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THEME:

Building Strategic Railway Corridors for Regional Integration, Economic Sovereignty, Peace, Security, and Sustainable Development in Eastern Africa

Eastern Africa's expanding railway corridors present a strategic opportunity to accelerate the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), strengthen regional integration, and advance sustainable economic transformation. However, their full potential remains constrained by financing gaps, fragmented infrastructure planning, geopolitical competition, weak regional governance, limited integration into peacebuilding, and growing exposure to transnational organized crime. These interconnected challenges reduce operational efficiency, increase strategic vulnerabilities, and limit the developmental impact of railway investments. This week's series recommends prioritizing innovative and diversified railway financing, safeguarding infrastructure sovereignty, strengthening regional governance and interoperability, integrating railway development into peacebuilding and borderland development strategies, and institutionalizing security by design through transnational organized crime risk assessments across the railway lifecycle to maximize the region's long-term economic, security, and integration dividends.

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Leveraging the Eastern Africa Railway Network to Catalyse African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Implementation

The Eastern Africa railway network presents one of the region's greatest opportunities to accelerate implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by strengthening regional connectivity, lowering transport costs, and improving the competitiveness of regional value chains. Strategic railway corridors such as the LAPSSET Corridor, the Northern Corridor Railway Network, the Standard Gauge Railway, and planned cross-border rail links are central to connecting ports, landlocked countries, industrial centres, agricultural production zones, mineral-rich regions, and regional markets into an integrated transport ecosystem. By reducing transit times, improving supply chain reliability, and facilitating the efficient movement of goods, these corridors can expand intra-African trade, attract investment, and strengthen Eastern Africa's position within continental and global markets. As AfCFTA increasingly shifts Africa towards regional production networks and industrial value chains, efficient railway connectivity will become a decisive enabler of long-term economic competitiveness.

Despite this considerable potential, the region's railway ambitions continue to face significant implementation constraints.

Persistent financing gaps, fragmented infrastructure planning, incompatible railway standards, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, limited multimodal integration, weak cross-border operational coordination, and competing national priorities continue to delay corridor development and reduce network efficiency. These structural challenges increase logistics costs, discourage private investment, weaken freight competitiveness, and limit the ability of businesses to fully exploit opportunities created by AfCFTA. Without greater regional alignment, expanding railway infrastructure alone will not generate the seamless trade environment required to support continental market integration.

Realising the full economic potential of Eastern Africa's railway network will therefore require a transition from nationally driven infrastructure projects towards integrated regional economic corridors. Governments should expand innovative financing mechanisms that combine public investment, private capital, blended finance, infrastructure bonds, pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, and regional development finance institutions to diversify funding sources and reduce reliance on external borrowing.



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Valuable lessons can also be drawn from the European Union's cross-border infrastructure financing model and Ethiopia's experience in mobilising domestic resources for strategic infrastructure investment. Equally important, railway development should be integrated with ports, dry ports, logistics hubs, special economic zones, industrial parks, agricultural value chains, and mineral processing centres to stimulate industrialisation, increase freight volumes, diversify revenue streams, and maximise the trade and development dividends of AfCFTA implementation.



Photo Credit: The East Africa

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Safeguarding Railway Infrastructure Sovereignty in Eastern Africa amid Geopolitical Competition

Railway infrastructure has evolved beyond its traditional transport function to become a strategic asset that shapes economic sovereignty, regional integration, industrial competitiveness, and geopolitical influence. As Eastern African countries expand investments in the Standard Gauge Railway, LAPSSET Corridor, Central Corridor, and other cross-border railway projects, these networks are becoming increasingly important in determining regional trade flows, supply chain resilience, market access, and long-term development trajectories. Their growing strategic value has intensified competition among external powers seeking to finance, construct, operate, and supply technology for major railway projects. While international partnerships remain essential to addressing the region's infrastructure financing deficit, they also present new governance challenges that require careful management to preserve national and regional strategic autonomy.

The increasing reliance on external financing, engineering expertise, technology platforms, and operational support raises important questions about infrastructure sovereignty, debt sustainability, technological dependence, and long-term policy flexibility. Financing arrangements characterised by limited transparency, restrictive contractual conditions, or prolonged foreign operational control can reduce domestic policy space and constrain future infrastructure decisions. Beyond physical infrastructure, the digitalisation of railway operations through signalling systems, communications networks, data management platforms, and intelligent logistics systems has introduced an additional layer of strategic vulnerability. Control over digital railway infrastructure increasingly influences operational resilience, commercial data, cybersecurity, and supply chain management, making railway sovereignty both a physical and technological imperative.

Protecting railway infrastructure sovereignty therefore requires a balanced investment strategy that welcomes international capital while safeguarding domestic ownership, institutional capacity, and strategic decision-making. Rather than relying predominantly on a single external partner, Eastern African governments should diversify infrastructure partnerships by leveraging multilateral development institutions, regional financial mechanisms, domestic capital markets, and responsible private investment. Expanding Public-Private Partnerships, infrastructure bonds, pension fund investments, and regional infrastructure financing facilities can strengthen financial resilience while reducing long-term dependence on external borrowing.

Equally important, infrastructure partnerships should be structured to maximise long-term developmental value rather than simply deliver completed assets. Financing agreements should

prioritise technology transfer, local content requirements, workforce development, domestic manufacturing, research collaboration, and joint ventures with regional engineering firms to strengthen indigenous industrial capabilities. Lessons from the Southern African Railways Association (SARA) further demonstrate that coordinated regional negotiations, harmonised procurement frameworks, and shared technical expertise can significantly improve bargaining power and secure more balanced infrastructure partnerships. Safeguarding railway infrastructure sovereignty will ultimately depend on transforming external investment into a catalyst for domestic capability, regional self-reliance, and long-term strategic autonomy rather than a source of structural dependence.



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Coordinated Railway Governance as a Catalyst for Sustainable Infrastructure Development in Eastern Africa

The long-term success of Eastern Africa's railway ambitions will depend not only on expanding physical infrastructure but also on building governance systems capable of managing an increasingly interconnected regional railway network. As countries invest in modern rail corridors to support industrialization, trade competitiveness, and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) implementation, coordinated governance will become the defining factor in determining whether these investments deliver sustained regional value. Railway systems operate across national jurisdictions, requiring common institutional frameworks that enable infrastructure, regulations, operations, and services to function seamlessly across borders. Without coordinated governance, even well-developed railway networks risk operating as disconnected national systems rather than an integrated regional transport ecosystem.

Eastern Africa has established important institutional foundations through the East African Railways Master Plan, East African Community infrastructure coordination mechanisms, and corridor institutions such as the Northern Corridor and Central Corridor. Despite these achievements, implementation remains constrained by fragmented institutional mandates, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, incompatible technical standards, limited interoperability, uneven investment priorities, and weak coordination among transport agencies, railway operators, customs authorities, and infrastructure regulators. These institutional shortcomings reduce network efficiency, increase

transaction costs, delay freight movement, discourage long-term private investment, and diminish the competitiveness of regional railway corridors.

As railway networks become more sophisticated and commercially integrated, governance arrangements must evolve beyond infrastructure coordination towards a comprehensive regional railway governance architecture. This requires stronger institutional collaboration throughout the railway value chain, including strategic planning, regulatory oversight, corridor management, asset maintenance, operational performance, digital innovation, and service delivery. Harmonised safety regulations, common technical specifications, interoperable digital platforms, coordinated operational procedures, and shared performance standards will be essential to ensuring that railway systems function as a single regional network rather than multiple disconnected national systems.

The experience of the Southern African Railways Association (SARA) demonstrates that effective railway integration is underpinned by strong institutions rather than infrastructure investment alone. Its emphasis on technical standardization, professional capacity development, knowledge exchange, operational benchmarking, and collaborative problem-solving has strengthened regional railway performance while promoting greater institutional coherence across member states.

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Achieving a fully integrated regional railway system will therefore require Eastern African Partner States to establish a stronger regional railway governance architecture that harmonizes regulatory frameworks, institutionalizes performance benchmarking, advances digital interoperability, and strengthens regional oversight mechanisms. Such reforms will improve operational efficiency, enhance service reliability, attract long-term investment, lower logistics costs, and position Eastern Africa's railway network as a globally competitive platform for sustainable infrastructure development and regional

economic integration.

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Strengthening Peace Dividends through Railway Connectivity in Eastern Africa

Beyond facilitating trade and mobility, railway connectivity is emerging as a powerful instrument for peacebuilding, regional cohesion, and inclusive development across Eastern Africa. As countries expand cross-border railway networks under the East African Community (EAC) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), these transport corridors are creating new opportunities to strengthen interstate cooperation, enhance economic interdependence, and improve the livelihoods of communities living along shared borders. By linking markets, institutions, and people, regional railway networks can transform infrastructure investment into a long-term peace dividend that addresses some of the structural drivers of instability while reinforcing regional integration.

Cross-border railway development requires neighbouring countries to coordinate

infrastructure planning, customs procedures, transport regulations, immigration systems, and security arrangements. This continuous collaboration strengthens diplomatic engagement, builds institutional trust, and creates practical mechanisms for resolving shared challenges through dialogue rather than unilateral action. At the local level, railway corridors can stimulate inclusive economic development by connecting historically marginalised and underserved borderland communities to markets, public services, employment opportunities, and investment. Improved access to economic opportunities can help reduce poverty, social exclusion, and regional inequalities that have historically contributed to local grievances, cross-border tensions, and irregular migration.

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Railways also enhance regional resilience by strengthening humanitarian logistics and emergency response capacity. Efficient railway systems enable the rapid movement of food supplies, medical equipment, disaster relief, and reconstruction materials during humanitarian crises while supporting peace support operations and post-conflict recovery initiatives. The Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA) remains a compelling example of how shared transport infrastructure can strengthen regional solidarity, facilitate economic cooperation, and reinforce long-term political partnerships. More broadly, growing economic interdependence through shared transport corridors increases the opportunity cost of conflict by making stability, cooperation, and uninterrupted connectivity mutually beneficial for participating states.

Maximizing these peace dividends requires governments to position railway corridors as platforms for inclusive regional development rather than transport infrastructure alone. This calls for integrating railway investments with border economic zones, local enterprise development, workforce skills programmes, youth employment initiatives, and community participation mechanisms that ensure local populations share in the economic benefits of connectivity. Embedding inclusive development alongside regional infrastructure expansion will strengthen public ownership, reinforce social cohesion, reduce the structural conditions that contribute to instability, and position railway connectivity as a lasting foundation for peace, resilience, and shared prosperity across Eastern Africa.



Photo Credit: The Coast Media Group

Building the Resilience of Eastern Africa's Railway Connectivity Against Transnational Organized Crime

The rapid expansion of Eastern Africa's regional railway corridors, including the Standard Gauge Railway, Meter Gauge Railway rehabilitation, and planned cross-border rail links, will significantly increase the speed, scale, and efficiency of cross-border movement, creating new opportunities for trade, regional integration, industrialization, and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) implementation. However, the same characteristics that make railway connectivity an engine of economic transformation can also make it attractive to transnational organized criminal networks. As transport corridors become faster, more interconnected, and capable of handling larger cargo volumes, they may unintentionally lower operational barriers for criminal organizations seeking to exploit weaknesses in border management, customs oversight, and regulatory coordination. Unless security and governance systems evolve alongside infrastructure investment, expanding railway networks could facilitate illicit trade, human trafficking, arms trafficking, wildlife trafficking, financial crimes, and the movement of illicit commodities concealed within legitimate commercial supply chains.

This emerging challenge is particularly significant in Eastern Africa, where the Global Organized Crime Index 2025 identifies the region as Africa's highest criminality region, reflecting persistent vulnerabilities across organised criminal markets and networks. International experience further illustrates the risks of governance lagging behind infrastructure expansion. The China–Laos Railway demonstrates how enhanced rail connectivity can unintentionally stimulate illicit

wildlife trade by increasing accessibility, reducing transaction costs, and allowing criminal enterprises to exploit legitimate transport and tourism systems where governance, monitoring, and enforcement remain insufficient. These experiences underscore that infrastructure investments designed to facilitate economic integration can also reshape the operating environment for organized crime if risk management is not embedded from the outset.

Building resilience against transnational organized crime therefore requires treating railway security as an integral component of infrastructure governance rather than a standalone law enforcement responsibility. Regional governments should deepen the integration of transnational organized crime risk assessments into railway planning, investment, financing, and operational frameworks, ensuring that security considerations inform decision-making throughout the infrastructure lifecycle. Embedding security by design, infrastructure resilience standards, and cross-border accountability mechanisms from project conception to operation will strengthen the region's capacity to anticipate, deter, and respond to emerging criminal threats. By adopting an anticipatory governance approach, Eastern Africa can safeguard strategic transport corridors, reinforce investor confidence, protect AfCFTA implementation, and ensure that expanding railway connectivity advances economic prosperity and regional resilience without creating new opportunities for transnational organized crime.



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