

The GLOCEPS

Weekly Influential Brief

Research and Analysis in Foreign Policy Focus

Kenya's Policy Pathways toward BRICS after Ethiopia's Accession

Denis Muniru



Photo credit: iemed.org

Executive Summary

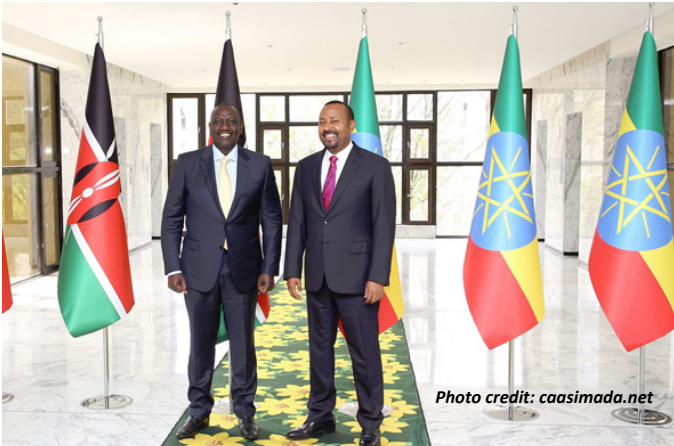
Ethiopia's accession to BRICS in January 2024 shifted the balance of influence in Eastern Africa, giving Addis Ababa privileged access to alternative finance, diplomatic networks, and a stronger voice in global governance debates. For Kenya, long regarded as the region's diplomatic and financial hub, this development introduces both urgency and risk. Kenya has expressed interest in joining BRICS as part of Nairobi's South-South cooperation agenda, yet the move intersects with Kenya's status as a Major Non-NATO Ally of the United States (US), exposing it to heightened scrutiny and possible pushback from Washington. At the same time, Europe's inward turn narrows traditional options,

while Uganda's position as a BRICS partner state signals that regional competitors are already positioning themselves to benefit. In a region where perceptions of early alignment shape long-term influence, Nairobi faces the risk of being bypassed if it remains indecisive.

This brief recommends a calibrated approach. It recommends that the government should convene multi-stakeholder forums on the implications of BRICS membership; maintain Western ties while opening economic channels with BRICS; establish debt-sustainability safeguards to prevent fiscal risks; frame BRICS engagement



as complementary to Western partnerships in high-level diplomacy; secure political backing and cross-ministerial alignment to safeguard policy autonomy and reinforce Kenya's leadership.



Context

Ethiopia's accession to BRICS on 1 January 2024 marked a pivotal moment for Eastern Africa, granting Addis Ababa direct access to the bloc's financing, diplomatic networks, and decision-making platforms. In 2024, BRICS achieved a collective GDP growth of 4%, outpacing the global average of 3.3%. The bloc accounted for 40% of the global economy measured by purchasing power parity in 2024, with projections rising to 41% in 2025. These figures underscore BRICS' growing economic and geopolitical significance on the world stage. For Kenya, long recognized as Eastern Africa's diplomatic and financial hub, Ethiopia's entry into BRICS presents a strategic challenge, potentially undermining its hard-earned reputation for stability, connectivity, and institutional credibility.

Kenya has historically leveraged its central role in multilateral diplomacy. As the host of the UN Office at Nairobi, the only UN headquarters in the Global South, Kenya has acted as a trusted bridge between developed and developing states. The recent decision to relocate three new global UN offices to Nairobi further cements its role as an indispensable hub for international governance, making the city not

only a continental but also a global convening space. This provides Nairobi with leverage that Addis Ababa cannot easily replicate. By aligning this global profile with potential BRICS membership, Kenya could reposition itself as an even more attractive interlocutor for the Global South, offering a rare blend of credibility in both Western and emerging power forums.

The regional context, however, is becoming more competitive. Uganda has strengthened ties with BRICS as a partner state, seeking concessional financing and expanded trade links. With Ethiopia already inside and Uganda actively aligning, Kenya risks being outflanked by its immediate neighbours if it remains indecisive. The optics of this shift matter as investors, lenders, and external powers are increasingly reading Eastern Africa's geopolitics through the lens of multipolarity. Nairobi's hesitation could erode its regional leadership. In a multipolar environment where visibility and early positioning matter, delayed action carries costs.

Kenya thus faces a delicate balancing act. On one hand, it is a Major Non-NATO Ally of the United States, deeply integrated into Western security and economic frameworks. On the other hand, its traditional partners in Europe are turning inward as they focus on their domestic interests, limiting Nairobi's space for external support. Ethiopia's BRICS



accession and Uganda's strategic engagement highlight that East African states are no longer waiting for Western-led initiatives but are actively diversifying their partnerships. For Nairobi, the decision is driven more by pragmatism than ideology. Kenya must weigh whether joining BRICS can strengthen its anchor-state role or risk surrendering ground to regional competitors whose early moves are reshaping Eastern Africa's balance of power.



Key Issues

Security Alignments

Kenya's potential accession to BRICS introduces a complex dynamic into its security landscape. The country's longstanding partnerships with Western allies, namely the US and the European Union (EU), have been central to its regional security strategy, supporting counterterrorism, maritime security, and capacity building for the security Forces. These collaborations include intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and provision of advanced equipment, which have strengthened Kenya's operational capabilities and reinforced its role as a stabilizing force in Eastern Africa. The US designation of Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally and EU-backed training programs have also cemented its credibility within rule-based security frameworks.

At the same time, BRICS members, particularly Russia, China, and India, are actively expanding their security engagements across Africa, including

Eastern Africa. This emerging landscape presents Kenya with both opportunities and challenges. Engagement with BRICS could provide alternative avenues for training, technology transfer, and defense cooperation, but it must be carefully calibrated to avoid undermining existing partnerships with the US and EU. Ethiopia's early BRICS membership may also influence regional security alignments and could shape the scope and priorities of BRICS-related security initiatives in the region. Balancing these overlapping dynamics will be crucial for Nairobi to maintain its strategic autonomy and operational coherence.

These choices are underscored by the persistence of insecurity threats in the region, including terrorism, violent extremism, and conflicts in Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Kenya's leadership in missions such as the peace and security missions in Somalia relies heavily on Western training, financing, and logistical support, yet expanding BRICS ties could diversify resources and reduce dependency on any single bloc. In this sense, security cooperation with BRICS should be framed not as a replacement for US and EU partnerships but as a complementary pillar that strengthens Kenya's resilience in a volatile region. By interlinking new partnerships with its existing alliances, Nairobi can reinforce its stabilizing role while avoiding the perception of a strategic pivot that could erode hard-won Western security guarantees.

Economic Opportunities and Debt Risks

BRICS is a critical player in the global economy, with a large population and key commodity suppliers such as Brazil and Russia providing energy, food, and strategic minerals. Their influence on global commodity prices makes engagement strategically important for Kenya. Kenya's potential engagement



with BRICS presents significant developmental opportunities but also entails complex economic and geopolitical trade-offs. Access to BRICS financing and investment could accelerate infrastructure, energy, and industrialisation projects while broadening export markets beyond traditional Western partners. However, non-Western finance often carries limited transparency, complex collateral arrangements, and political risk, underscoring the need for rigorous debt-sustainability assessments and robust project-level oversight. Similarly, diversification of export markets requires targeted investment in value addition, logistics, and standards compliance to ensure that Kenya captures higher-value economic gains rather than primarily exporting raw commodities.



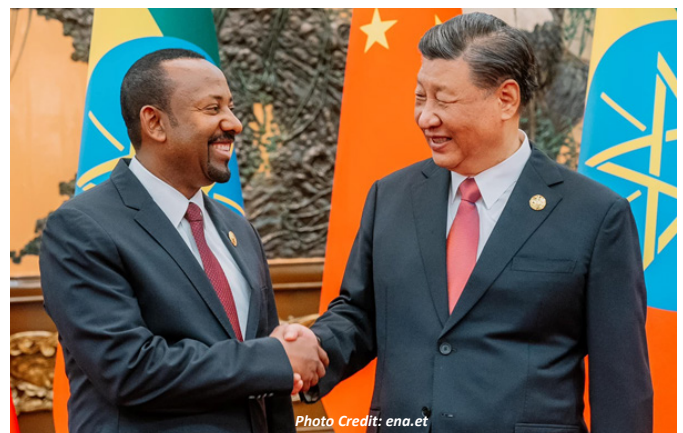
The regional and geopolitical context amplifies these considerations. Ethiopia's early accession to BRICS has already reshaped regional dynamics, placing pressure on Kenya to safeguard its comparative leverage. At the same time, the US and EU states, longstanding economic partners, may interpret closer BRICS engagement through a transactional lens, influencing aid, investment, and security cooperation. India's recent experience under the Trump administration, where steep US tariffs over New Delhi's purchases of Russian oil triggered trade retaliation, highlights the economic risks of overreliance on Western markets and the appeal of alternative alliances. In that context, India's meeting

with China's President Xi Jinping during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin underscored emerging Global South pressure to coordinate in response to Western policies.

Against this background, Kenya needs to pursue a dual-track strategy by leveraging BRICS-linked opportunities to support growth and diversification while clearly signalling that such engagement complements, rather than supplants, existing Western partnerships. This calibrated approach is critical to manage fiscal vulnerabilities, protect regional influence, and navigate the multipolar dynamics shaping Eastern Africa's strategic environment.

Geopolitical Posture

Ethiopia's accession to BRICS presents a risk of altering the regional balance of power by giving Addis Ababa institutional influence that could shape Eastern African priorities within the bloc. For Kenya, this development creates a limited window to ensure it is not sidelined in BRICS-linked regional initiatives, from transport corridors to energy interconnectivity and financial allocations. While Ethiopia has the potential to consolidate influence, Kenya retains significant comparative advantages with its UN-hosting status, dynamic private sector, and advanced financial markets, which it can leverage to position itself as the natural gateway to Eastern African markets and regional networks.



At the same time, Kenya faces a delicate geopolitical situation in the context of US–China competition. As a Major Non-NATO Ally, closer engagement with BRICS could draw scrutiny from Washington, potentially affecting aid, trade, or security cooperation if perceived as a pivot toward Beijing. Recent developments, such as Senator Jim Risch's Africa amendments in the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, underscore this risk, signaling that the US Congress is prepared to review Kenya's status and tie strategic support to its alignment with American interests. Conversely, hesitating risks allowing Ethiopia to strengthen its regional profile and preempt Nairobi in shaping BRICS-supported initiatives. This tension underscores the need for careful timing and messaging in Kenya's engagement strategy.

In this context, Kenya would benefit from adopting a calibrated and balanced diplomatic posture. Engaging with BRICS actors at the project level in sectors of comparative advantage, such as digital finance, green energy, and logistics, without committing prematurely to full membership, could allow Nairobi to extract tangible benefits while managing risk. At the same time, Kenya would need to clearly communicate to Western partners that this diversification is pragmatic, aimed at enhancing resilience and economic opportunity rather than signaling ideological realignment. By pursuing such a coordinated approach, the country could preserve strategic flexibility, reinforce its continental leadership role, and mitigate the risk of being overshadowed by Ethiopia's early BRICS integration.

Domestic Politics and Public Legitimacy

Kenya's engagement with BRICS carries significant political and social implications that require careful management. Ethiopia's early BRICS accession provides Addis Ababa with a head start in regional

projects and financial allocations, potentially shaping domestic expectations and perceptions in Kenya. Large infrastructure deals and financing streams, whether from BRICS or other partners, create winners and losers. BRICS partnerships are often viewed as pragmatic and flexible, sometimes with less stringent governance or transparency requirements, while US and EU partnerships are generally seen as more rule-based, tied to democratic norms, accountability, and human rights standards. These differences shape domestic debates as citizens and political actors weigh the benefits of rapid project implementation against the potential risks of perceived elite capture or compromises to sovereignty.



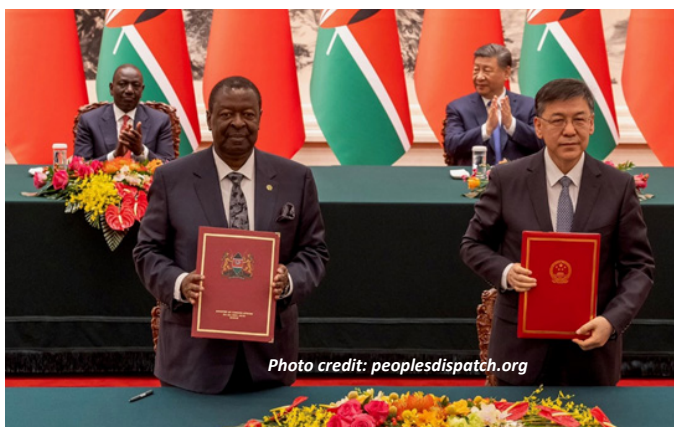
Photo Credit: seforall.org

The public's perception of BRICS partnerships is strongly shaped by tangible national benefits. Domestic participation, including Kenyan companies, workers, and materials, along with Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) involvement and skills transfer in projects, are key indicators through which citizens assess the value of engagement. Transparent mechanisms for community grievances and visible development outcomes, such as job creation, industrialisation, energy security, and investments in critical sectors and infrastructure, also play a crucial role. Additionally, increased exports and foreign investment linked to BRICS projects can reinforce the perception that engagement delivers real economic gains. How citizens perceive the



balance between rapid project implementation and the protection of national interests will determine whether BRICS engagement strengthens or weakens domestic trust in government policy.

BRICS's broader push for reforms in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, such as adjusting quota systems, enhancing voting rights for Global South countries, and promoting concessional finance, aligns with Kenya's foreign policy objectives and resonates with public expectations for fairer global representation. These initiatives complement Kenya's priorities in sustainable growth, climate resilience, and equitable development, while signaling that engagement with BRICS can advance both international influence and tangible domestic benefits. By linking BRICS partnerships to governance reforms, development outcomes, and citizen-focused results, Kenya can reinforce legitimacy at home while enhancing its role in shaping global financial and institutional norms.



Institutional Capacity and Governance Safeguards

Kenya's prospective engagement with BRICS exposes the limits of its institutional capacity to negotiate, supervise, and enforce complex agreements. Large infrastructure and financing deals often involve state-owned enterprises, long-term contractual obligations, and arbitration risks that require robust procurement systems, strong oversight, and transparent public financial management. Weaknesses in these areas could

leave Nairobi vulnerable to poorly structured projects or fiscal liabilities, undermining the credibility of its engagement. Ethiopia's entry into BRICS increases the competitive pressure, as Addis Ababa's early participation could channel projects and financing toward its priorities, leaving Kenya with reduced leverage if its own institutional frameworks are not seen as reliable.

A further challenge lies in navigating overlapping legal and treaty commitments. Kenya's obligations under the World Trade Organization, the African Continental Free Trade Area, and preferential trade arrangements with the US and EU create a dense web of rules that may not always align with BRICS-linked agreements. Divergences in standards such as dispute resolution mechanisms, state aid rules, or sanctions regimes could expose Kenya to diplomatic friction or legal disputes if not carefully managed. In this context, institutional readiness is not just a matter of technical efficiency but a determinant of Kenya's ability to participate credibly in multipolar governance while protecting its sovereignty and long-term policy flexibility.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's accession to BRICS and Uganda's deepening engagement with the bloc have heightened the strategic stakes for Kenya. In a global environment marked by Western protectionism and expanding BRICS activism, diversification of partnerships is prudent. However, Kenya's choices cannot be reduced to a straightforward dichotomy between East and West. Its national interest will be best advanced through a carefully





sequenced strategy that leverages BRICS-linked opportunities in finance, infrastructure, and market access, while safeguarding macroeconomic stability, institutional integrity, and its longstanding Western partnerships. Treating BRICS engagement as a set of instruments rather than an end

in itself allows Kenya to extract developmental value while retaining policy autonomy. Failure to act with clarity risks diminishing Kenya's resilience and enabling regional competitors to consolidate influence.

Recommendations

1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) should;
 - a) convene multi-stakeholder forums to evaluate the foreign policy, security, and trade implications of joining BRICS, and use the outcomes to prepare and table a comprehensive policy paper that guides national debate and builds political consensus;
 - b) pursue a balanced strategy that consolidates partnerships with traditional Western allies while selectively expanding economic channels with BRICS states; and
 - c) lead high-level diplomatic messaging to position BRICS engagement as complementary to Western ties, managing external perceptions and avoiding misinterpretation as an ideological shift.
2. The National Treasury & Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) should develop clear debt-sustainability safeguards for any BRICS-linked financing to ensure that diversification of funding does not compromise Kenya's fiscal stability or policy autonomy.
3. The Executive Office of the President should provide political backing for MFA's policy directives and stakeholder forums to ensure cross-ministerial alignment and signal coherence in Kenya's foreign policy approach.
4. Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) should work with MFA and KenInvest to identify sectors of comparative advantage and coordinate lobbying efforts to secure export and investment opportunities in BRICS markets.



THE GLOBAL CENTRE FOR POLICY AND STRATEGY
(GLOCEPS)

Research | Knowledge | Influence
Runda Drive 100, Nairobi, Kenya
P. O. Box 27023 - 00100, Nairobi.
Telephone: 01 12401331
Email: info@gloceps.org
Web: www.gloceps.org

