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Geopolitical Disruptions and Eastern Africa's Strategic Imperatives

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Executive Summary

Eastern Africa finds itself at a crossroads as global political dynamics shift rapidly. The rise of ultra-nationalism and protectionist policies in Western nations, notably the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), has far-reaching implications for the region's security preparedness, economic stability, humanitarian capacity, and geopolitical alliances. While these developments pose considerable risks, they also open new avenues for recalibrating foreign relations, strengthening intra-African trade, and advancing regional integration. This policy paper examines the challenges and opportunities stemming from the West's inward-looking orientation and offers strategic recommendations for enhancing Eastern Africa's resilience and autonomy. These include expanding strategic and development partnerships with both traditional and emerging allies; strengthening regional integration; enhancing coordination among regional actors to strengthen collective bargaining power; and encouraging humanitarian financing by offering positive incentives such as recognition and compliance rewards.

Context

The resurgence of far-right populism and nationalist ideologies in EU states and the US is reshaping the global order. In Europe, parties such as Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ) and France's National Rally have gained significant political ground, advocating against immigration, multilateralism, and liberal economics. Similar trends in the US, particularly under Donald Trump's leadership, have introduced restrictive trade policies, aid cuts, and increased defense spending.


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In Europe, the Russia-Ukraine war has accelerated the shift towards securitized policies. The EU has redirected funding to bolster defense, cutting back on development assistance and humanitarian aid. Since 2021, military spending in the EU has risen by 30%, and 150 billion Euros in loans have been availed to member states through the Re-Arm Europe plan. Increased EU military spending is also attributed to President Trump's stance on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where he has urged EU members to increase their defense spending to 5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with assertions that they are underpaying for US protection.

Donald Trump's administration has brought about major shifts in US foreign policy characterized by a renewed emphasis on protectionism and a transactional approach. Trump's "America First" doctrine has led to tariff impositions, immigration restrictions, and reduced financial support for international development initiatives. For instance, his administration plans to slash $555 million in funding for the African Development Bank's (AfDB) main development fund. Africa's low-income and fragile economies, supported by this bank, will be greatly affected, given that the US is the AfDB's second-largest shareholder. Similarly, aid cuts by the US to humanitarian bodies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will have significant effects on dependent Eastern African countries. These changes place Eastern African states, many of which rely on Western partnerships for security, humanitarian aid, and trade, in a vulnerable position. Nonetheless, this policy shift by traditional Western partners serves as a wake-up call for the Eastern Africa region to reduce dependency and boost intra-African capacities and partnerships.

Key Issues

The following key issues highlight Eastern Africa's vulnerability and opportunities amidst rising protectionism and ultranationalism in the West.

Security Preparedness

Eastern Africa's security architecture has historically been underpinned by external funding, particularly from the US and the EU. Peacekeeping, military training, and conflict prevention efforts have benefited from their financial and technical support. However, with the West reprioritizing domestic concerns, this support is declining.

Trump's administration has proposed eliminating funding for the United Nations peacekeeping operations, threatening missions in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali,


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and Western Sahara. This move significantly jeopardizes stability in conflict zones, as the US covers nearly 27% of the UN peacekeeping budget. Furthermore, in May 2025, the US vetoed the funding mechanism for the African Union Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), stalling implementation of a financing framework under UNSC Resolution 2719. The resolution provides a framework that enables predictable and sustainable financing, allowing UN-assessed contributions to cover up to 75% of the budget for AU-led peace support operations. AUSSOM now faces a budget deficit of about $73.7 million. These funding gaps threaten to undermine the gains made by the AU and embolden the Al-Shabaab, risking the loss of control of liberated regions.

Similarly, the EU has prioritized military reinforcement in response to Russia, increasing defense spending from €218 billion in 2021 to €326 billion in 2024. As a result, EU contributions to AU peace initiatives are likely to diminish, undercutting gains in regions still grappling with terrorism and insurgency. This is because the EU provides more than half of the AU's annual budget. For instance, in 2024, the EU and European member states provided an estimated $370 million of the total AU budget, where 56% of this was for the AU's programs and 44% was for peace support operations.

Economic Uncertainties

The global trade landscape is becoming increasingly volatile due to protectionist policies and escalating trade wars. In 2025, Trump introduced baseline tariffs of 10% on all US imports, including those from Eastern Africa. Additionally, the imposition of tariffs exceeding 100% on Chinese goods prompted retaliatory measures that further disrupted global supply chains. These developments pose significant risks to Eastern Africa's export-driven sectors, which depend heavily on stable global trade flows.

Remittances, an essential economic lifeline for countries in the region, are also under threat. The US has tightened visa regimes and proposed a 3.5% tax on remittances by non-citizens. This is a big blow to Eastern African states since many of them are dependent on remittances to grow their economies. For example, in 2024, Kenya received $4.8 billion in diaspora inflows, followed by Somalia with $1.73 billion, Uganda with $1.49 billion, DRC with $1.35 billion, and South Sudan with $1.14 billion.

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Adding to the uncertainty is the looming expiration of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in September 2025. AGOA has provided Sub-Saharan African countries with duty-free access to the US market for over 1,800 products. The potential non-renewal of the initiative threatens key sectors, particularly manufacturing and agriculture, with widespread implications for employment and economic stability. For instance, AGOA sales in apparel from Kenya grew from $55 million in 2001 to $603 million in 2022, accounting for 67.6% of the country's total exports to the US.

In response to these risks, regional economies need to proactively seek alternatives. More broadly, Eastern African countries need to prioritize export market diversification, value addition, and reduced dependence on extra-African trade. Currently, intra-African trade accounts for only 16% of the continent's total trade, far below intra-regional trade in the EU (70%) and Asia (60%). This underperformance underscores the challenges in realizing the full potential of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aspires to create a unified African market for goods and services. To counter external shocks, the region should leverage the COMESA and EAC frameworks to negotiate more favorable trade terms and boost intra-African commerce. Notably, COMESA's 2025 cooperative strategy emphasizes strengthening regional value chains, enhancing trade integration among African countries, and forging new partnerships with emerging global players such as India, Japan, and Gulf states aimed at reducing dependency on volatile Western markets.

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Humanitarian Assistance

Eastern Africa's humanitarian landscape is increasingly constrained by reduced Western aid. The EU and US, traditionally the largest donors, have reallocated resources to domestic priorities and defense. In 2024, donor countries from the Global North gave $212.1 billion in development assistance and $24.2 billion in humanitarian aid. This was a 7.1% drop in development assistance and a 9.6% drop in humanitarian aid from the previous year. Reduced funding could aggravate instability in conflict-ridden areas. Countries will be more vulnerable to external shocks, given that Western ODA has been a stabilizer during crises such as conflicts and pandemics.

The US aid cuts have been particularly severe. Trump's administration suspended 83% of USAID-funded programs in the region, including those that focused on healthcare, education, and livelihoods. In 2024 alone, USAID provided $6.5 billion in humanitarian support to Sub-Saharan Africa. The strain is exacerbated by climate-induced disasters, protracted conflicts, and large-scale displacement. As of March 2025, the region hosted over 24 million displaced persons. With funding gaps growing, humanitarian operations in South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia face increasing constraints.

This serves as a critical wake-up call for Eastern African states to develop their humanitarian capacities to reduce overreliance on external donors amidst foreign aid cuts. Humanitarian assistance, while critical in times of crisis, can be a double-edged sword. Overreliance on humanitarian aid, particularly from the West, risks embedding dependency and undermining development. Efforts should focus on reducing this reliance by promoting community-based protection mechanisms that strengthen local resilience and reduce the need for external assistance.

The region should leverage collective action through initiatives such as the AU Peace Fund, which disbursed $19 million between 2023 and 2024 through the Crisis Reserve Facility, providing support

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for conflict prevention across the continent. This calls for the strengthening of member states' assessed contributions to the AU budget, guaranteeing a predictable and self-sustaining funding model. This is only achievable if the region's leadership shows unity and political will in actualizing this endeavor.

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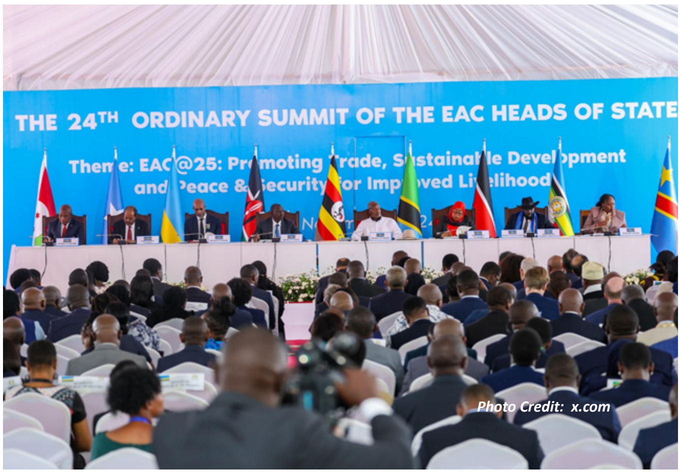
Geopolitical Realignments

The shift towards protectionism and ultranationalism in the West has brought significant geopolitical realignments in the Eastern Africa region. In response to these policies, Eastern African states are increasingly diversifying their diplomatic partnerships, which has emboldened cooperation between states in the Global South under blocs such as the BRICS+. Eastern African states such as Ethiopia and Uganda have joined the bloc, while others, such as Kenya, have also declared their intention to join the bloc, signaling growing interest and engagement with the alliance. BRICS has leveraged the New Development Bank as a soft power tool by offering financing without the stringent conditionalities imposed by Western creditors, increasing its appeal.

Emerging powers such as Turkey, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are stepping into the void being left by the West. This is because the region is of strategic importance to global actors due to its vast natural resources and trade routes. These actors have expanded their presence in infrastructure development, resource extraction, and security cooperation. Although they provide much-needed investment, concerns about opaque financing terms and governance risks persist.

Against this backdrop, Eastern Africa should carefully balance relations between traditional and emerging partners to avoid diplomatic tensions and maximize strategic gains. Leveraging regional institutions to coordinate external engagement and adopt unified negotiating positions is integral in strengthening the region's bargaining power. To enhance resilience and self-sufficiency, countries should harness their collective natural resource wealth, especially in energy and critical minerals vital to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, to secure fairer trade terms and forge mutually beneficial partnerships. Ultimately, value-driven engagement, not the quantity of alliances, will determine the region's ability to attract meaningful, long-term cooperation.



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Conclusion

The global shift toward protectionism and ultra-nationalism by key Western powers demands a fundamental recalibration of Eastern Africa's policy orientation. Reliance on external aid and export markets must be gradually replaced by strategies emphasizing regional integration, industrialization, and strategic diplomacy. Enhancing the region's resilience requires bold leadership, robust institutions, and effective coordination through regional mechanisms. Eastern Africa needs to safeguard its future by building self-sustaining systems capable of navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations

1. EAC, IGAD, and the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) should;

a) intensify lobbying for the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2719;

b) expand partnerships with individuals of high net worth and actors such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) to mobilize resources for conflict-prevention and post-conflict stabilization programs;

c) heighten lobbying for the expansion of the AU Peace Fund's Crisis Reserve Facility to ensure rapid deployment capability; and

d) recognize countries meeting humanitarian financing commitments through a regional index to promote accountability and best practices.

2. Eastern African governments should;

a) maintain strategic neutrality by preserving relations with traditional allies while pursuing new partners;

b) leverage the region's critical minerals and energy potential to attract long-term investment aligned with national development goals;

c) capitalize on the influence of BRICS member countries in the region as a strategic avenue for securing development partnerships with the New Development Bank (NDB);

d) use platforms such as EAC, COMESA, and the AU to negotiate common positions and strengthen collective bargaining;

e) shift humanitarian financing toward local governments and NGOs to promote context-specific responses;

f) evaluate risks and benefits of non-concessional financing from emerging donors to ensure debt sustainability;

g) increase the ease of doing business in the region by investing in shared infrastructure projects and cutting down on business-related costs;

h) intensify the provision of incentives for industries processing minerals, textiles, and agricultural products to generate domestic employment and increase export value; and

i) enhancing fiscal discipline, efficiency, and accountability by cutting inefficient public spending.