

**Africa Programme  
Meeting Summary**

# **Tanzanian agency in the international system**

## **Global geopolitics and multilateral engagement**

24 November 2022

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## Introduction

On 24 November 2022, the Chatham House Africa Programme, in partnership with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), convened a public webinar event on Tanzanian foreign policy. The event explored Tanzania's international partnerships and external engagements in a context of global geopolitical change marked by war in Ukraine, climate change and the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. It marked the first in a series in partnership with KAS on *Tanzania's Foreign Policy Agenda: Economic Diplomacy and International Agency*. This document summarizes the key findings and themes of the discussion.

### Context: Tanzania's foreign policy review

Tanzania's main foreign relations strategy document, the 'New Foreign Policy', was published in 2001. It marked a shift towards economic considerations in Tanzania's external engagement, while retaining traditional core principles such as non-alignment and South–South cooperation. With the policy now more than two decades old, Tanzania's president Samia Suluhu Hassan has confirmed that an official review is underway to update it.

Event participants noted that this review is a recognition both of the major international shifts of the last 20 years – most notably in terms of increasing multipolarity, the rise of emerging powers such as China, and the response to challenges such as climate change – and those within Tanzania, with the country having graduated to lower middle-income country status in 2020 according to the World Bank. It also reflects current issues dominating the international stage, in particular the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The following sections summarize the key issues and considerations raised at the event.

## Non-alignment and the war in Ukraine

Tanzania voted to abstain on two major UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of four regions, raised in March 2022 and October 2022, respectively. Event speakers raised the following considerations as relevant for the assessment of this stance:

- **Consistency in the medium term:** Tanzania's abstention can be seen to be consistent with the 2001 New Foreign Policy's stated commitment to a non-alignment approach. It is also not a deviation from Tanzania's previous UN voting record on related issues in recent years, as the country abstained on a 2014 resolution calling on states not to recognize changes in the status of Crimea following the Russian occupation of the region.

- **Historical continuity of non-alignment:** Tanzania’s vote at the UN, in 1980, in favour of a resolution calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan – a motion ostensibly targeted at the Soviet Union – raises questions over the consistency of the contemporary non-alignment position. Nonetheless, despite rhetorical continuity, non-alignment has held different meanings at different times, and participants noted that Tanzania may then have been positioned differently in terms of counterbalancing competition from the Soviet Union for African swing votes. It is not clear that the official Non-Aligned Movement is truly alive in 2022 and has a substantive political agenda. One founding member, Yugoslavia, no longer exists, while India has shifted its position to one of ‘multi-alignment’ – a term that may more accurately describe what non-alignment means today.
- **Not a decisive pivot towards Russia:** Tanzania’s abstention vote should not be interpreted as necessarily pro-Russian or anti-Western. Rather, it should be taken at face value, as a choice to leave options open. Trade volumes between Russia and Tanzania are not significant (see Figure 2), but there may also be broader strategic considerations at play in the reluctance to vote against Moscow: Russia is a permanent member of the UN security council (UNSC) and a majority of the UN peacekeeping budget is spent on missions in the African continent, including those with direct implications for Tanzania, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Participants also highlighted the relevance of historical factors stemming from the perception of Soviet support for African liberation movements.
- **‘Soft balancing’:** More broadly, Tanzania’s approach is guided by a desire to maintain resilience in its foreign policy by cautiously keeping its relationships as open and diverse as possible. This ‘soft balancing’ approach is shared by many other African and southeast Asian countries, driven by the reality that they are negotiating from a position of relative weakness compared to larger economic and military powers such as the EU, US and China. The current context of global change is tricky for smaller countries to navigate. Tanzania may have felt it could not afford to take an opposing stance against a power such as Russia without absolute certainty that it would be fully supported and its interests protected. There is a perception from Tanzania that neighbouring Kenya, which made a strong statement in support of Ukraine, has been subsequently left without sufficient backing.
- **A perception of double standards:** Tanzania is likely to be among the African countries that feel there has been a disproportionate focus on Ukraine due to its proximity to Western Europe, as compared to the attention given to the conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, for example. The perception arising as a result is that voting on resolutions related to Ukraine has been elevated to an issue of principle, as opposed to a vote considered in context.

- **Missed opportunity to exercise collective agency:** Despite the strategic considerations at play, it is also important to interpret the response as a collective African issue. Tanzania may have been over-cautious in its unwillingness to take a stance, but as a collective Africa missed an opportunity to exercise agency and stand on issues of principle. This is particularly evident when considering the tenets of the UN Charter, which is very clear on respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.

## Evolving bilateral and regional relations

### Relations with emerging economies

Tanzania's review of the 2001 New Foreign Policy is regularly attributed to recent changes in global circumstances. One aspect of this, which has been less frequently analyzed, is the role of emerging powers such as China and India and how they have changed the international landscape. Tanzania's 'soft balancing' approach has a tradition in the politics of South–South cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement, but several of the states that were heavily involved in the movement in the 1960s and 1970s have graduated to hold far more influential voices on the global stage, including as members of the G20.

Participants highlighted that prioritizing 'soft balancing' means that Tanzania is not trying to oppose the dominant forces in international relations, but rather is taking a pragmatic approach that is still rooted in solidarity with other less powerful countries in the so-called Global South. This entails making the most of partnerships with emerging economies and maintaining good relationships, without necessarily abandoning countries in the West.

### Tanzania–China relations

Tanzania's relationship with China is grounded in historical tradition. China is also currently at the forefront of Tanzanian foreign policy due to an official visit to Beijing by President Samia Suluhu Hassan in November 2022, in which she met with Chinese president Xi Jinping. During the visit, bilateral relations were upgraded to a 'comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership', and Hassan stated that China represents Tanzania's 'most important friend'.<sup>1</sup>

Event participants considered whether this recent visit and statement reflects a broader shift in Tanzania's foreign partnerships. It was noted that it is broadly consistent with historical trends, as Tanzania and China have been close since the former gained independence in 1961 – particularly through links between their two ruling parties, which have each remained in power throughout this period. Beyond the official visit in November 2022, these links were also recently seen in the February 2022 inauguration of the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Kibaha, Tanzania. The school was jointly established by

<sup>1</sup> The Chanzo (2022), 'Samia Says Tanzania 'Firmly' Supports China on Taiwan, Xinjiang and Hong Kong', 3 November 2022, <https://thechanzo.com/2022/11/03/samia-says-tanzania-firmly-supports-china-on-taiwan-xinjiang-and-hong-kong/>.

former liberation movements and now ruling parties in Southern Africa, including Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), with support from the Communist Party of China (CPC). Moreover, similar statements have been made by previous leaders: relations with China were close under President Jakaya Kikwete and Tanzania's first president Julius Nyerere described this as a 'friendship between most unequal equals'.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be recalled that the partnership faced a test under former president John Magufuli, who publicly criticized the terms of a planned port project at Bagamoyo agreed under his predecessor Kikwete.

Economic relations are already significant and China's share of overall trade volumes and foreign direct investment inflows is trending upwards. Participants highlighted this economic relationship as a major driver of the positive rhetoric on cooperation. However, there is a major imbalance in the trading relationship, with Tanzania currently importing ten times more in value from China than it exports (see figures 1 and 2 below).

The relationship is also a strategically significant one, including in the multilateral arena. Speakers highlighted unconfirmed reports of assurances made by China to Tanzania due to the latter's key role in restoring the Chinese seat in the UN in 1971, with suggestions that China would never vote against Tanzania in the security council as a result. It was also noted that China is seen, at least in the arena of public diplomacy, to not be forcing Tanzania to choose sides – whereas this perception is felt more strongly from partners in the West. As a result, Tanzania's statements about the strength of the Chinese relationship may be seen as an example of exercising agency to send a signal to other partners. In this way, even a deeply favourable statement towards China may align with the strategic goals of a soft balancing strategy.

### The Gulf states and Turkey

Participants also noted that the deepening of ties with Gulf states has attracted less attention than other aspects of the current administration's foreign policy engagements. Since assuming office in 2021, President Samia Suluhu Hassan has travelled to Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These countries reflect an increasingly important source of foreign direct investment and trade.

### Central and Eastern Europe

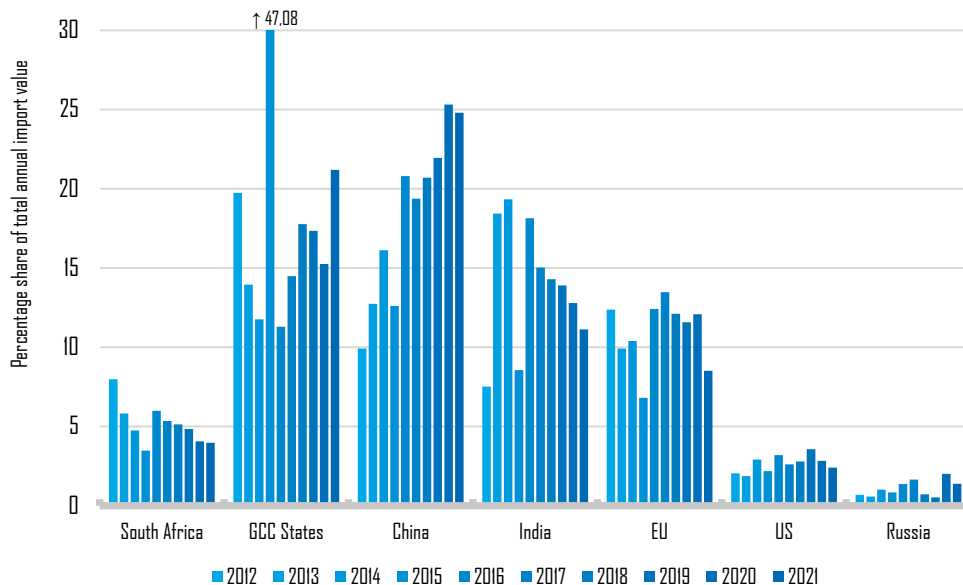
Participants also discussed the extent to which emerging partners in Europe could be pursued in Tanzania's external engagements. Poland was raised as an example of an emerging economy with which Tanzania had strong ties during the Cold War period, and also as being unburdened by colonial history. Examples such as Poland may point to the value of differentiating among European countries, and particularly newer European Union members in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), rather than treating them as a single bloc. However, it was also noted that renewing partnerships with CEE countries

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<sup>2</sup> Shangwe, M.J. (2017), 'China's Soft Power in Tanzania: Opportunities and Challenges', *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3(1), pp. 79–100, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740017500026>.

cannot only be a Tanzanian-led initiative and must also be spurred by internal action within Europe, including by former colonies allowing space for others within the EU to drive the EU’s Africa policy.

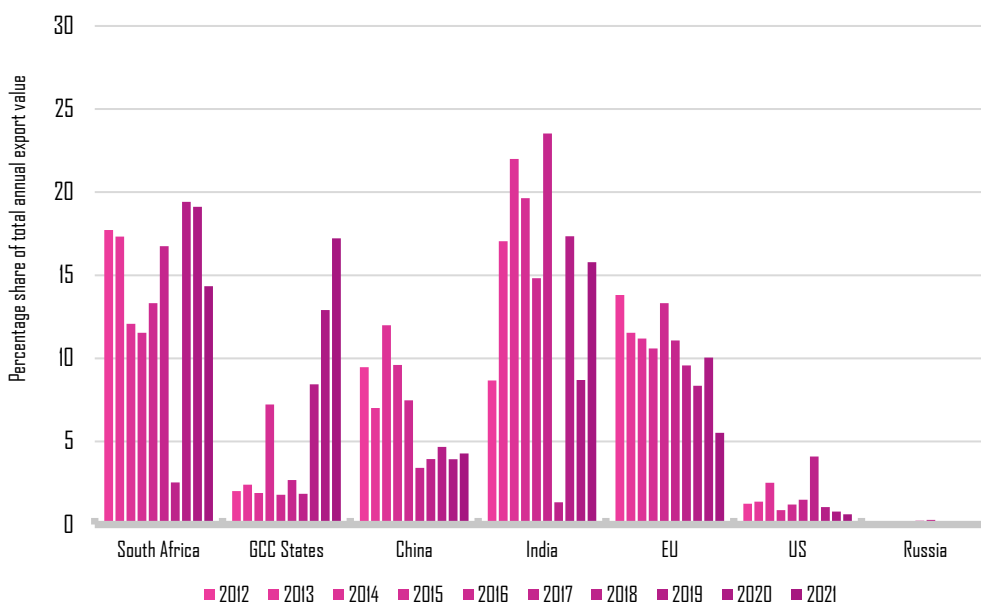
**Figure 1.** Share of Tanzanian annual imports by source, 2012–21



Source: United Nations (2022) ‘UN Comtrade Database’, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, <https://comtrade.un.org/data>.

Note: GCC States refers to the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. EU data includes the UK until 2020.

**Figure 2.** Share of Tanzanian annual exports by destination, 2012–21



Source: United Nations (2022) ‘UN Comtrade Database’, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, <https://comtrade.un.org/data>.

Note: ‘GCC States’ refers to the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. EU data includes the UK until 2020.

## Regional relations

Participants noted that Tanzania is still seen as a spiritual home for elements of the liberation and anti-apartheid movement in Southern Africa. Over the longer term, it has also been perceived as relatively neutral, retaining fairly consistent regional friendships and largely avoiding entanglements where possible. Tanzania has also contributed to peacekeeping forces and mediation efforts in the region and has hosted refugees from its neighbours.

Nonetheless, participants highlighted a general consensus that this regional influence has slightly waned over recent decades. Since assuming office, President Samia Suluhu Hassan has made visits to Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique that have helped to stabilize relationships, which have been up and down in previous years. Trade flows have increased with Kenya and the development of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline with Uganda has assisted in strengthening ties. Stable competition, such as with Kenya over the development of strategic hub infrastructure to connect with landlocked countries in the region, is likely to continue.

## Values and norms in foreign policy

The discussion also considered the extent to which values and entrenched norms have influenced shifts in Tanzania's foreign relations:

- **Party or state agency:** When discussing Tanzania's international agency, it is important to clarify whether this refers to the national interest or that of the ruling party, CCM. Although Tanzania is no longer a one-party state, having adopted a multiparty system in 1992, the functionality of the state has been slow to move away from the previous system, and there remains a very close relationship between the CCM and state institutions. At times, foreign policy – particularly at the regional level – is pursued in a way that seeks to primarily strengthen the CCM party's position.
- **The role of personalities:** The foreign policy of former president Magufuli was far more isolationist, but under President Samia Suluhu Hassan, Tanzania has returned to a much more pragmatic approach previously seen under the Kikwete administration – pursuing a warmer relationship with the West while also maintaining close partnerships with China, the Gulf States and other non-Western powers. A further change of tone under Hassan has been visible in terms of more active engagement in international conferences and multilateral arrangements, which can also be interpreted as a function of personality.

- **Interests versus ideals:** During the liberation period in Southern Africa, Tanzania was seen as having sacrificed its own economic interests for broader ideals. With the advent of economic diplomacy through the 2001 New Foreign Policy, however, increasingly a cost–benefit economic analysis has taken precedence over value judgment in foreign policy. However, speakers noted that there are risks to this approach. Succumbing to the pressure of putting short-term economic interests first may ultimately prove harmful – for example due to the long-term consequences for Tanzania of instability in Burundi or the eastern DRC. Disputes with Kenya that flared up under the Magufuli presidency, affecting cross-border trade, had significant negative implications for ordinary citizens.
- **Democratic values:** It was noted that Tanzania remains a conservative state in the complex process of nation-building. In this context, it may be important to separate democracy as a system of decision making and democracy as a set of liberal values, which are not being broadly practised in Tanzania. While the aspiration for them is still clear in the constitution, the notion that Tanzania could authentically project and defend democratic values elsewhere is challenging in this context. Despite this, President Hassan has made statements on the international stage that do not reflect reality: most notably in describing Tanzania as a ‘vibrant democracy’ in her UN General Assembly speech in September 2021.<sup>3</sup>
- **Entrenched norms:** There are a wide variety of influences, both within and outside Tanzania, that inform foreign policy. Often there is a high degree of incrementalism in accepting changes, or bureaucracy involved in taking decisions. Crucially, some decisions are significantly influenced by entrenched norms that are not explicitly expressed in official strategic discourse. For example, when it comes to engagement in the East African Community (EAC) or Southern African Development Community (SADC), speakers highlighted that Tanzania has deliberately not been at the forefront of driving trade or economy-related matters and will actively leave those that it does not deem to suit its interests – such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).
- **Economic diplomacy:** Where overarching strategic direction has been present, such as the economic diplomacy of the 2001 New Foreign Policy, this has been ambiguously defined. For certain diplomatic missions abroad, economic diplomacy refers to the attraction of investment flows, while others have become entangled in complex negotiation processes to defend economic interests, such as the EU’s Economic Partnership Agreements. Tanzania’s economic liberalization and attraction of foreign investment, which began in the 1990s, may also be described as preferential and rooted in the selective interests of CCM as opposed to purely market principles.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations (2021), ‘Statement by H. E. Samia Suluhu Hassan, President of the United Republic of Tanzania to the United Nations at the General Debate of the Seventy Sixth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York’, 23 September 2021, [https://estatemements.unmeetings.org/estatemements/10.0010/20210923/MBCmdqQ6mouY/7repngYQARG8\\_en.pdf](https://estatemements.unmeetings.org/estatemements/10.0010/20210923/MBCmdqQ6mouY/7repngYQARG8_en.pdf).



## Conclusion: long-term trends

Participants highlighted a number of relevant long-term considerations for Tanzania's foreign policy approach.

- The scale of Tanzania's projected population growth, according to the UN, will make it one of the world's most populous countries over this century. More than half of the increase in global population up to 2050 will be accounted for by just eight countries, of which Tanzania is one.
- Tanzania is resource rich in the context of a green transition, digital transition and Europe's efforts at decoupling from Russian supplies. Critical raw materials such as copper, nickel, tin, lead, cobalt, phosphates, helium and rare earth elements are present in Tanzania. Global competition for these resources is already fierce but is sharpening further, presenting a challenge for Tanzania to navigate effectively.
- It is also critical to recognize the cultural and soft power dimensions of foreign policy. In this respect, Tanzania has been much more active in promoting Swahili as an important global language. While more work remains to be done in this sphere, it may open up long-term opportunities in teaching, education and across creative sectors.

## Acknowledgments

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Dr Muhidin Shangwe, Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Dar es Salaam

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