

The **Eastern Africa**

Journal of Policy and Strategy

GLOCEPS

Weekly Influential Bulletin (WIB)

Monday 6th - Friday 10th July, 2026

THEME:

Harnessing Aviation Infrastructure, Regional Cooperation, and Security to Advance Eastern Africa's Economic Transformation

Eastern Africa's aviation transformation requires a shift from isolated national investments to a coordinated regional strategy. Expanding airport infrastructure should be accompanied by the development of airport economic zones that strengthen trade, logistics, manufacturing, and investment. Equally important is regional resource pooling through harmonized regulations, shared maintenance facilities, joint skills development, and technology transfer to reduce costs and enhance competitiveness. As aviation connectivity grows, governments must also strengthen security by addressing transnational organized crimes, improving intelligence sharing, and modernizing passenger and cargo screening. Accelerating the implementation of the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) will unlock the full benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by improving connectivity and lowering transport barriers. Consequently, sustained investment in cybersecurity, skilled personnel, and compliance with international standards will safeguard national security while positioning Eastern Africa as a globally competitive aviation and logistics hub..

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Africa's Aviation Infrastructure Boom and Its Implications for Eastern Africa

Africa's aviation infrastructure is undergoing a significant transformation, with more than US\$25 billion being invested in new airports, cargo terminals, runway expansions, and aviation support facilities. These investments are not merely intended to accommodate growing passenger numbers. They reflect a broader shift in which aviation infrastructure has become a strategic instrument for economic growth, geopolitical influence, and global competitiveness. Countries that develop efficient aviation ecosystems are positioning themselves to attract investment, expand exports, strengthen tourism, and become indispensable nodes in international supply chains.

For Eastern Africa, this transformation presents both opportunities and strategic choices. The region occupies a unique geographical position linking Africa with the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, giving it the potential to become a preferred gateway for passengers and cargo moving between continents. If leveraged effectively, this location can support the expansion of air cargo services, time-sensitive exports such as horticultural produce and pharmaceuticals, e-commerce logistics, and high-value manufacturing. Aviation infrastructure should therefore be viewed not simply as transport infrastructure but as

an economic platform capable of driving industrialization and regional prosperity.

However, infrastructure alone does not guarantee competitiveness. Modern terminals and expanded runways can quickly become underutilized if they are not supported by strong commercial ecosystems. Airports increasingly compete on the quality of logistics services, digital technologies, cargo efficiency, business-friendly policies, and their ability to attract airlines, investors, and multinational companies. Eastern Africa must therefore complement physical infrastructure with policies that create vibrant airport economies capable of generating employment, innovation, and investment.

Governments should capitalize on airport development by establishing aviation-linked economic zones that integrate logistics, warehousing, cold-chain facilities, aircraft maintenance, manufacturing, hospitality, and commercial services. Such airport cities or aerotropolises can transform airports into engines of economic activity rather than simple transit points. This approach would stimulate private sector investment, strengthen regional value chains, and increase the competitiveness of Eastern African exports in international markets.

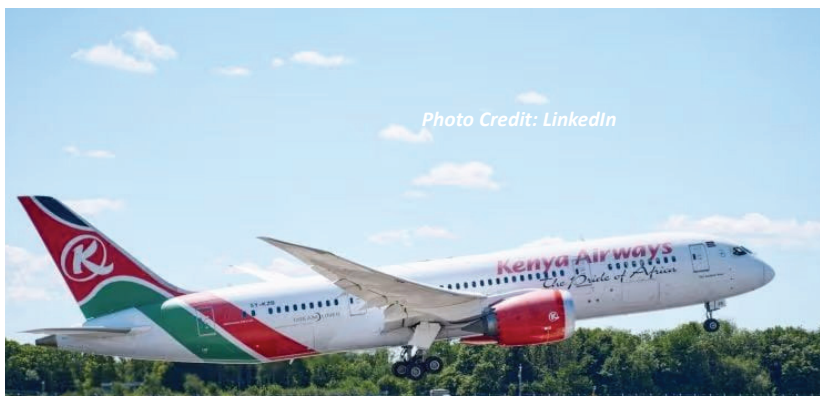


Photo Credit: LinkedIn

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The region should also prioritize digital transformation across the aviation value chain. Smart airport technologies, paperless cargo processing, integrated customs platforms, artificial intelligence-driven passenger management, and digital trade facilitation can significantly improve operational efficiency while reducing costs and delays. These innovations would enhance the attractiveness of Eastern African airports to airlines, investors, and global logistics companies seeking reliable regional hubs.

Africa's aviation infrastructure boom is about far more than constructing impressive airport terminals. It is about shaping the future geography of trade, investment, and influence on the continent. By developing airports as integrated economic and logistics ecosystems, Eastern Africa can strengthen

its competitiveness, diversify its economies, and attract high-value industries.



Photo Credit: TRT Afrika

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Safeguarding Eastern Africa's Aviation Sovereignty through Regional Resource Pooling

Eastern Africa is emerging as one of Africa's fastest-growing aviation markets, supported by major investments in airport infrastructure, expanding airline networks, and increasing passenger demand. Ethiopia continues to strengthen its position as a continental aviation hub through Ethiopian Airlines and the expansion of Bishoftu International Airport. Kenya is modernizing Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) to enhance its role as a regional gateway, while Rwanda has positioned Kigali as a growing aviation and logistics hub through strategic investments and its progressive visa-free policy. These developments demonstrate the region's growing ambition to become a globally competitive aviation corridor.

Despite this momentum, Eastern Africa's aviation ecosystem remains constrained by fragmented national approaches. Most countries continue to develop aviation infrastru-

cture independently, resulting in duplication of investments, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, shortages of highly skilled personnel, limited aircraft maintenance capacity, and continued dependence on foreign technologies and expertise. While individual investments strengthen national aviation sectors, they do not automatically create a competitive regional aviation industry capable of supporting long-term economic transformation.

Experience from leading global aviation hubs shows that competitiveness is built on integrated regional ecosystems rather than isolated national projects. Successful aviation centres combine modern infrastructure with coordinated regulations, shared technical capabilities, advanced research and innovation, efficient maintenance facilities, and highly skilled human capital.

By pooling resources, countries reduce operational costs, increase efficiency, strengthen resilience, and create larger markets that attract international investment and technology partnerships.

Eastern African governments should therefore view flagship aviation investments as complementary regional assets rather than competing national projects. Ethiopia's US\$12.7 billion Bishoftu International Airport, Kenya's modernization of JKIA, and Rwanda's aviation expansion should be integrated into a broader regional strategy that maximizes their comparative advantages. Rather than competing for the same markets, these facilities can perform complementary roles within an interconnected regional aviation network that improves connectivity, expands cargo movement, and enhances passenger mobility across Eastern Africa.

Achieving this vision will require deeper regional cooperation. Governments should harmonize aviation regulations, accelerate implementation of the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), and strengthen collaboration among

civil aviation authorities. Regional resource pooling should also extend to pilot and aerospace engineering training, aircraft maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facilities, air traffic management, aviation research, and component manufacturing. Establishing shared centres of excellence would reduce costs while improving technical capacity across the region.

Technology partnerships with global aerospace leaders such as Boeing, Airbus, and Embraer should equally prioritize technology transfer, skills development, and local industrial capacity. Such collaborations would help build a competitive regional aerospace ecosystem while reducing long-term dependence on external expertise and imported technologies. Eastern Africa can build a more resilient, innovative, and competitive aviation sector by embracing regional resource pooling. Ultimately, stronger aviation cooperation will not only support economic growth and regional integration but also position Eastern Africa as a strategic gateway connecting Africa with global markets.

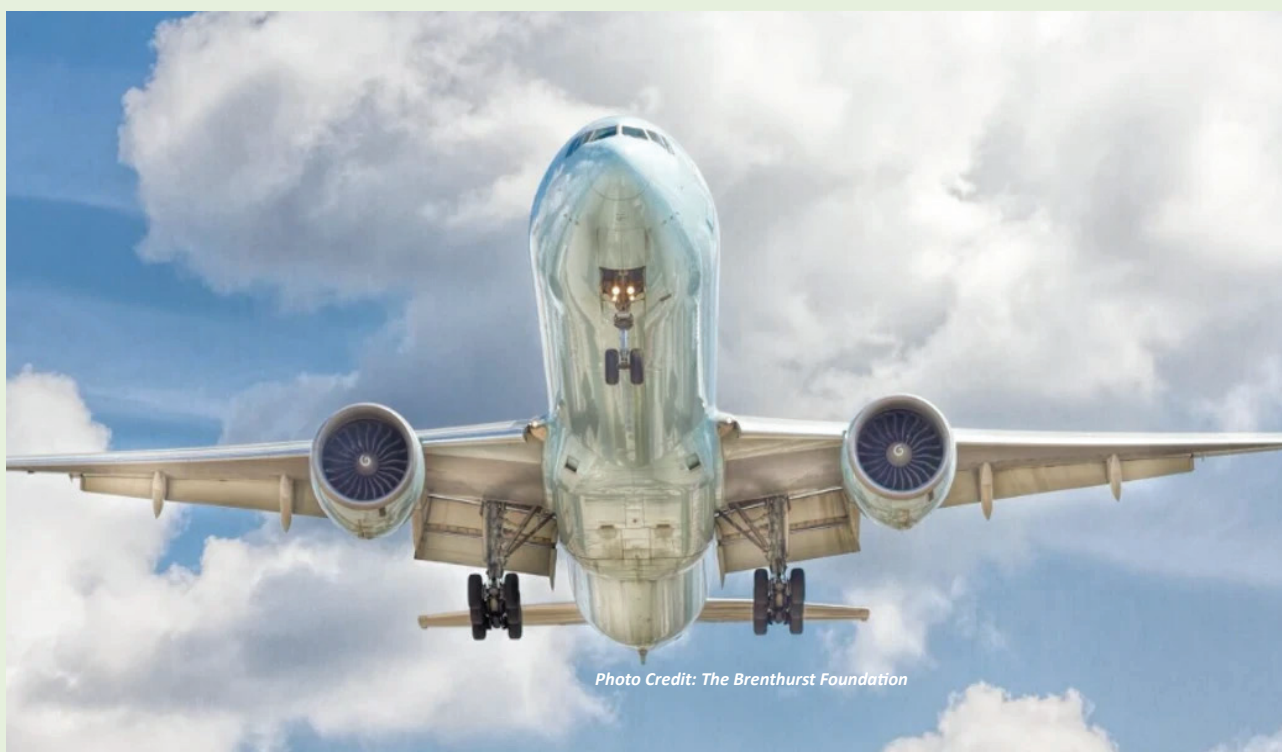


Photo Credit: The Brenthurst Foundation

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Safeguarding the Rapidly Expanding Eastern Africa's Aviation Industry Against Transnational Organized Crimes

Eastern Africa's aviation sector is experiencing remarkable growth, driven by increasing investments in airport infrastructure, expanding airline networks, and rising passenger demand. As countries modernize airports and strengthen air connectivity, aviation is becoming a critical enabler of trade, tourism, investment, and the free movement of people. While this growth presents significant economic opportunities, it also creates new vulnerabilities that can be exploited by Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) networks. These threats not only undermine national security but also erode public confidence in air transport, disrupt economic activity, and weaken Eastern Africa's credibility as a safe and reliable aviation hub.

Criminal organizations are increasingly taking advantage of expanded air transport systems to facilitate the movement of illicit goods and people across borders. These networks use commercial flights, cargo operations, and in some cases private aircraft to traffic narcotics and arms, smuggle wildlife products, transport counterfeit goods, facilitate human trafficking, and launder illicit financial proceeds. As aviation connectivity increases across the region, so does the sophistication and adaptability of these criminal networks, making aviation security an increasingly important component of national and regional security.

Human trafficking remains one of the most concerning threats. According to the International Organization for Migration's Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, approximately 80% of international human trafficking victims crossed official border entry points, with nearly 28% transported by air. These figures demonstrate that airports

are not only gateways for legitimate travel and commerce but also strategic transit points that criminal networks seek to exploit. Without effective detection and intervention mechanisms, aviation infrastructure can inadvertently facilitate the movement of trafficking victims and other illicit activities.

Several structural challenges continue to expose Eastern Africa's aviation sector to organized crime. Remote and privately operated airstrips often receive less regulatory oversight than major international airports, creating opportunities for illegal operations. Inconsistent security standards across countries, corruption, limited technological capacity, and fragmented intelligence sharing further weaken the region's ability to detect and disrupt cross-border criminal activities. These vulnerabilities undermine public safety, discourage investment, threaten tourism, and erode confidence in the region's transport systems. They also risk damaging Eastern Africa's international reputation as governments seek to position the region as a competitive aviation and logistics hub.

Addressing these threats requires a coordinated regional approach that combines modern technology, stronger institutions, and enhanced international cooperation. Eastern African governments should invest in advanced passenger and cargo screening technologies, strengthen biometric travel document verification systems, and enhance surveillance and regulatory oversight of private airports and remote airstrips. Continuous training of aviation security personnel and anti-corruption measures should also be prioritized to improve operational effectiveness and maintain the integrity of airport security systems.

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Regional cooperation will be equally important. Governments should deepen collaboration through the Eastern African Regional Working Group on Advance Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Record (PNR) systems to enable timely intelligence sharing, risk profiling, and coordinated investigations. Furthermore, aligning national regulations with international standards, promoted by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Eastern and Southern African (ESAF) Office will help establish a more consistent and predictable security environment across airports in the region. This includes capacity building and the development of coordinated responses to emerging threats. By

safeguarding its rapidly expanding aviation industry against TOCs, Eastern Africa will ensure that aviation continues to serve as a driver of sustainable regional development.



Photo Credit: Interpol

Thursday 9th July 2026

Advancing the African Continental Free Trade Area Through Eastern Africa's Aviation Connectivity

Efficient air transport is indispensable to the successful implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). While the agreement seeks to create a single African market for goods and services, its success ultimately depends on how quickly people, products, and investments can move across the continent. Aviation provides the speed, reliability, and connectivity needed to support regional value chains, facilitate business travel, expand tourism, and strengthen commercial integration. Without an efficient and interconnected aviation network, many of AfCFTA's economic opportunities will remain difficult to realize.

The SAATM was established to address one of Africa's longstanding development challenges which is fragmented and restrictive air transport systems. By liberalizing air services across the continent, SAATM aims to reduce travel costs, increase competition among airlines, expand connectivity, and improve access to regional markets. These

outcomes are essential for Eastern Africa, where stronger air links can accelerate trade, attract investment, and support economic transformation.

The economic case for aviation liberalization is compelling. Aviation currently contributes approximately US\$12 billion, representing about 0.35% of Africa's GDP, while passenger demand is projected to triple by 2050. Despite this growth potential, intra-African trade remains at only about 16% of the continent's total trade, significantly below Europe's nearly 60%. Limited direct flight connections, high airfares, and restrictive bilateral air service agreements continue to hinder the movement of people and goods across African markets. Businesses frequently incur higher transport costs and longer travel times because many routes require connections through destinations outside the continent, reducing Africa's overall competitiveness.

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Encouraging progress has been made in advancing SAATM. By 2026, 38 African states, accounting for more than 89% of intra-African air traffic, had joined the initiative. However, accession alone is insufficient. Implementation remains uneven, with many countries yet to fully liberalize their air transport markets or align national aviation policies with SAATM commitments. As a result, several potentially viable intra-African routes remain underserved, limiting the benefits that greater connectivity could generate for trade, investment, and regional integration.

Eastern African governments should therefore move beyond political commitments and accelerate practical implementation. This includes removing restrictive bilateral air service agreements, harmonizing aviation regulations, strengthening cooperation among civil aviation authorities, and investing in modern airport infrastructure and air navigation systems. Governments should also establish clear implementation

timelines, measurable performance indicators, and accountability mechanisms to monitor progress. Introducing incentive frameworks that reward compliance could further encourage participating states to fully operationalize their commitments under SAATM.

The region can also draw valuable lessons from countries that have embraced aviation liberalization. Rwanda's open-skies policy and visa liberalization have significantly enhanced its position as a regional aviation and business hub. Similar reforms across Eastern Africa would make cross-border travel more efficient, stimulate tourism, support regional supply chains, and encourage greater business mobility. By strengthening aviation connectivity, Eastern Africa will not only unlock the full potential of SAATM but also accelerate the realization of AfCFTA's vision of a more integrated, competitive, and prosperous African economy.



Photo Credit: Top Africa News

Building Resilient National Security Policies for Aviation Systems in Eastern Africa

Aviation security is increasingly becoming a critical pillar of national security in Eastern Africa. As the region expands its aviation infrastructure and air connectivity, safeguarding aviation systems has become essential for protecting national security, economic stability, and regional resilience. Modern aviation underpins trade, tourism, humanitarian operations, and diplomatic engagement. Consequently, any disruption to the sector can have far-reaching security and economic consequences.

The region faces a rapidly evolving threat environment that extends beyond traditional aviation security concerns. Cyberattacks, insider threats, shortages of skilled aviation personnel, and emerging technologies are exposing new vulnerabilities across the aviation ecosystem. At the same time, interference with Global Positioning System (GPS) and Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) signals has become an increasing concern, affecting navigation accuracy and the safety of flight operations. Such disruptions not only increase operational risks for airlines but also challenge the ability of governments to maintain secure and reliable airspace.

Regional instability further compounds these challenges. Ongoing conflicts in Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo continue to affect regional airspace management and aviation planning. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab's 2025 drone attack on Villa Somalia demonstrated how rapidly evolving technologies can threaten critical national infrastructure and expose broader security vulnerabilities. The aviation sector is also becoming increasingly vulnerable to

digital threats, as demonstrated by the 2025 cyberattack on South African Airways, which highlighted the growing exposure of airlines and airport systems to cyber disruption.

Although progress has been made, important gaps remain. Kenya's admission into the United States Transportation Security Administration's One-Stop Security Programme reflects growing confidence in the country's aviation security standards and demonstrates that Eastern Africa can meet internationally recognized security requirements. However, the broader regional progress remains uneven. Sub-Saharan Africa's International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) effective implementation score averages 60.34%, well below the global target of 75%. This indicates that significant improvements are still needed in aviation oversight, regulatory compliance, and institutional capacity.

Eastern African governments should therefore prioritize building aviation systems that are secure, resilient, and capable of responding to evolving security threats. This requires strengthening compliance with ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) while enhancing regional coordination through the Civil Aviation Safety and Security Oversight Agency (CASSOA). Governments should also expand specialized aviation security training through the East African School of Aviation to address persistent skills shortages and strengthen operational capacity.

At the same time, sustained investment in modern surveillance systems, cybersecurity, resilient communication networks, and advanced screening technologies will be essential to protect critical aviation infrastructure. Consequently, Eastern Africa

can strengthen national security, improve public confidence in air transport, and build an aviation sector by adopting a proactive and coordinated approach.



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