

# Policy Brief

Special Edition

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## Risks And Prospects of Somalia's East African Community (EAC) Membership

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IPSS-SOAS Pan-African Policy Brief Series

March 2025

## Executive Summary

In 2022, the Federal Republic of Somalia re-applied to join the East African Community (EAC). It first applied in 2012, but this application was rejected because of (in)security considerations in the country. In June 2023, the report to verify Somalia's application to join the EAC was adopted at the EAC Heads of State Summit in Bujumbura. Somalia was subsequently admitted to the EAC as the 8th partner state. This policy brief analyses the implications of Somalia's admission to the EAC. It focuses on challenges, opportunities and Somalia's readiness to integrate regionally, identifying particularly the multiple opportunities in trade and economics. The brief notes that for the greater benefit of the EAC, it should invest in linking the transport infrastructure of Somalia to the rest of the member states to increase regional trade. On the other hand, Somalia is not unique; internal contradictions and conflict are key features that Somalia shares with most of the EAC member states. The process of integrating Somalia into the EAC should, therefore, be undertaken with long-term success in mind rather than in the light of the situation currently prevailing in the country.

### This policy brief makes the following key recommendations:

- ▶ Leverage on Somalia's membership as a new pathway to unlock regional and national success through regional collaboration with EAC partner states in trade, security, and governance.
- ▶ Somalia should focus on the continued consolidation of security reforms and gains against Al-Shabaab with the support of its neighbours. This should be done through mutual security agreements like the EAC Protocol on Defence And Security.
- ▶ EAC should fast-track Somalia's integration process to the EAC by ratifying the required protocols to allow Somalia to take advantage of the potential trade benefits.
- ▶ Through concerted efforts, the EAC should invest in a regional transport network that effectively connects all EAC partners to Somalia and increases the regional trade.

## Introduction

The East African Community (EAC) is made up of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (founding members); Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (newer members). The bloc forms a community anchored on shared values, culture, and the spirit of good neighbourliness. It includes a vision for development and prosperity in different sectors, from manufacturing to technology and innovation. As a functional bloc, the EAC acts as a platform to inspire regional political and social agenda and legal commonalities and provide a ripe space for shared progress.

The EAC admission process critically assesses economic, social, and political infrastructure.<sup>i</sup> Its lengthy admission process guarantees that the onboarded member states share and approve of the EAC's main objectives and can positively participate in pertinent programs. Some of the main issues include the existence of a free market-driven economy and legal and institutional frameworks.<sup>ii</sup> The political and legal convergence among member states is instrumental in shaping a common institutional framework supported by all parties. Additionally, the EAC admissions process reviews critical areas such as education, security, energy, and infrastructure.<sup>iii</sup> The membership imposes fiduciary obligations, and the admission process considers the ability of members to sustain their subscriptions and provide working economic systems that support trade.<sup>iv</sup>

Somalia made its first application to join the EAC in 2012. With fighting still underway on the outskirts of Mogadishu, joining the bloc was impossible then. Eleven years later, significant gains in governance and security mean that joining the bloc will consolidate some of these gains, and therefore, Somali's admission to the EAC is a step forward in building regional integration. According to a report published by the International Crisis Group, the Somali government has gained ground in its war with the Al Shabaab terrorist group especially in central Somalia (International Crisis Group 2023). The joint security campaign by different security agencies in Somalia has witnessed the dislodging of the terror group, especially in the centre of the country leading to the reestablishment of government presence. In addition, the expected transformation of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) into African Union Support Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) in 2025, means that Somalia will not have a security vacuum once the mandate of ATMIS ends (ISS Africa Today 2024).

## Overview of Somalia's case for Joining the EAC

The case of Somalia presents an intriguing exposition of the EAC framework and the larger political landscape in the region. Somalia struggles with insecurity and together with states like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, it is exposed to political and security challenges.<sup>v</sup>

Somalia's long-standing conflict since 1991 and the activities of terrorist groups like Al Shabaab have negatively impacted the economy, governance structures and created a long-lasting humanitarian crisis. However, Somalia's admission to the EAC is a strong statement of its commitment to rise above the internal conflict and integrate with the region. Under Article 3 of the EAC Treaty, the criteria for admission demands acceptable principles of good governance, democracy, social justice, observance of human rights, and the rule of law (EAC Treaty). Despite the continued security challenges, Somalia has made some significant progress in certain key areas. In terms of democracy, the successive peaceful transfer of power from President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (also known as Farmaajo) to President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud is a welcome development (Somali Dialogue Platform 2022). In addition, Somalia is on the verge of preparing to hold its first one-person-vote election since its independence (Osman 2024). Somalia's move towards the rule of law and adherence to the shared democratic principles is a welcomed feat that will unlock the potential for EAC to meet its goal of having 10 members by the close of the decade.

The admission is built on an existing foundation of goodwill that the current leadership of Somalia and EAC partner states have enjoyed in the recent past.<sup>vi</sup> It is based on the friendship where EAC states continue to play host to Somali nationals displaced by the insecurity from prolonged conflict. In addition, Somalia has strong historical, linguistic, economic and socio-cultural links with all the EAC Partner states.<sup>vii</sup> Furthermore, the integration from below that has been undergoing in East Africa is a boost for the large Somali diaspora population. Despite the presence of small-scale xenophobic sentiments especially in Kenya, there has been a bigger acceptance of Somali citizens across the region.

According to a report done by the Economic Policy Research Centre, Somalia's admission will increase the trading opportunities in the region especially in the export market as Somalia relies heavily on imports from neighbouring countries (EPRC Policy Note 2023). Furthermore, the continued stabilisation of the security situation will ease cross-border business, invite more investors to the country, and create opportunities for trade.

Somalia's 3000km of coastline (the longest in Africa) will give the partner states access to the Indian Ocean corridor to the Gulf of Aden.<sup>viii</sup> The governments of the EAC partner states consider the Indian Ocean a key strategic and economic theatre for their regional economic interests. Therefore, a secure and stable Somalia coastline along the Indian Ocean is central to the region's maritime trade opportunities.<sup>ix</sup> Despite possessing such a vast maritime resource, the continued insecurity in Somalia has limited the benefits that can be accrued from it. These blue economy resources are underused and it has suffered from decades of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing until the Somali government issued its first fishing licence in 2018.<sup>x</sup> The previous piracy problem is one example that shows the continued lawlessness on the Somalia coast, which is a huge risk for all the states that rely on it in the region. However, at the time of writing the levels of piracy have reduced exponentially due to the disruption of the piracy groups.

The importance of the maritime domain and the Indian Ocean has seen Kenya and Somalia take their dispute to the International Court of Justice. Somalia joining the EAC might present an opportunity to discuss deeper cooperation frameworks within the bloc, including around the Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute (Interview Omar Mahmood, 02/04/2024). Integrating Somalia into the EAC potentially offers an opportunity to de-escalate any remaining tensions and, in turn, focus on developing mechanisms that can benefit the region (Interview Omar Mahmood, 02/04/2024). In addition, despite the geopolitical competition over the Indian Ocean, Somalia can gain more in the long term from the EAC partner states. The EAC offers a better, safer option that respects Somalia's territorial integrity, unlike what we are witnessing in the competition among the Gulf states to balkanize Somalia further.<sup>xi</sup>

The EAC will likely gain better control over Somalia's evolving international intervention force. In the last 15 years, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has been supporting the Somalia government in fighting the Al Shabaab. In 2002, there was an agreement to transform AMISOM to the new African Union Transition Mission in Somalia with a short-term mandate. With the expected drawdown of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) force in Somalia, the proposed African Union Support Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) is likely to have EAC partner states as part of the troop contributing countries.<sup>xii</sup> Furthermore, given that, for the first time, the EAC has deployed a force in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, it is highly likely that it will be called upon to do the same for Somalia in the event ATMIS exits before AUSSOM is fully constituted.

## Implications of Somalia's Admission to the EAC

Critics believe that Somalia fulfils only one key requirement to be admitted to the bloc: to share a border with an EAC partner state, namely Kenya.<sup>xiii</sup> On paper, Somalia does seem to be the least prepared to fulfil the requirements to join the EAC. The security situation remains fragile, and the economy cannot support the community's annual payment obligations.

Furthermore, Somalia's admission invites risks as it redefines the socio-economic and political landscape in Eastern Africa. Kenya and Uganda have in the past experienced attacks perpetrated by Al Shabaab, and opening up borders for Somalia is perceived huge risk for these countries. The spill over effect of the group's activities creates a lot of discomfort among EAC citizens, particularly those who believe that the region remains vulnerable to their attacks. Therefore, the admission must consider the regional political landscape and its preparation to manage and mitigate any risks. It is also crucial to facilitate a shared understanding of the associated risks and build concerted efforts to counter any unforeseen outcomes. However, the continued gains over Al Shabaab might require a regional effort. If the EAC can offer assurances to Somalia's fledgling security situation, then a collective security strategy from the bloc might be significant.

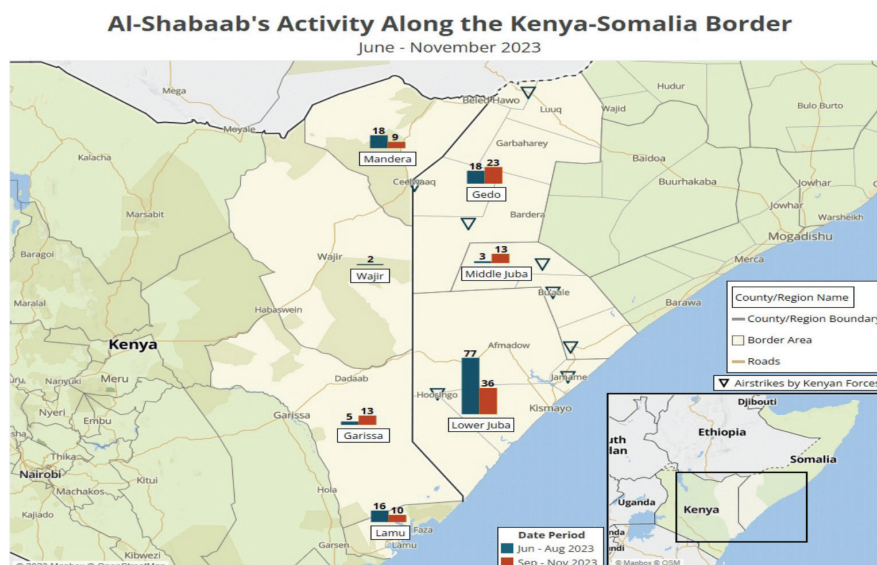
The continued push for self-determination by some of Somalia's regions like Somaliland and Puntland is a huge challenge to the full integration of Somalia. This brings the challenge of territorial control by the Somalia government. Such concerns are also fuelled by the possibility of Kenya expanding its influence in

Somalia via the state of Jubbaland. These territorial control challenges might create more conflict internally and affect the seamless integration.

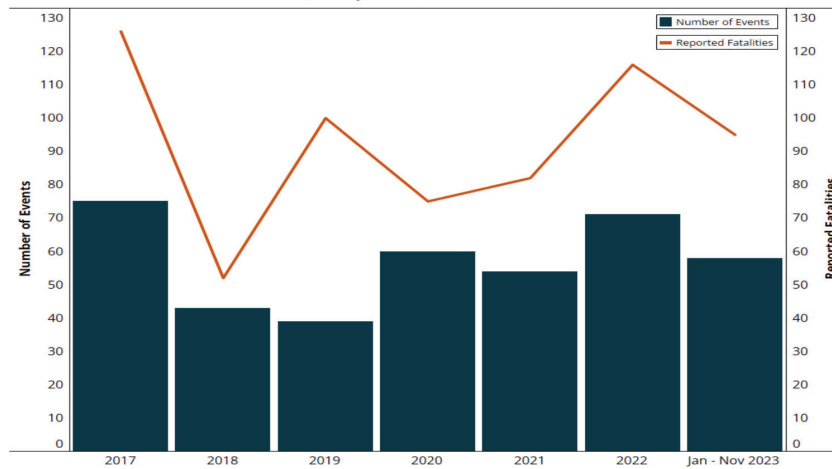
According to the Fragility State Index, Somalia is ranked one of the poorest among the 179 countries assessed with an index score of 111.9 on a scale from zero to 120. Key among the issues remains the continued insecurity situation necessitated by the long decades of civil war and violent extremism (Fragile States Index Annual Report 2023). Furthermore, Human Rights Watch ranks Somalia low in terms of human rights and justice as there is a breakdown of government institutions which are ineffective in upholding the human rights of its citizens (Human Rights Watch World Report 2022).

The EAC's goal is to build a people-centred community that builds from regionalism from below through people's integration. Somali citizens have faced discrimination in one way or another in some of the EAC member states like Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. This is partly due to activities that are beyond their control back in their country especially the activities of terrorist group Al Shabaab (Wario and Hassen, 2023). This has seen a build-up of negative and suspicious attitudes towards the Somali citizens. Social media reactions to Somalia's admission have seen a spike in some hate towards Somali citizens. A hostile citizenry of other partner states could be witnessed as Somalia's admission takes shape. To address this challenge, the EAC needs to conduct a lot of sensitization around the importance of integration because, to a large extent, many EAC citizens have no idea on what regional integration is all about. The idea of the EAC being a people-centred organization envisioned in the Treaty has not been actualized. The integration process is still very elitist as Head of States determine and set the agenda.

Al Shabab's Activity- Kenya-Somali Border. Source: ACLED (2023)<sup>xiv</sup>



**Civilian Targeting by al-Shabaab Along the Kenya-Somalia Border**  
January 2017 - November 2023



## Conclusion

The goodwill extended by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to join the EAC should not be vilified and condemned. Somalia is not joining the EAC, as Onyango Obbo has alluded to in a separate piece; Somalia is already part of the EAC and does not need any formal welcoming. Many critics have argued that the EAC has not learnt from the previous rush to admit conflict-plagued South Sudan and the DRC. The reality is that Somalia will not be in conflict forever, and it is on a trajectory of change as the state stabilises more. In addition, the geo-political competition over Somalia especially from Gulf countries and Turkey might complicate integration further if the EAC does not move with speed to consolidate the gains made in Somalia by fast-tracking their admission. Furthermore, a keen look at the history of the EAC member states shows that a number of them have been in a conflict cycle in one way or another. Therefore, Somalia is not a unique case. Internal conflict and contradictions are key features that Somalia shares with most of the EAC member states. The process of integrating Somalia into the EAC should be viewed as a long-term success as opposed to the current situation in the country.

## Policy Recommendations

### Critical policy recommendations for Somalia include:

- i. Strengthen budgetary and fiscal policy: Fiduciary duties are crucial for all member states, and Somalia needs to reconsider its budgetary and fiscal policy to ensure it can pay its dues. The country can streamline its budgetary allocation

and explore opportunities for additional revenue to ensure a stronger balance sheet to support its contribution to the bloc.

- ii. Consolidation of security reforms to promote security. By collating efforts through a well-coordinated security agenda that includes the peacekeeping mission, Somalia needs to keep improving its security architecture.

### The EAC partner states should:

- i. Review the EAC treaty and add sections that explore security issues and integrated efforts to solve such concerns. It includes a more robust EAC-led security and peacekeeping mission targeting Somalia.
- ii. Anchor Somalia's membership as a new pathway to unlock regional and national success. The focus on problems and shortcomings of Somalia clouds its assessment with negative perception. It ignores the vast opportunity that the region promises to the bloc, including new economic and social pathways.
- iii. Explore commonalities between Somalia and other member states. The essence of EAC regional integration is anchoring on a common vision, shared core values and spirit of good neighbourliness. Somalia is a vibrant community with a culture and principles, and its ascent to EAC needs to capture its true character as a part of the transforming region.
- iv. Invest in Somalia to unlock better infrastructure: The EAC must consider Somalia a potential business partner. It includes exploring investment opportunities by building critical infrastructure, such as roads, to ease business conduct.

## **End Notes**

1. Somalia's Export Potential and Product Diversification data for all EAC member states are not available.
2. Interview data was collected from the following participants: Dr Hassan Khanjeje, Nasongo Muliro, Dr Nicodemus Minde, and Omar Mahmood.

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