

Kenya's Role in Re- gional Peacekeeping

Assessing Kenya's strategic position in
regional peace and stability

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Voices from Kenya, No. 2/2026

At a Glance

- › Kenya's role in regional peacekeeping is becoming increasingly critical as conflicts grow more complex
- › The key question now is not Kenya's participation, but how it can exercise leadership that is both strategic and principled.
- › Kenya's regional clout seems to be waning in recent years, as several neighbouring countries increasingly contest its traditional leadership role and question its interventions.
- › Efforts to reclaim its traditional leadership role particularly in places like Sudan and the DRC have been met with pushback from those governments.

Kenya's Role in Regional Peacekeeping

Introduction

Kenya's role in regional peacekeeping has never been more critical as conflicts evolve, and new threats emerge. The question is no longer whether Kenya should intervene but how it can lead with purpose, strategy, and integrity.

The country's role has recently been seen to be diminishing in the East African region. While some attempts to restore this 'big brother' influence have been attempted through various processes, they all seem to be denied by the receiving nations, like Sudan and DRC.

By framing Kenya's peacekeeping efforts within a geopolitical context, this paper analyses how shifting alliances, political priorities and regional tensions shape its leadership in East Africa.

Legacy of Peacebuilding

Since the establishment of EAC in 1967, Kenya has been a key actor in regional peace and conflict management via treaties, border diplomacy and cooperative frameworks. Kenya was still newly independent and lacked the capacity to partake in large-scale military interventions at the time. One of the treaty's stated objectives was to "promote political cooperation and hence peace and security" in the region. Though the EAC in 1977 later collapsed, the framework itself reflected a peace/stability ambition through integration.

Kenya's reputation as a peacebuilder in East Africa is the result of decades of deliberate engagement, strategic diplomacy, and principled leadership. From hosting high-stakes negotiations to deploying peacekeeping forces, Kenya has consistently positioned itself as a stabilising force in a region often marked by volatility.

1. The comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan

Kenya, through its membership of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), played a key role as host mediator for negotiations between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). This led first to the signing of the Machakos protocol¹, which laid the foundation for parties to negotiate a first breakthrough in peace talks after nearly two decades of failed efforts to end the Second Sudanese Civil War. It eventually culminated in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)², which ended the longest known conflict in Africa at the time. The Protocol granted the people of Southern Sudan the right to vote in a referendum on whether to remain part of Sudan or secede. This principle directly led to the 2011 independence of South Sudan, one of the most significant political outcomes in recent African history.

¹ Machakos protocol is the framework agreement to restart the peace process in Sudan and outlines the principles and issues to be addressed in future substantive talks

² Comprehensive agreement is a text comprised of the Protocols and Agreements already signed

Kenya's Role in Regional Peacekeeping

2. AMISOM

Kenya's peacebuilding legacy also includes its major contribution to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In October 2011, Kenya deployed the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) into Somalia under Operation Linda Nchi to counter the growing threat of Al-Shabaab. By 2012, Kenya formally integrated its troops into AMISOM, becoming one of the mission's largest and most active military contributors.

Beyond military engagement, Kenya supported political stabilisation, humanitarian access, and regional counterterrorism cooperation. Its involvement in AMISOM not only advanced Somalia's security trajectory but also reinforced Kenya's reputation as a frontline state committed to regional stability and collective security frameworks.

Shifting Geo-Political Terrain

Kenya is uniquely positioned to lead in an evolving landscape. Its relatively stable political environment, professional military, and robust diplomatic corps provide a strong foundation for regional engagement. Kenya's active participation in the EAC, IGAD, and the African Union gives it access to critical platforms for shaping regional policy.

Despite these achievements, the regional security environment is becoming increasingly complex. Somalia continues to grapple with the persistent threat of Al-Shabaab, while internal political divisions, particularly around Somaliland's push for international recognition, complicate efforts toward national cohesion. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), instability in the eastern provinces and tensions with Rwanda over rebel activity in the Kivu region have reignited fears of a broader regional conflict. On the other hand, Kenya is grappling to resolve its policy issues with Sudan. This complicated web of conflict in the region places Kenya at a vital position when determining its next steps.

Sudan

The Sudan Armed Forces had previously rejected Ruto as a mediator when fighting erupted in April 2023 between the two rival factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah el-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Ruto was quick to admonish the generals, urging them to "stop this nonsense."ⁱⁱ A comment which was not taken lightly.

Among its foreign policy missteps was the hosting of Sudan's rebels, the Rapid Support Force (RSF), in Nairobi in Feb 2025. The RSF are sanctioned and accused of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Sudan. In an interview by Al Jazeera, Pres. Ruto denies that Kenya backs RSF and supports this decision, saying that Kenya is a diplomatic hub that allows for all to meet without any ulterior motives. This, however, was viewed differently by Sudan whose ambassador to Kenya was quickly recalled after the meeting.

This was followed by Sudan suspending imports from Kenya, which included tea and coffeeⁱⁱⁱ. The newly elected government of William Ruto in 2022, eager to establish itself as a continental leader and spokesperson on African matters, made several missteps that raised geopolitical concerns. Sudan's military leadership found itself on the receiving end of Ruto's assertive approach to representing Africa's voice. Sudan's perception of Kenya shifted from viewing it as a friendly neighbour.

The Kenyan government has tried to justify its action as promoting peace but faces mistrust even within^{iv}.

Kenya's Role in Regional Peacekeeping

The case of Sudan reflects Kenya's declining diplomatic leverage. In 2011, Kenya was among the primary actors facilitating mediation, but its role has since become less prominent and seemingly unwelcome.

Economic priorities

Congo

Kenya has long invested heavily in regional peace and integration, historically serving as one of the East African Community's (EAC) most consistent financial contributors, even as other member states repeatedly fell behind on their obligations, with only Kenya and Tanzania fully paying their contributions^v.

This uneven commitment has weakened the bloc's institutional capacity, including its ability to sustain EAC-led initiatives such as the EAC Regional Force in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The DRC government termed the mission as ineffective and accused the soldiers of cohabiting with the M23^{vi}. One of the reasons for this has been attributed to unpredictable funding, especially considering that their mandate was expanded twice^{vii}.

The EAC-led Nairobi Process³, spearheaded by former President Uhuru Kenyatta, was meant to bring the Congolese government and armed groups to the negotiating table with Kenya, currently chairing the East African Community (EAC), taking the lead.

Kenya had invested heavily in regional peace efforts, positioning itself as a key mediator in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s protracted conflict. Despite this, the Congolese government refused to accredit the Kenyan ambassador to Kinshasa Shem Amadi. In 2024, DRC recalled its ambassador to Kenya, who was replaced in September 2025 after almost a year.

The appointment of former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta was a point of contention as tensions between Kenyatta and his successor, William Ruto, driven by domestic politics, reduced the level of support Kenya afforded Kenyatta and his mission^{viii}.

Ultimately, President Tshisekedi leaned more towards SADC⁴ than EAC. SADC Member States pledged to provide resources, including soldiers, to the mission^{ix}.

Recommendations

Rebuild Strategic Trust with Key Regional Actors

Kenya should prioritise repairing strained relationships with Sudan and the DRC by adopting a more neutral, predictable, and consensus-driven diplomatic posture. This includes coordinating closely with IGAD and AU mechanisms and signalling consistency in foreign policy messaging.

³ The EAC-led Nairobi Process, launched in April 2022, is a regional initiative to address the conflict in eastern DRC, built on principles of dialogue, inclusivity, and regional ownership.

⁴ South African Development Community, headquartered in Gaborone, Botswana

Kenya's Role in Regional Peacekeeping

Depoliticise Regional Mediation Roles

To regain credibility, Kenya must separate domestic political rivalries from regional diplomacy. Mediators, whether political rivals or special envoys, should receive full state backing, regardless of their internal political alignment.

Reassess the Economic Costs of Peacekeeping Leadership

Kenya has been disproportionately funding regional initiatives. It should advocate for equitable burden-sharing within the EAC and push for stronger financial compliance mechanisms to prevent missions from collapsing due to inconsistent contributions.

Conclusion

Kenya's legacy as a regional peacebuilder is long-standing and significant. However, recent developments in Sudan, the DRC, and within the EAC underscore a clear decline in its influence. Once seen as a central mediator and stabilizing force, Kenya now faces growing mistrust from key regional actors and diminishing credibility in multilateral peace efforts.

This erosion reflects both shifting geopolitical dynamics and the challenges of sustaining consistent leadership in the region. Kenya must confront the contradictions between its peace diplomacy abroad and its governance at home and reconcile domestic dynamics which risk undermining the credibility of Kenya's foreign policy, particularly when it seeks to mediate conflicts beyond its borders.

The current trajectory signals that Kenya's ability to shape regional peace and security is increasingly constrained, marking a notable departure from its historical prominence in East African diplomacy.

Kenya's Role in Regional Peacekeeping

- ⁱBy [Kenyan Foreign Policy \(2023, July\) Sudanese Al Burhan Rejects Ruto, Wants Kiir as Lead Mediator](#) | [Sudanese Al Burhan Rejects Ruto, Wants Kiir as Lead Mediator](#) | [Kenyan Foreign Policy](#)
- ⁱⁱ TRT World. (2023, May). *"Stop the nonsense," says Kenya's president to Sudanese generals.* TRT World. ['Stop the nonsense' says Kenya's president to Sudanese generals - TRT World](#)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Akisa Wandera (2025, Feb) Sudan bans all imports from Kenya after it hosted civil war rivals. BBC. [Sudan bans all Kenyan imports after it hosted RSF](#)
- ^{iv} By [Kenyan Foreign Policy \(2025, March\) How Hosting RSF's 'Government' Landed Kenya in a Diplomatic Quagmire](#) | [How Hosting RSF's 'Government' Landed Kenya in a Diplomatic Quagmire](#) | [Kenyan Foreign Policy](#)
- ^v Solomon Ekanem (April 2025) Financial crisis looms in East African Community as member states owe \$58 million [Financial crisis looms in East African Community as member states owe \\$58 million](#) | [Business Insider Africa](#)
- ^{vi} Jones Mila (2023) Replacing EACRF with SADC troops will worsen bad situation
- ^{vii} Ian Wafula & Kenneth Mungai (2023) Why DR Congo wants East African troops to leave [Why DR Congo wants East African troops to leave](#)
- ^{viii} Mvemba Phezo Dizolele and Nick Elebe (2025, Feb) Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Where Is the Security Partnership? [Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#)
- ^{ix} DRC: exit the EAC force, make way for SADC troops in the east of the country [DRC: Exit the EAC force, make way for SADC troops in the east of the country - TRT Afrika](#)

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Imprint

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Publisher: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2023, Berlin

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