The Al Shabaab Threat: Kenya's policy dilemma in strengthening ties with Somalia
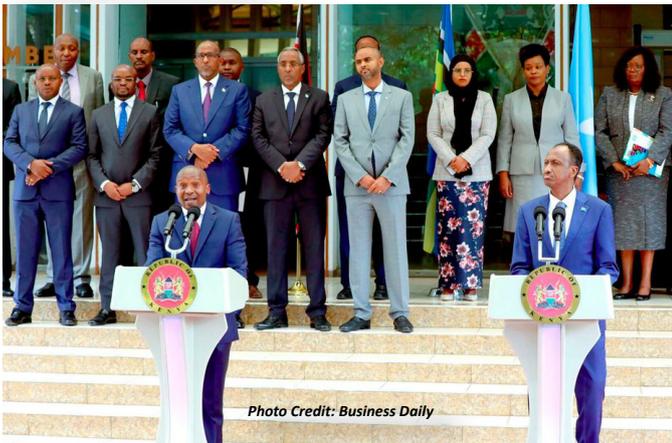
## Muliro Wilfred

Photo Credit: Business Daily

CS Prof Kindiki and his Somalia Counterpart Mohamed Ahmed Sheikh Ali at a press briefing on Cross-border cooperation

Kenya and the region are facing renewed Al Shabaab terrorist attacks. In recent months, the Somalia-based Al Shabaab made over ten deadly attacks mainly targeting Kenya's security personnel on patrol, particularly in the coastal and northeastern regions. This has emerged even as the country is reviewing its border policies with Somalia. Kenya seeks to strengthen ties with the Somalia government as a strategy against the Al Shabaab threat.

The Kenya-Somalia diplomatic ties have been on and off for sometime. In 1963 the two states engaged in an armed conflict when Somalis in Kenya's Northern District Frontier(NFD) sought to secede and join the Somalia state. In 2011, Kenya announced the closure of its border with Somalia following increased attacks by Al Shabaab, including kidnappings of tourists and foreign aid workers. Shortly after, Kenya deployed its military into Somalia in pursuit of AlShabaab. Later, in 2014, Somalia instituted proceedings at the International Criminal Court (ICJ) against Kenya over a dispute concerning the delimitation of maritime zones claimed by both States in the Indian Ocean. This worsened the diplomatic relations between the

two countries. However, since the election of a new president in Somalia in 2022, diplomatic relations between the two countries have improved. After high-level consultations between the two neighbours, in May 2023, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Interior and National Administration, in a joint press conference with his Somalia counterpart, announced that the Kenya-Somalia border would be re-opened in phases. Both governments had agreed that opening the border would promote trade and businesses thus rendering Al Shabaab ideologies and activities unattractive to communities of the two states.

Still, the planned phased-out reopening of the Kenya-Somalia border has been postponed after increased Al Shabaab attacks and cross-border crimes. In its efforts to strengthen diplomatic relations with Somalia, Kenya is facing the dilemma of balancing between maintaining tight border restrictions as a security measure and opening borders to promote trade. Current attacks have disrupted Kenya's foreign policy strategy of creating a favourable balance of power in the Horn of Africa and the entire EA region by supporting

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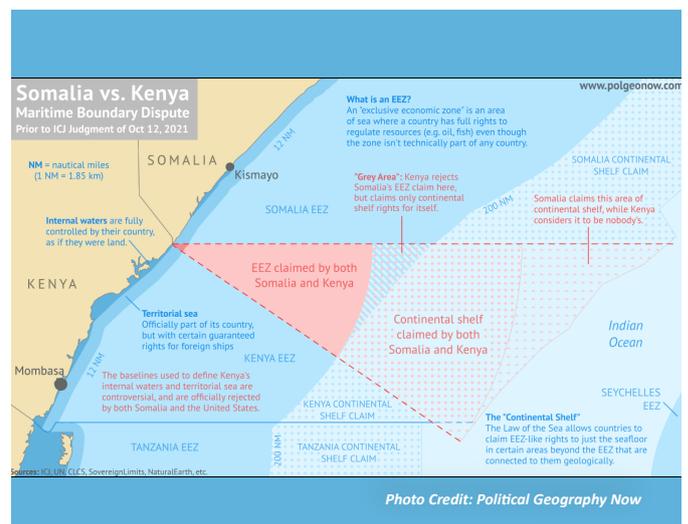
Somalia's entry into the EAC. It also threatens the ongoing cross-border initiative dubbed "Deris Wanaag" (Somali for "Good Neighbourliness") between Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia. This ongoing initiative sponsored by the United Kingdom, aims to enhance peace and stability and strengthen social and economic development among borderland communities in the Horn of Africa.

Meanwhile, the Al Shabaab group continues to target security personnel manning the border as a way of expressing the group's opposition to the opening of the Kenya-Somalia border. Thus, the net effect of keeping the Kenya-Somalia border closed is that it fulfills Al Shabaab's objectives. The attacks reveal that Al Shabaab fights any move or policy that indicates the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) is in control of the country. The militant group is against policies such as re-opening the borders to normalize relations with Somalia's Federal Government, the drawdown of The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) troops, and the consideration of Somalia's membership to the East African Community (EAC). Their intention is to continue creating a perception that Somalia is greatly destabilized and that Al Shabaab is winning. In this regard, Al Shabaab has heightened religious rhetoric and Pan-Somalia narrative that brands ATMIS Troup Contributing Countries (TCCs) as foreign occupiers in ethnically Somali regions. This is meant to attract local and regional recruits against Kenya and other ATMIS TCCs. Overall, Al Shabaab seeks recognition that will give them mileage.

ATMIS Forces (left) and Somalia National Forces (right)

Photo Credit: The New York Times

Further, besides Al Shabaab, the war economy in Somalia has drawn in numerous actors who now do not desire stability since the war has become a lucrative business. Their resurgence is also meant to distract and spread thin Kenya's offensive against Al Shabaab in Southern Somalia and dispirit Kenya and other ATMIS TCCs from remaining or deploying as frontline states after ATMIS exits.

For this reason, four key concerns emerge from the discussion about Kenya's policy dilemma in strengthening ties with Somalia. The first concern is that the policy to open borders misses crucial elements namely, timing, preparation and sequencing. On timing, it was not clear whether it was the right time to open borders when ATMIS is downscaling its troops as it plans to exit and allow the fledgling Somalia National Army (SNA) to take over the security responsibilities of their country. To counter any vulnerability to the Alshabab threat with the eventual opening of the border, Kenya's security team should be equipped with modern technological capacity to counter any threat as a prerequisite to such strategic decision. Other measures should include winning the hearts and minds of local communities and involving them in future security responses and intelligence collection. In sequencing therefore, the trade driven initiatives should come after addressing security threats. Additionally, before opening the borders, Kenya should be assured of Somalia's internal security system and political capacity to fully guarantee security on its side of the border.

The second concern is that the planned exit of ATMIS from Somalia portends security challenges

that could increase the vulnerability of Kenya to Al Shabaab attacks. The Kenya government needs to comprehensively assess the risks and security implications of ATMIS reducing its troops in Somalia. Such a risk assessment will enable Kenya to predict and plan for eventualities in case the Somalia government will be unable to sustain the gains made by ATMIS. It appears post-ATMIS, Kenya as a frontline state will continue shouldering Somalia's stabilization challenges including continued attacks from Al Shabaab. For instance, in July 2023 Al Shabaab militants took over the Gariley military base in Jubaland, which had recently been handed over by the KDF to the Somalia National Army, as part of the ATMIS exit strategy. Although Kenya has constructed 14 fully equipped forward operating bases along its border with Somalia, it needs to improve on cross-border collaborative mechanisms involving both state security agencies and the engagement of border communities.

The third concern is about the persistent famine due to climate change and existing economic hard times in Kenya, the Horn of Africa and globally, which have contributed to the vulnerability of the youths to join Al Shabaab. Therefore, the government should boost the development approach to security by cushioning the citizens against high cost of living, enhancing entrepreneurship and sustainable development in vulnerable marginalized areas of Garissa, Lamu, and Somalia border. In this way, government policies and messaging will be more appealing to communities than Al Shabaab's extremist ideologies.

Fourth, is the missing link between trade policy and national security policies in Kenya's foreign policy

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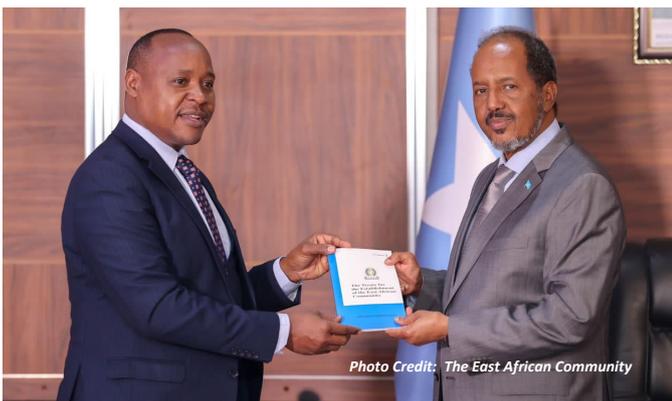
EAC Secretary General, Hon (Dr) Peter Mathuki (left) and Somalia President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (right)

toward Somalia. Both trade and security policies impact each other in a cyclic way, yet the Government appears to be pursuing them independently. For example, the objective of opening the border was to increase legal trade and curtail smuggling of contrabands. However, this policy was later suspended because of what Kenya's Internal Security Minister stated to be fears of increased terror attacks and cross-border crime. If harmonized, the trade and security policies can also reinforce each other. To illustrate, Kenya took control of Somalia's Kismayu Port to disrupt Al Shabaab financing hence improve security, but also this enabled Kenya to pursue trade aims of stopping the inflow of contrabands which were denying local businesses markets in northern and coastal Kenya. Kenya should synchronize trade and security strategies in its foreign policy strategies towards Somalia. This will require concerted effort between the ministries of Defence, Trade, Internal Security and Foreign Affairs.

As a way forward, it is recommended that the Kenyan government should adopt a number of options before opening the border. To begin with, Kenya should continue strengthening its ties with Somalia given the prevailing friendly environment in Somalia under the current leadership of President Hassan Sheikh Muhamud. This could involve the use of public diplomacy that combines enhancing people-to-people trade and cultural relations and utilizing Somalia diaspora in Kenya to project a positive image of Kenya among communities in Somalia. Additionally, the offering of educational and sports scholarships for

Further, Kenya needs to reinforce the Jubaland strategy to establish a solid buffer zone. The country needs to continue working with the Jubaland administration to shape security and politics in the border region for mutual benefit without antagonizing the Federal Government of Somalia. Kenya should also focus on strengthening the capacity of the Somalia Armed Forces through a bilateral arrangement. Kenya should hence pursue a defence pact with Somalia, to enhance mutual collaboration for peace and security between the two symbiotic neighbors.

In conclusion, Kenya should reevaluate its entire foreign policy strategies towards Somalia to create harmony with Kenya's security policies. Further, Kenya needs to promote its public diplomacy toward Somalia so that its image and influence attract the support of the Somali masses. A joint committee of Kenyan and Somali technocrats should be tasked with identifying the issues and grievances that hamper diplomatic relations between the two states and make policy recommendations.

Federal Republic of Somalia Hon Hussein Sheikh Mahmoud (left) and Kenya's National Security Advisor Amb (Dr) Monica Juma (right)

Photo Credit: Twitter

Somali youths, and the promotion of Kenya's public-private investment in Somalia's tourism, ICT and energy sectors will complement the strategy.

Additionally, Kenya and Somalia should invigorate multi-agency cross-border security committees. These should comprise state agencies, community-based organizations, and cross-border communities from both countries working together. This will call for more joint activities and increased interactions between people and state agencies to address trust concerns between communities and security agencies. Other initiatives such as community policing akin to the Nyumba Kumi model practised in Kenya should be capacitated, and incorporated into cross-border security collaborations.

Wilfred Muliro is GLOCEPS Resident Research Fellow for Foreign Policy Pillar.

THE GLOBAL CENTRE FOR POLICY AND STRATEGY
(GLOCEPS)
Research | Knowledge | Influence
Off Kiambu Road, Nairobi Kenya
P.O. Box 27023-00100,Nairobi.
Telephone: 0112401331
Email: info@gloceps.org
Web: www.gloceps.org