

The GLOCEPS

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Research Focus: Foreign Policy

The Implications of Geopolitical Re-alignments in East Africa on Governance

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Photo Credit: Geopolitical Monitor

Executive Summary

The growing restiveness in the Eastern Africa (EA) states has underscored the impact of geopolitical realignments on governance. The Eastern African states tend to be more vulnerable to geopolitical realignments because of the region's geostrategic location and their pliability to external influence. These vulnerabilities have impacted governance and public service delivery in regional states. Notably, the protests in Kenya are a reflection of the domestic governance and service delivery challenges that states across Africa are facing due the realignments. In EA, geopolitical rivalries and self-interests have hampered integration and cooperative initiatives, instead pushing states towards alignment with

external powers thus entangling themselves in the new Cold War. One notable implication is the pervasiveness of external influence and ideas on domestic policies and governance. The West, especially the US is finding it difficult to balance the tension between an interests-based and values-based foreign policy amidst China's approach of non-interference in the internal affairs of African states. The focus on values such as democracy, good governance, human rights, and anti-corruption among others have put the US and Western allies in the position of neocolonial interference in African affairs, thus making China more popular in the continent because it does



not emphasize such values. The net effect is that service delivery and governance decisions become unfavorable to the citizens as external actors ignore governance issues while focusing on self-interests. If not mitigated, this state of affairs will degenerate into proxy wars and destabilizations, internal revolutions, violent conflicts, interstate tensions, and subsequent regional instability. The brief notes that the region's vulnerability to geopolitical influence affects the rule of law, democracy, economic and security governance, and the general service delivery by states. It recommends that regional states should diversify diplomatic relations to avoid aligning with one power at the cost of the other, prioritize public participation and homegrown solutions, while strengthening regional integration to enhance their common approach towards external geopolitical actors.



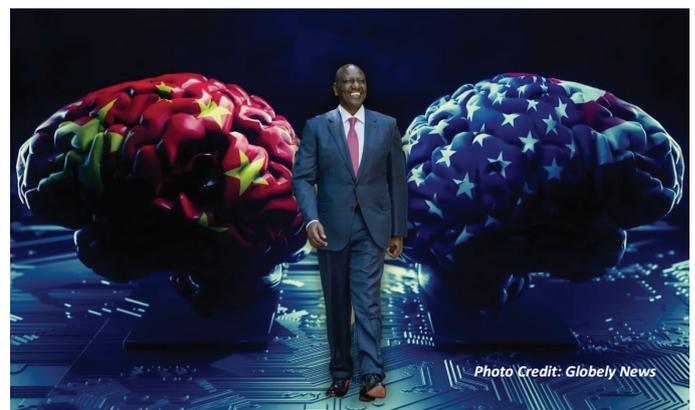
Context

The ongoing geopolitical re-alignments are taking place at two levels, namely the global and the intra-regional. Both levels have implications on governance and service delivery in EA. The phenomenon has seen the West, led by the US, expand its geopolitical reach into the EA region. Similarly, China, India, Russia, and other newer powers including South Korea, Turkey, Qatar, and Gulf states are jostling for influence and strategic alignments in the region. The increased global interest in Eastern Africa is occasioned by the region's natural resources and geostrategic

significance to extra-continental powers. Within the region, there are rivalries, geopolitical tensions, jealousies, and unhealthy competition among states in Eastern Africa. Most of these are driven by realignments mostly with rivaling global powers. The risk is that the EA countries deal with these geopolitical shifts differently, making the entire region politically fragmented and vulnerable to the ongoing geopolitical realignments.

Likewise, the United States and its closest Western allies and regional partners appear to be going slow on defending democracy in Africa lest they sacrifice security interests and geopolitical influence. The rising powers such as Russia have found a loophole to advance their interests by providing support and protection to military and authoritarian regimes. The entrenchment of coup leaders in Africa's Sahel and Western region attests to this.

Historically, states in Eastern Africa had diverse social engineering from different colonial powers including France, Britain, Germany, and Italy among others. This has continued into the present diplomatic attachments by EA states to respective global players. Presently, besides historical ties with the United Kingdom, generally Kenya is considered Western-leaning despite its huge economic relations with China and its allies. Tanzania has maintained its ties with Germany with the latter being among the top five investors in the East African country. By the end of last year, Germany had





invested in approximately 180 projects within Tanzania totaling \$118.6 million. China leads in foreign investment in Tanzania while the United Kingdom remains among the leading foreign investors in Kenya. France continues to maintain military and economic agreements with Djibouti where for instance it has a military base in the Horn of Africa state. However, the entry of the USA has also complicated matters pushing states to navigate a balance between historical ties and diplomatic coaxing by the new world powers.

Nonetheless, the region is divided on the ongoing geopolitical alignments. This is, for instance, reflected in the EA states' position on the Russia-Ukraine war even in their voting at the UN. For example, at the 11th Emergency Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Kenya voted alongside 31 other African countries including East Africa's Rwanda, DR Congo, and South Sudan, to endorse a resolution that demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. While Uganda maintained its neutral position by abstaining, Tanzania was absent but Eritrea emerged as the only African country to reject the resolution thus siding with its long-time ally Russia. Both Russia and Ukraine have been using grain and fertilizer diplomacy to win allies in the region concerning voting at the UN and amplifying the positions of the two warring states. While Kenya has shown snippets of non-alignment in the Russia-Ukraine war by condemning Russia's violation

of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and also pointing to the unfairness and illegality of expropriating Russia's assets to pay Ukraine, it has generally been leaning towards the West's position on the Russia-Ukraine war. Uganda, which is seemingly geopolitically falling low with Western powers is seeking new partners including deepened ties with Russia. Kampala has positioned itself as a gateway for Russian health diplomacy in Africa and also looking to enhance support in the nuclear and space sectors from Moscow.

This fragmentation of the region due to external influence has impeded the region's progress towards infrastructural integration, instead increasing rivalry and competition. Kenya and Tanzania have occasionally heightened Port competition in serving landlocked countries in the region. This rivalry has severally been exploited by Uganda whenever it wants to push its trade interests with both Kenya and Tanzania. This tactic pressured Kenya to allow Uganda to directly import its fuel via Kenya Port. The pressure of projecting itself as an anchor state after joining BRICS has pushed Ethiopia into conflicts with Somalia over access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia signed an MoU with Somaliland which Somalia considers as part of its territory. This saw Somalia accelerate its defense and economic cooperation agreement with Turkey a month after the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU. Somalia Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre told the cabinet that the country's deal with Turkey will remove "any fears of terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, toxic dumping and any external violations or threats" to Somalia's maritime domain.

The EA region is in a vicious cycle where poor and bad governance leads to protests and violent conflicts that destroy property, infrastructure, and other economic systems leading to poverty and diminished service delivery. The largely civilian





protests in Sudan which eventually removed the regime of Al-Bashir, plunged the country into one of the worst internal armed conflicts in Africa. To date, Sudan is ravaged by a war between the army generals supported by various external geopolitical actors. Elsewhere, there were geopolitical undertones expressed orally and on placards by demonstrators during Kenya's protests sparked by the 2024 Finance Bill. The protesters were against what they perceived as USA domination of Kenya's internal affairs and they rejected the Finance Bill for being, as they claimed, engineered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The same sentiments were expressed in Tanzania and Uganda as traders threatened to protest on the streets against the economic policies. Additionally, some protesters in Kenya had threatened to raise the Russian flag during demonstrations to spite Kenya-USA's elevated ties. This is a development that has been witnessed across Africa where youths have hoisted the Russian flag as a symbol of revulsion and resistance against long-held Western dominance in Africa.

The historical cycle seems to be repeating itself in the new Cold War featuring the USA and its European allies on one side and China and other rising powers on the other. The Cold War eroded democracy and entrenched authoritarianism in Africa. It was not until the end of the Cold War that the wind of democratic change swept across Africa improving governance and service delivery. But this

wind of change was contrived by the USA and achieved through street protests. The concerns about China's expanding influence in Africa have pushed the USA to tamper with its strict push for good governance in Africa especially among states it considers strategic allies.

Key Issues

Democracy

The USA and its allies are facing a geopolitical dilemma in Africa: whether to promote democracy and good governance and lose out on the geopolitical power competition or focus on combating violent extremism and engaging in great-power competition at the cost of democracy and good governance in Africa.

Since 2020, Africa has seen more political unrest, violent extremism, and democratic reversals than any other region in the world. The Sahel, West Africa, and Sudan in Eastern Africa are under the power of military coup authoritarians. The democratization wave of the 1990s is now on a reversal decline, according to the Freedom House report, by 2023 half of Africa's population lived under autocratic rule. In 2023, average electoral democracy scores were only 0.34 in central-east Africa, 0.29 in the Sahel, and 0.28 in northern Africa.

The decline in governance in other parts of Africa has pushed the US to now shift its strategic interests to the Eastern Africa region thus making the region serve as a stage for the escalating great-power competition between China, Russia, and the United States. This is coming with an erosion of democracy and general good governance.

Some leaders in the Eastern Africa region, including Uganda and Rwanda's President Museveni and President Kagame respectively, have removed term limits but due to their re-alignment with the West, there has been not much pressure on this violation





of democratic principles. The challenge of electoral malpractices continues to be ignored by global powers due to their major concern to enhance partnerships against China's drastic expansion in Africa. The Eastern Africa region and indeed the entire continent, have become an important front in America's global war on terror, thus authoritarian governments in the region enjoy USA patronage provided they are critical allies of the US in the counter-terrorism agenda.

Overall, the rising democratic backsliding could have geopolitical and security implications for the region as the youths and masses increasingly get agitated leading to protests and revolutionary politics while the United States and its allies quickly lose influence on the continent.

Economic

The geopolitical alignments and competition are playing out in the economic governance of Eastern African states. The region is vulnerable to external shocks such as the war in Ukraine, the convergence of the Gaza war with Houthis rebels seen in the Red Sea blockade, the improbable global debt burden, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) economic prescriptions that have attracted mass resistance in African states.

The protests in Kenya underscored the worldwide concern over rising debts and high taxes and the growing anxiety among youths in Africa that the

succeeding and future generations could have a worse economic situation than now. In September 2023, the Tanzanian government had to back down in the face of intense opposition by the masses to the country's port management deal with an Emirati firm, DP World.

Kenya's Finance Bill 2024 faced mass protests largely due to the high taxes which the demonstrators blamed on the interference and prescriptions by the IMF and USA. As Kenya seeks much-needed loans from the IMF, the loans have come with strings attached which have proven unpopular among the people. The IMF policy recommendations that have been forced on the country propose austerity measures such as scrapping the subsidies on maize flour and fuel that previous governments had offered to consumers. Such measures coupled with high taxes, even though projected for good reasons, have a direct impact on the people already suffering a high cost of living.

The geopolitical re-alignments have seen trade tensions between the USA and its allies and the rising role of China, India, Russia, and other newer powers as alternative models for economic development. This comes with implications such as distortions and fragmentations in the economic development and integration since member states get into more bilateral engagements with different powers rather than a united approach.





Security Governance

The competition for security alignments in the Eastern Africa region has come with the cost of diminished governance. The heavy military investments and support by global powers have always made African governments less answerable to their citizens and more to the provident external powers.

The Eastern Africa region has become a geostrategic zone for defence competition and alignments as leading and rising global powers compete to establish military bases. These powers are driven by an omnibus of interests including military security, commercial, natural resources, and geopolitics.

Geopolitically, some of the foreign forces are using military bases in the region to counter perceived threats from one another. This militarization of the region by foreign powers may become destabilizing and threaten the strategic interests of the Eastern African states. For instance, we are seeing increased security relations and militarization of states in the region by new actors, such as China's increased involvement in Djibouti, India's maritime collaboration with the Seychelles, Turkey, and Gulf states naval developments in Somalia and Horn of Africa.

Russia has capitalized on anti-French sentiment and French withdrawals in the Sahel including US security draw-down in the region to entrench its security and geopolitical aims. The growth of Private



military companies such as Russia's Wagner and USA Bancroft in the Eastern Africa portends a destabilization implication for the region.

Besides the traditional powers, namely the USA, the UK, and other Western states, the number of military bases in Eastern Africa has been on the rise to include new actors such as China, Japan, Spain, Germany, Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States. The net implications of increased foreign security establishments in the region include maritime exploitation, geopolitical tensions, undermining counterterrorism and conflict resolution efforts, and diminishing the collective security approach. The proliferation of foreign military bases and subsequent rivalry for defence and security influence in the Eastern Africa region is a threat to the strategic interests of the regional states. It undermines continental efforts in responding effectively to ongoing peace and security threats ranging from inter-state conflicts and tensions to terrorism, and piracy.

Additionally, the naval bases provide a cover for uncontrolled exploitation of the region's maritime resources and blue economy including oil, gas, minerals, and fisheries. The region is also vulnerable to geopolitical manipulations by external powers leading to escalation of tensions between member states. Yet, the deeper challenge is that African countries have continued to exhibit a disjointed approach to how to regulate these foreign security

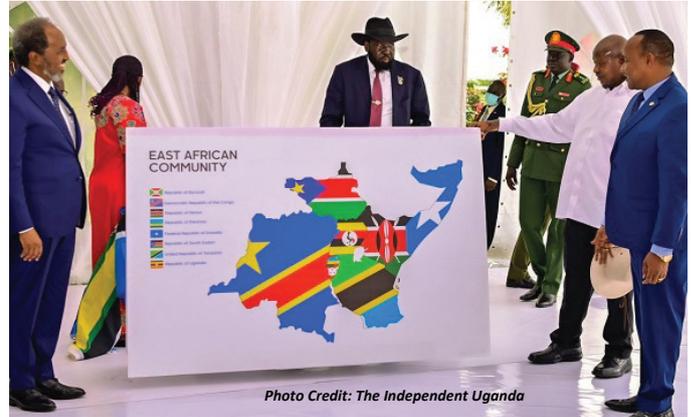


and military activities. They also lack mechanisms to monitor the activities of these military bases to ascertain their impact on the strategic interests of states in the Eastern Africa region.

Conclusion

In the ongoing global geopolitical realignment, the Eastern Africa region is likely to experience rough times in the near future partly due to diminishing democracy and governance, economic challenges, and security disruptions by vying global powers engaged in both global and regional re-alignments for their interests. The region's vulnerability to

geopolitical influence affects the rule of law, democracy, economic and security governance, and the general service delivery by states.



Recommendations

Regional states should:

1. identify and prioritize their national interests even as they engage international partners,
2. diversify diplomatic relations to avoid aligning with one power at the cost of the other,
3. prioritize public participation and homegrown solutions,
4. strengthen regional integration to enhance their common approach towards external geopolitical actors.





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