ABNUS JOURNAL
Your Research Partner

Advanced Studies in Law, Policy Innovation, and Institutional Reform (ASLPI)
E-ISSN: 3164-3329 | Vol. 2, No. 1 (2026) | pp. 15-27

Military Exercises as Cultural Diplomacy and Their Social Impacts on Defense Cooperation in Africa

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Received: 20 November 2026 | Revised: 11 December 2026 | Revised: 28 December 2026 | Published: 9 January 2027

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the social impacts of multinational military exercises in Africa, with particular attention to their contribution to cultural understanding, interpersonal trust, professional networks, civil military relations, and regional cooperation.

Research Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design, drawing on peer reviewed literature, African Union documents, government publications, and official reports on AMANI Africa, African Lion, and Justified Accord. Constructivist Theory and Defense Diplomacy Theory provide the analytical framework.

Results: Joint exercises generate social benefits by creating repeated contact among military personnel, encouraging cultural learning, developing shared professional norms, and strengthening interpersonal and institutional trust. Humanitarian assistance, medical outreach, disaster response, and civilian participation extend these effects to host communities. However, these benefits are not automatic, because exercises can also reinforce perceptions of external influence, militarization, or strategic competition when their objectives and social consequences are poorly communicated.

Conclusions: African military exercises should be designed not only as instruments of operational preparedness but also as structured platforms for cultural diplomacy, people to people engagement, and confidence building.

Limitations: The study relies on documentary evidence and does not measure attitudes statistically or establish causal relationships through primary surveys.

Contributions: The study conceptualizes military exercises as social and diplomatic processes, proposes a framework of social impact pathways, and offers indicators and recommendations for integrating cultural diplomacy into exercise planning and evaluation.

Keywords: *Civil Military Relations, Cultural Diplomacy, Defense Diplomacy, Military Exercises, Social Impact*

How to Cite: Otakwu, A. A. (2026). Military Exercises as Cultural Diplomacy and Their Social Impacts on Defense Cooperation in Africa. *Advanced Studies in Law, Policy Innovation, and Institutional Reform (ASLPI)*, 2(1), 15-27.

1. Introduction

Military exercises have become an increasingly important component of contemporary security cooperation in Africa. Although their immediate purpose is generally associated with military preparedness, command and control proficiency, interoperability, and the ability to respond collectively to security threats, multinational exercises also create sustained interaction among personnel, institutions, and societies from different countries. These interactions give military

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exercises a social and diplomatic dimension that extends beyond battlefield preparation. Defense institutions increasingly operate within security environments characterized by transnational terrorism, violent extremism, organized crime, maritime insecurity, humanitarian emergencies, climate related risks, and complex peace support requirements. Consequently, military cooperation is no longer limited to the exchange of weapons, tactics, and operational procedures. It increasingly involves the development of relationships, institutional familiarity, and mutual confidence among states and their security institutions (Blake & Spies, 2020, Ngari et al., 2023). Scholars have also observed that diplomacy, defense, and development are increasingly merged in engagement with fragile regions (Constantinou & Opondo, 2016).

The African security environment provides a particularly important setting for examining these developments. The African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have progressively sought to strengthen collective security capabilities through training, exercises, and peace support arrangements. The African Standby Force (ASF) was developed around the principle that effective continental peace support operations require military, police, and civilian capabilities to operate together (Darkwa, 2017). The AMANI Africa exercise cycle represented an important stage in this process. The AMANI Africa II Field Training Exercise in South Africa in 2015 brought together more than 6.000 military, police, and civilian personnel and tested the ability of African regional mechanisms to plan, deploy, and manage multidimensional peace support operations (African Union, 2015).

The expansion of multinational exercises involving African and external partners has further strengthened this social and diplomatic dimension. Exercise African Lion, hosted across Morocco, Ghana, Senegal, and Tunisia, has developed into one of the largest multinational military exercises conducted on the continent. The 2025 iteration involved more than 10.000 participants from over 50 countries and combined command post and field training with humanitarian civic assistance (U.S. Africa Command, 2025). Exercise Justified Accord in East Africa has similarly incorporated military, civilian, police, humanitarian, and disaster response dimensions. The 2025 exercise, cohosted by Kenya and the United States, brought together participants from more than fifteen countries and included Women, Peace and Security familiarization, disaster response training, public affairs activities, and veterinary civic action, which Kenyan defense authorities described as strengthening bonds among personnel and relationships with host communities (Kenya, 2025).

These developments suggest that military exercises should be understood as social encounters as well as security instruments. Research on multinational exercises shows that they socialize participating militaries into shared doctrine and practice (Frazier & Hutto, 2017), serve as instruments of military statecraft (Wolfley, 2021), and help assemble wider security orders (Schmidt, 2026). Military personnel from different national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds interact repeatedly, develop professional familiarity, and learn how other institutions understand security challenges. Such interactions can gradually create shared expectations and professional norms and may reduce stereotypes and misperceptions. African scholarship likewise argues that joint training and exercises can contribute to mutual trust and interstate cooperation (Ngari, 2025).

Nevertheless, the social impact of military exercises should not be assumed to be uniformly positive. Exercises may generate concerns about external influence, strategic competition, militarization, or unequal relationships between powerful and less powerful states. Where exercises are heavily focused on combat capabilities and public communication is weak, local populations may interpret them primarily as demonstrations of military power. Research on defense cooperation in Southeast Asia shows that the same exercises can make partners appear as trusted allies or potential adversaries depending on context (Ngeow & Hoo, 2025, Ang et al., 2025).

The dominant assessment of exercises nevertheless remains heavily operational. Success is commonly measured through readiness, command and control performance, tactical competence, interoperability, and logistical coordination. A major gap therefore exists in the assessment of their social consequences. Personnel interact with colleagues from other countries, learn different operational

cultures, and develop professional networks that may remain relevant after the exercise ends, yet such outcomes are rarely incorporated systematically into exercise planning or evaluation. The problem is also visible at the community level, where humanitarian and community activities may be perceived as public relations exercises if they are disconnected from local priorities, and at the strategic level, where different audiences interpret exercises differently. The challenge is particularly important in Africa because of the history of military intervention in politics, uneven civil military relations, and varying levels of public trust in security institutions (Khisa & Day, 2020).

This study therefore pursues four objectives. The first is to examine the role of multinational military exercises in promoting cultural diplomacy and defense cooperation in Africa. The second is to assess how military exercises influence interpersonal trust, professional relationships, and cultural understanding among participating personnel. The third is to examine the social effects of humanitarian, civilian, and community activities incorporated into exercises. The fourth is to identify policy measures for strengthening the cultural, diplomatic, and social value of multinational exercises. Correspondingly, the study asks how exercises contribute to cultural diplomacy and defense cooperation, how they influence trust and cultural understanding, what social effects arise from their humanitarian and community components, and which policy measures can strengthen their social value.

The study contributes to the literature by treating military exercises as social and diplomatic processes rather than only as technical events, by connecting the literature on defense diplomacy with research on cultural diplomacy and civil military relations in Africa, and by proposing a framework and indicators for assessing the social impact of exercises.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis/es Development

2.1 Military Exercises

Military exercises are organized training activities through which armed forces and, increasingly, police and civilian institutions practice procedures, capabilities, and responses to simulated security situations. They may be national, bilateral, regional, or multinational and range from command post exercises to field training and multidimensional peace support exercises. Their conventional objectives include operational readiness, interoperability, command and control, logistical coordination, and preparedness for collective action. Studies of multinational staff exercises show that they also foster team learning and leadership across national boundaries (Hedlund, 2017), and research on the Global South indicates that multinational cooperation builds shared professional practices among armed forces with different traditions (Ferreyra & Soeters, 2024). Making sense of multinational cooperation therefore requires attention to the meanings that participants attach to joint activity (Kraft, 2024).

Beyond their training function, military exercises also carry political and diplomatic meaning. Repeated participation in multinational exercises socializes armed forces into shared doctrines, procedures, and expectations, gradually aligning how different militaries plan and conduct operations (Frazier & Hutto, 2017). Exercises also serve as instruments of military statecraft, allowing governments to signal commitment to partners, reassure allies, and communicate resolve to potential rivals (Wolfley, 2021). At a broader level, recurring exercises help to assemble and sustain regional and international security orders by linking national forces to wider networks of cooperation (Schmidt, 2026). In Africa, exercises such as those organized under the African Standby Force framework have been used to test continental peace support capabilities and to strengthen coordination between the African Union and regional mechanisms (Darkwa, 2017). Military exercises should therefore be understood not only as technical rehearsals for operations but also as social and political processes through which relationships, norms, and perceptions among participating states are formed.

2.2 Defense Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy concerns the use of defense institutions and military relationships as instruments of foreign and security policy. It includes military exchanges, professional education, joint training, exercises, defense consultations, liaison arrangements, and other cooperative activities designed to build relationships and manage security challenges (Drab, 2023). Noncoercive defense diplomacy is particularly relevant because confidence and trust are central to conflict prevention (Blake & Spies, 2020). Historical research on military assistance in Nigeria shows that training teams have long served diplomatic as well as military purposes (Wyss, 2023), while research on defense diplomacy and public diplomacy shows that elites often blur the two (Bueno, 2023). Recent studies of joint exercises in Southeast Asia show how they contribute to regional ordering and security relationships (Chang & Laksmana, 2025, Teo, 2025).

Defense diplomacy is not, however, a uniformly cooperative practice. Defense institutions often engage simultaneously with close partners and potential competitors, using joint activities both to deepen trust and to manage uncertainty with less friendly states (Ang et al., 2025). Smaller states that conduct exercises with competing major powers may be viewed by each as a trusted partner, a quasi ally, or a potential adversary, which shows that the same cooperative activity can carry very different meanings (Ngeow & Hoo, 2025). The growing convergence of diplomacy, defense, and development in engagement with fragile regions further broadens the scope of defense diplomacy beyond traditional military relations (Constantinou & Opondo, 2016). In Africa, research shows that professional education, defense partnerships, and joint training can strengthen interstate cooperation and mutual trust, although national sensitivities and limited resources constrain their wider use (Ngari, 2025). Professional military education also shapes the values and outlook that officers bring to such engagements (Mukherjee, 2018). Defense diplomacy should therefore be understood as a relational process whose outcomes depend on context, perception, and the balance of interests among participating states.

2.3 Cultural Diplomacy and People to People Engagement

Cultural diplomacy refers broadly to the use of cultural interaction, exchange, and mutual understanding to develop relationships among societies and states. Cultural products and practices carry meanings that are interpreted differently by different audiences, which means that their diplomatic effects depend on reception as well as intention (Clarke, 2016). In the context of military exercises, cultural diplomacy involves the deliberate use of interaction among personnel and communities to improve understanding of different cultures, languages, traditions, professional practices, and social expectations. It does not imply that military institutions replace conventional diplomatic actors, but it recognizes that interactions between militaries and between militaries and civilians can contribute to wider diplomatic relationships. People to people engagement describes direct interaction among individuals and communities across national or institutional boundaries, and research on intergroup contact shows that structured contact can reduce prejudice under appropriate conditions (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019).

The effects of cultural and people to people engagement are, however, shaped by how such activities are perceived. Research on foreign assistance shows that visible goodwill activities can improve public attitudes toward external actors, but they can also provoke resistance when audiences view them as tools of political influence (Tokdemir, 2017; Child, 2023). Evidence from Africa similarly indicates that the attitudes of local populations toward foreign powers depend on how assistance is delivered and whether it addresses genuine local needs (Xu & Zhang, 2020). In multinational military exercises, cultural engagement is therefore more likely to build lasting relationships when it is reciprocal, when participating forces learn from one another rather than simply receive instruction, and when community activities are designed with local authorities (Ferreyra & Soeters, 2024). Recent exercises in East Africa illustrate this approach by combining professional exchanges with community and veterinary activities intended to strengthen relationships with host populations (Kenya, 2025). Cultural diplomacy through military exercises should therefore be understood as a two way process

whose success depends on mutual respect, local ownership, and sensitivity to how different audiences interpret military presence.

2.4 Social Impact and Civil Military Relations

Social impact in this study refers to the changes that exercises produce in interpersonal relationships, professional networks, cultural understanding, community perceptions, civil military relations, and patterns of institutional cooperation. Research on civil military relations in Africa has moved beyond a narrow focus on coups toward the interaction between armed forces, civilian authorities, and society (Khisa & Day, 2020). Studies from Ghana show how societal factors shape the relationship between the armed forces and citizens (Agyekum, 2022) and how concordance between military and civilian actors supports democratic stability (Salihu, 2020). Professional military education also shapes how officers understand their role in society (Mukherjee, 2018).

Research on humanitarian assistance shows that aid can improve public perceptions of donors, but it can also provoke resistance when it is associated with political or ideological goals (Tokdemir, 2017, Child, 2023). Evidence from Africa shows that external aid can influence local attitudes toward foreign powers, although the effect depends on how assistance is delivered (Xu & Zhang, 2020). Gender perspectives also matter. The Women, Peace and Security agenda has developed distinctive forms in Africa (Haastrup, 2019), its implementation depends on institutional commitment (Shawki, 2017), and it has increasingly been linked to military practice and deterrence (OSullivan, 2024) .

Taken together, these strands of research suggest that the social impact of military exercises operates at several levels at once. At the individual level, repeated and structured contact among personnel can reduce prejudice and build familiarity, provided that participants interact on an equal footing and work toward shared goals (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019). At the institutional level, exercises that bring together military, police, and civilian components help different organizations understand one another's roles and procedures, as demonstrated by the integrated design of continental peace support exercises in Africa (Darkwa, 2017). At the community level, humanitarian, medical, and veterinary activities create direct contact between armed forces and civilians that can either strengthen or weaken public trust depending on how they are conducted. These levels are interconnected, because positive experiences among personnel and communities can reinforce institutional cooperation, while negative experiences can undermine it. In African contexts, where public confidence in security institutions varies widely, the social impact of exercises is therefore closely tied to the broader quality of civil military relations (Khisa & Day, 2020). Assessing social impact consequently requires attention to individual, institutional, and community outcomes rather than to operational performance alone.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Constructivist Theory provides one of the principal analytical foundations of this study. Constructivism emphasizes that international relations are influenced not only by material capabilities but also by identities, norms, shared meanings, and social interaction. From this perspective, multinational military exercises are social environments in which personnel and institutions repeatedly encounter one another, exchange professional practices, and construct shared understandings of security. Research on the socialization of military power through exercises supports this view (Frazier & Hutto, 2017). Constructivism helps explain why the social consequences of exercises may persist beyond the exercise itself, because a soldier who develops professional respect for a counterpart may carry that perception into future operations, training, or consultations.

Defense Diplomacy Theory provides the second analytical framework. It conceptualizes military institutions as instruments of peaceful international engagement rather than solely as coercive instruments and emphasizes activities through which defense establishments build relationships and confidence, reduce uncertainty, and strengthen cooperation (Blake & Spies, 2020, Drab, 2023). Exercises fit within this framework because they allow institutions to work together under controlled conditions before they confront real crises. Together, the two theories frame military exercises as both operational activities and social diplomatic processes.

The literature reveals a gap. Studies of exercises focus mainly on operational effectiveness, signaling, or regional order, while studies of cultural diplomacy rarely consider military actors. African research on defense diplomacy recognizes trust and joint training as important (Ngari et al., 2023, Ngari, 2025), but the social effects of exercises remain underdeveloped as an area of analysis. This study addresses that gap.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. This approach was appropriate because the study examines institutional practices, policy developments, social interactions, and diplomatic effects that can be investigated through existing documentary evidence rather than through primary fieldwork.

3.2 Data Sources and Cases

The study relied on peer reviewed academic literature, African Union documents, national defense publications, official exercise reports, and international security publications. The analysis focused on AMANI Africa, African Lion, and Justified Accord as illustrative cases, with Southern Accord as a supplementary example. These exercises were selected because they demonstrate continental African peace support preparation, multinational partnership between Africa and external actors, and regional crisis response training. The core primary sources are the AU account of AMANI Africa II (African Union, 2015), the U.S. Africa Command account of African Lion 2025 (U.S. Africa Command, 2025), the U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa account of the same exercise (U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa, 2025), and the Kenyan Ministry of Defence account of Justified Accord 2025 (Kenya, 2025).

3.3 Analytical Procedure

Documentary evidence was subjected to thematic analysis around the four objectives. Particular attention was given to cultural interaction, professional socialization, interpersonal trust, humanitarian engagement, civil military relations, community interaction, and broader diplomatic consequences. The study does not claim to measure public attitudes statistically or to establish causal relationships. Rather, it synthesizes documentary evidence to identify recurring patterns and mechanisms through which exercises produce social and diplomatic effects.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Military Exercises Have Become Instruments of Defense Diplomacy

The evidence indicates that military exercises increasingly perform functions that extend beyond operational preparedness. Joint training creates structured opportunities for military institutions to establish relationships, understand one another's capabilities, and develop mechanisms for cooperation. AMANI Africa provides a strong continental example. The exercise cycle was established to develop and test the ASF and involved personnel from different African regions and institutional components, so its importance extended beyond tactical preparedness to strengthening cooperation between the AU and regional mechanisms (African Union, 2015, Darkwa, 2017). African Lion and Justified Accord follow the same pattern by bringing together African, European, and North American personnel around peacekeeping, crisis response, and humanitarian preparedness.

Table 1. Illustrative multinational military exercises in Africa and their social components

Exercise	Scale and Participants	Social and Civilian Components
AMANI Africa II (2015)	More than 6,000 military, police, and civilian personnel from African regions	Integration of military, police, and civilian components under a common AU framework
African Lion (2025)	More than 10,000 participants from over 50 countries across Morocco, Ghana, Senegal, and Tunisia	Humanitarian civic assistance, medical, dental, and veterinary activities, and professional exchanges
Justified Accord (2025)	Participants from more than fifteen countries, cohosted by Kenya and the United States	Women, Peace and Security familiarization, disaster response training, public affairs, and veterinary civic action

Table 1 compares the three illustrative exercises in terms of their scale, participants, and social or civilian components, drawing on official accounts (African Union, 2015, U.S. Africa Command, 2025, Kenya Ministry of Defence, 2025). AMANI Africa II shows a continental model in which military, police, and civilian components were integrated under AU leadership. African Lion shows the largest scale of participation and the widest range of humanitarian civic activities. Justified Accord shows how gender, disaster response, and community components can be built into a regional exercise. Together, the cases show that the social dimension of exercises is already present but varies considerably in scope and design.

4.2 Repeated Interaction Builds Interpersonal and Institutional Trust

Trust is one of the most important social effects of multinational exercises. Military organizations often cooperate under circumstances in which uncertainty about the capabilities, intentions, and reliability of partners generates operational risk. Repeated interaction reduces this uncertainty by allowing personnel to observe how their counterparts plan, communicate, solve problems, and respond to pressure. Kenyan defense authorities described Justified Accord as strengthening bonds among participating personnel and enabling them to learn from one another (Kenya, 2025) and African research identifies joint training and exercises as mechanisms for building mutual trust, although national sensitivities and resource constraints may limit their adoption (Ngari, 2025). Trust can survive beyond the exercise, because officers who have worked together may communicate more easily during future crises, so the social capital produced by exercises becomes an informal resource for regional security cooperation.

4.3 Cultural Understanding Improves Operational Cooperation

Operational interoperability is not solely a technical matter. It also depends on whether personnel understand the behavior, communication styles, and institutional expectations of their counterparts. Multinational exercises provide an environment in which such differences can be encountered and managed before an actual crisis occurs. African Lion offers an illustrative example because participants from numerous countries work together in complex training environments that include professional planning and academic exchanges. Participants have described the value of learning from partner forces, which shows that knowledge flows are not exclusively from stronger militaries to weaker ones (U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa, 2025). This reciprocal dimension is important for cultural diplomacy, because exercises are more likely to generate positive relationships when participating states are treated as partners with knowledge and capabilities rather than as recipients of training (Ferreyra & Soeters, 2024).

4.4 Military Exercises Create Shared Professional Norms

Repeated multinational exercises contribute to the development of shared professional norms concerning planning, communication, humanitarian response, command procedures, and operational conduct (Frazier & Hutto, 2017). AMANI Africa illustrates this process at the continental level, because its objective was to test procedures, structures, and multidimensional capacities under a

common AU framework, contributing to the institutionalization of common peace support practices (African Union, 2015). Where exercises include police and civilian components, military personnel gain familiarity with nonmilitary actors while civilian institutions gain a better understanding of military planning and operational limitations, which encourages a more integrated approach to peace support and crisis response.

4.5 Humanitarian Assistance Broadens the Social Meaning of Exercises

The inclusion of humanitarian activities changes how military exercises relate to society. African Lion has incorporated humanitarian civic assistance programs, including medical, dental, and veterinary activities that allow personnel to interact directly with communities and demonstrate practical contributions to civilian wellbeing (U.S. Africa Command, 2025). Justified Accord similarly incorporated veterinary civic action intended to foster relationships with host communities while addressing local needs (Kenya, 2025). These activities generate positive social effects when they are designed in consultation with civilian authorities and address identified needs. Research on aid and public opinion warns, however, that assistance perceived as instrumental can lose rather than win support (Child, 2023), which means that design and delivery matter as much as the activity itself (Tokdemir, 2017).

4.6 Community Engagement Can Strengthen Civil Military Relations

Military exercises create temporary but significant contact between armed forces and civilian communities. Such contact matters because public perceptions of military institutions are influenced partly by direct experience. Where communities experience personnel as disciplined, respectful, and responsive to legitimate needs, perceptions may improve. This is particularly important in African contexts where civil military relations have historically been affected by military intervention in politics, human rights concerns, and public distrust (Khisa & Day, 2020, Agyekum, 2022). Community components can provide opportunities for constructive engagement, but they should not substitute for civilian development responsibilities. Their principal value lies in relationship building, humanitarian responsiveness, and the demonstration of professional conduct.

4.7 Cultural Engagement Can Reduce Stereotypes and Misperceptions

Stereotypes persist when societies and institutions have limited opportunities for direct interaction. Military personnel from different countries may initially hold assumptions about one another based on national narratives, historical experiences, or limited exposure. Joint exercises provide opportunities to replace abstract perceptions with direct interpersonal experience. Research on intergroup contact suggests that such contact can reduce prejudice, although effects depend on conditions such as equal status and shared goals (Paluck et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant to African regional cooperation, where historical borders, linguistic differences, and varying political systems create institutional distance.

4.8 People to People Engagement Strengthens Defense Relationships

Defense relationships are ultimately sustained by people. Agreements establish the formal basis for cooperation, but personal relationships often determine how effectively institutions communicate and collaborate. Exercises create networks among officers, trainers, planners, medical personnel, technical specialists, and civilian officials, and research on African defense diplomacy indicates that education, training, joint exercises, and institutional engagement strengthen mutual trust (Ngari et al., 2023, Ngari, 2025). These networks are particularly valuable during crises, because an officer who knows a counterpart personally may communicate more quickly and confidently when an emergency emerges.

4.9 Military Exercises Can Strengthen African Strategic Cooperation

Multinational exercises can also contribute to African strategic autonomy by strengthening the capacity of African institutions to cooperate with one another and with external partners on terms consistent with African priorities. AMANI Africa was significant because it was embedded in the

development of African peace support capabilities (Darkwa, 2017). External partnerships can provide training, technology, and experience, but African states retain an important role in defining their own priorities and ensuring that exercises contribute to regional rather than narrowly external objectives. Exercises led by regional organizations elsewhere show that such ownership helps build regional order (Teo, 2025).

4.10 The Social Meaning of an Exercise Depends on Its Audience

Military exercises do not have a single social meaning. Participants, host communities, civilian authorities, neighboring states, civil society organizations, and international partners may interpret the same activity differently. A government may view an exercise as a mechanism for interoperability, while a neighboring country may perceive it as strategic signaling (Wolfley, 2021). Communication should therefore form an integral part of exercise planning. Public communication should explain why the exercise is taking place, what security problem it addresses, which institutions are participating, and what safeguards exist for civilian communities, consistent with the public diplomacy role that defense institutions increasingly play (Bueno, 2023).

4.11 Military Exercises Can Also Reinforce Strategic Mistrust

The social and diplomatic effects of exercises are not automatically positive. Exercises can increase mistrust when they are perceived as instruments of strategic competition, external influence, or intimidation, particularly where powerful external states conduct large exercises in regions experiencing geopolitical rivalry. Research shows that defense diplomacy can keep partners close while also managing potential adversaries (Ang et al., 2025), and that joint exercises with competing great powers place smaller states in delicate positions (Ngeow & Hoo, 2025). Exercises can also become part of how major powers assemble their own security orders (Schmidt, 2026). African states therefore need to manage the signaling effects of exercises carefully through transparency, regional ownership, and civilian participation.

4.12 Inclusiveness Enhances the Diplomatic Value of Exercises

Exercises become more socially meaningful when they incorporate different professional and institutional perspectives. The inclusion of police, civilian officials, humanitarian actors, medical personnel, and disaster management agencies reflects the multidimensional nature of contemporary security. AMANI Africa II demonstrated the value of such inclusiveness by bringing military, police, and civilian components together within a peace support scenario (African Union, 2015), and Justified Accord has incorporated public affairs, disaster response, and Women, Peace and Security familiarization (Kenya, 2025). Civilian institutions such as ministries responsible for foreign affairs, humanitarian affairs, disaster management, health, and agriculture should be involved from the planning stage, which also strengthens democratic accountability (Salihu, 2020).

4.13 Women and Youth Can Broaden the Social Reach of Defense Diplomacy

Women and youth remain important but underused actors in security cooperation. The incorporation of Women, Peace and Security familiarization into Justified Accord illustrates growing recognition that multinational military activities should engage with the gender dimensions of security (Kenya, 2025). The African experience of this agenda shows that it can be adapted to regional priorities (Haastrup, 2019), but its value depends on substantive implementation rather than symbolic inclusion (Shawki, 2017). Youth engagement can similarly connect defense institutions with younger populations, who constitute a significant part of African societies.

4.14 Social Outcomes Should Be Included in Exercise Evaluation

The evidence suggests a need to broaden the evaluation of military exercises. Operational performance remains essential, but it should be complemented by indicators of social and diplomatic impact. Evaluation should examine whether participants developed stronger professional relationships, whether cultural understanding improved, whether civilian institutions cooperated

effectively, whether communities perceived the exercise positively, and whether relationships were maintained afterwards. Methods for evaluating joint staff exercises already exist and could be extended to social objectives (Hedlund, 2017).

Table 2. Proposed indicators for assessing the social impact of military exercises

Dimension	Example Indicators	Possible Data Sources
Interpersonal trust	Willingness to cooperate with foreign counterparts, continued contact after the exercise	Participant surveys and follow up interviews
Cultural understanding	Awareness of partner communication styles, language exposure, reduced stereotypes	Pre and post exercise questionnaires
Institutional cooperation	New liaison arrangements, joint training plans, information sharing agreements	Defense ministry and AU records
Community perceptions	Local attitudes toward participating forces, satisfaction with humanitarian services	Community surveys and focus groups
Strategic signaling	Reactions of neighboring states and media framing of the exercise	Diplomatic reporting and media analysis

Table 2 proposes five dimensions for assessing the social impact of military exercises, together with example indicators and possible data sources. Interpersonal trust and cultural understanding can be measured among participants through surveys and interviews before and after an exercise. Institutional cooperation can be traced through new liaison arrangements and joint plans recorded by defense ministries and the AU. Community perceptions and strategic signaling extend the assessment beyond the military, capturing how host populations and neighboring states interpret the exercise. Used together, these indicators would allow planners to distinguish activities that generate genuine social benefits from those that merely produce short term visibility.

4.15 Military Exercises Should Be Designed as Platforms for Regional Trust

The overall finding is that military exercises should be understood as opportunities to create security relationships rather than simply as opportunities to test capabilities. The strongest social benefits arise when exercises combine operational training with cultural understanding, professional exchange, humanitarian cooperation, civilian participation, and transparent communication. This approach does not diminish military readiness, because operational effectiveness in multinational environments depends partly on trust, communication, and cultural understanding.

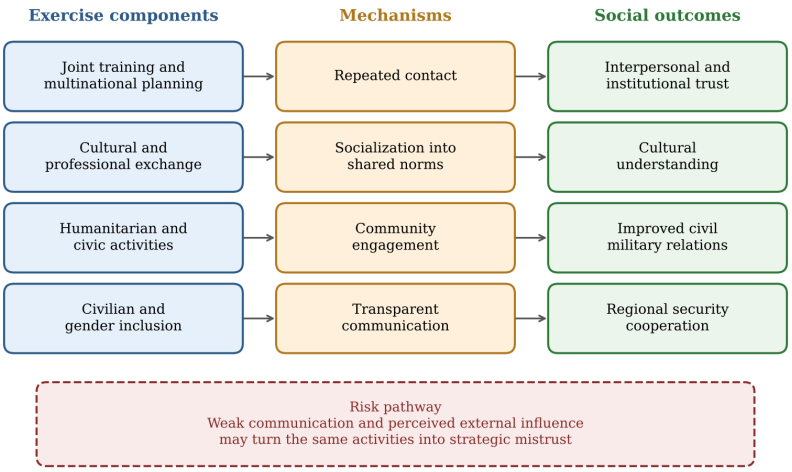


Figure 1. Social impact pathways of multinational military exercises in Africa

Figure 1 summarizes the social impact pathways identified in this study. Exercise components on the left, namely joint training, cultural and professional exchange, humanitarian and civic activities, and civilian and gender inclusion, operate through the mechanisms in the center, which are repeated contact, socialization into shared norms, community engagement, and transparent communication. These mechanisms produce the outcomes on the right, namely interpersonal and institutional trust, cultural understanding, improved civil military relations, and regional security cooperation. The dashed box at the bottom shows that weak communication and perceptions of external influence can redirect the same activities toward strategic mistrust, which is why design and communication determine whether exercises deliver positive social value.

5. Conclusions

Military exercises in Africa are more than technical preparations for combat or peace support operations. They are institutional encounters through which military personnel, civilian agencies, and communities build relationships and shared understandings of security. Exercises such as AMANI Africa, African Lion, and Justified Accord can strengthen cultural understanding, professional socialization, interpersonal trust, civil military engagement, and regional cooperation, especially when combined with humanitarian assistance and civilian participation. However, these effects are not automatic, because exercises can generate mistrust when perceived as instruments of strategic competition or external influence. Cultural diplomacy is therefore an important complement to defense diplomacy.

The study recommends integrating cultural and people to people engagement into exercise design, institutionalizing civilian and humanitarian components that respond to local needs, adopting social impact assessment in exercise evaluation, and strengthening inclusive and transparent communication, including greater participation of women, youth, and civilian actors. The study relies on documentary evidence, much of it produced by organizations that conduct the exercises, and does not measure attitudes directly. Future research should survey participants and host communities and compare exercises led by African institutions with those led by external partners. Ultimately, the value of military exercises lies not only in how well forces operate together but also in the relationships they build. For Africa, the ability to build trust among institutions and societies is itself a security capability.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks the Centre for Civil Military Cooperation (CIMICO), Abuja, Nigeria, for institutional support during the preparation of this article. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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