

KENYA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC:

THE RATIONALE FOR AN “OUTLOOK” AND WHY KENYA (AND EAST AFRICA) MATTERS

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This issue brief argues that Kenya should carefully consider promulgating an Indo-Pacific outlook given the seismic shifts in global distributions of power and the resulting great power rivalry. The future of the region hangs in the balance and East African states like Kenya are already battling the headwinds associated with great power competition. The political economy of external state actors' recent involvement in Kenya and the region has added to the charged geopolitical situation with China competing with Japan, India, and others for political and economic influence. In this context, this brief analyzes Kenya's role and place in the Indo-Pacific, and outlines the risks and rewards of a Kenyan Indo-Pacific approach.

Connection to the Indo-Pacific

Monica Juma, National Security Advisor to Kenyan President William Ruto, unequivocally endorsed a Kenyan position on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific in Nairobi recently. Attending the Free and Open Indo-Pacific for Peace and Development in East Africa Forum¹ on March 1, 2023, Juma spoke of working towards “greater prosperity in the grand sphere of our shared maritime domains...² for all nations to interact in a free open world guided by the rule of law and where multilateralism truly prevails.”³ Juma's speech was followed by that

of Abraham Korir Sing'Oei, Kenya's Principal Secretary for Foreign Affairs, who commented on Kenya's support of the rules-based international order on the high seas, and the “centrality of the UN Convention on the Law (UNCLOS) of the Sea as customary international law for sustainably and peacefully managing our ocean resources.”⁴

Given its lengthy Indian Ocean coastline and complex maritime disputes with neighboring Somalia, Kenyans well understand the promise of the rules-based international order to manage

maritime resources sustainably and peacefully, and the resulting greater prosperity for all. UNCLOS, for example, provides a legal framework for the sustainable use and management of ocean resources, and is supposed to facilitate peaceful resolution of maritime disputes, and enable international cooperation on critical ocean issues. When Somalia unilaterally took Kenya to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to determine its maritime border in the Indian Ocean, the importance of Kenya's access to the sea and its resources became critical.⁵

Maritime disputes are not isolated to East Africa, of course. Indeed, it is maritime disputes in East Asia involving great powers that directly led Japan to promulgate a concept and related body of strategies that we now know as the Indo-Pacific. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chose to unveil this seminal “geography of strategies”⁶ not in Tokyo, Taipei, or Singapore, but in Nairobi during the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) on August 27, 2016.⁷

The confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans—and safeguarding their common security—formed the basis for Abe's “free and open Indo-Pacific” vision.⁸ These Indo-Pacific ideations espouse a “principled regionalism,” one based on the values

and norms of international law. Japan's Indo-Pacific has now become the inspirational source of narrative and response for multiple states across the Indo-Pacific, foremost those comprising the Quad of Japan, Australia, India, and the U.S. This conceptual framework, because it speaks directly to the importance of upholding the rules-based order and the national security concerns of Indo-Pacific states, has engendered a vigorous dynamism, and drawn in Indo-Pacific proponents from Southeast Asia, Europe and now East Africa.⁹

Rivalries, power competition, and border disputes are stock-in-trade in East Africa as they are in much of the world. But they are now playing out with a vengeance. This issue brief argues that Kenya should, therefore, carefully consider promulgating an Indo-Pacific outlook given the seismic shifts in global distributions of power and the resulting great power rivalry. The future of the region hangs in the balance and East African states like Kenya are already battling the headwinds associated with great power competition.

The political economy of external state actors' recent involvement in Kenya and the region has added to the already charged geopolitical situation with China competing with Japan, India, and others for political and economic influence. In this context, Kenya's role should be assessed and analyzed in relation to the power shifts taking place across the Indo-Pacific.

China's massive investment in loans and infrastructure has made it the largest financier of African infrastructure, which has led to concerns among the Quad states about losing influence in Kenya and across East Africa.¹⁰ Accordingly, this issue brief poses and answers a series of questions within the context of Kenya's national interests and desire for regional and international influence. Should these interests, for example, not take top priority for Nairobi? Have recent decisions regarding development and loans put Kenya in the de facto position of “choosing” China versus alternatives?

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Put another way, however, is the question about the existence of viable alternative development partners. Nevertheless, can Kenya's leadership continue to pick and choose, in essence playing both sides? To answer these questions, an analysis of risks and rewards seems in order for Kenya to take stock of both its centrality to the Indo-Pacific and the high stakes involved in Nairobi's potential Indo-Pacific gamble.

Kenya: Open to All and Caught in the Middle

East Africa is situated at the western bookend of the Indo-Pacific region. Comprising the coastal states of Kenya and Tanzania, and landlocked Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan, they form the East African Community (EAC).¹¹ The region is characterized by complex and dynamic socio-economic, security and political conditions, including poverty, terrorism, and maritime insecurity. It is home to diverse states and peoples, is abundant in natural resources like oil and gas and has few ports, making them crucial for the region's economic and political stability.

Despite being perceived—both at home and abroad—as peripheral actors in the Indo-Pacific region, this perception is wrong, and the stakes are extremely high for both the region and global

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geopolitics. With its strategic location facing the Indian Ocean and economic potential, East Africa has seen its fair share of infrastructure development such as ports, railroads, and resource extraction, much of which has dual-use application and thus has a geopolitical logic associated with great power competition. Kenya is also the most important country in the EAC in terms of global geopolitics for several reasons. First, Kenya's strategic location on the eastern coast of Africa and the major port of Mombasa make it the natural gateway to East and Central Africa. Kenya, accordingly, continues to serve as the major transport hub for the region. Second, Kenya is the largest economy in the EAC and has a relatively stable political and investment environment, making it an attractive destination for FDI. The country is also rich in natural resources, including oil and minerals. Third, Kenya has a long history as a partner to the U.S. and UK that began during the Cold War and that has continued in the fight against Islamist terrorism. In 2011, Kenya deployed the Kenya Defence Force (KDF) to Somalia where it has played a leading role against al-Shabaab. Fourth, Kenya exercises a great deal of regional influence in both East Africa and the Horn of Africa. It is a leading member of the EAC, for example, and has been instrumental in driving regional integration. It has also been involved in mediating conflicts in neighboring countries, such as South Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the Horn of Africa, a combination of geographic proximity, economic ties, military presence in Somalia, and

membership in regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)¹² has given Kenya the ability to exert significant influence in the region.

Because of its geopolitical significance, both regionally and internationally, Kenya has many suitors. Take two geopolitical rivals, China and Japan. Both Beijing and Tokyo are driven to participate in infrastructure development projects in Kenya by a combination of economic and political (influence) factors, as well as a desire to access natural resources and provide development assistance.¹³ Infrastructure development projects in Kenya, for example, offer external states the opportunity to increase their influence in the region and counterbalance that of other external actors. As such, China's funding and constructing of major projects like roads and railroads, as part of its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led Japan to redouble its efforts to engage Kenya and maintain its influence.

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outside actor engaged in Kenya and, more broadly, East Africa. It has built the first leg of a \$3.2-billion Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), the 27-km Nairobi Expressway in Kenya for \$764 million and various other projects that conform to Kenya Vision 2030, a development blueprint unveiled in 2008 that aims to transform Kenya into a middle-income country and increase overall quality of living.¹⁴ In Tanzania, China is developing the Bagamoyo port at an estimated cost of \$10 billion. In Uganda, as of late 2022, Chinese firms had been contracted to upgrade or build over 626 km of roads out of the total 1,000km, or 62 percent, in total at a cost of \$673 million.¹⁵

Despite this, a semblance of buyer's remorse has set in, partially due to the massive debt the region owes China and partially because projects are either unfinished or of sub-optimal quality. Kenya certainly has never worked with one partner exclusively. It received support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and other partners to design, construct, and support the development of operational procedures at one-stop border posts (OSBPs) with its neighbors so as to facilitate trade and travel by reducing the number of stops made at a border crossing, thereby reducing the time required for clearance at the border. Japan is also instrumental in expanding the Port of Mombasa and developing, building, and funding¹⁶ the Dongo Kundu special economic zone (SEZ) near the port. The project is part of Kenya's industrialization plan. Uganda, for its part, engaged with China on numerous projects but chose to eject China Harbour and Engineering Company Ltd (CHEC), which had been contracted in 2015 to develop a 513-km SGR project to the Kenyan border for \$7.7 billion, because of delays and costs. Kampala has reportedly approached a Turkish company—Yapı Merkezi, which is currently building a railroad in next door Tanzania—to build the project. Kenya, for its part, failed to get a third round of funding in 2018 from China to extend the SGR from Naivasha to Kisumu.¹⁷ While China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed cautious optimism in

early 2022 that China will re-engage with Kenya to complete its SGR,¹⁸ a combination of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on China, its increasingly combative relations in the Indo-Pacific, and Beijing's complex relations with Nairobi about debt repayment have thus far militated against this.

The perception of China's growing power and influence in East Africa, largely due to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) linked projects, often leads other external state actors to make oversimplified assumptions.¹⁹ The reality of Chinese power in the region is more complex and depends on various factors such as its economic strength, presence of its media and technology companies, and political relationships. East African states retain significant agency of their own and have backed out of infrastructure deals such as the example of Uganda mentioned earlier, as well as in Tanzania, which suspended Chinese funding and building of the Bagamoyo port project in 2019 on the grounds that they were exploitative. In a subsequent reversal, Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan attempted to revive the deal during her late 2022 visit to China.²⁰

Though there is no doubt that China's economic influence has grown, Beijing's political strength remains lacking. This is particularly true in terms of global geopolitics—the Indo-Pacific as a chessboard—and China's hard power resources. In East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean region, China's footprint is nowhere proportional to its size. East African states like Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda all have very different relations with China and tend to favor a variety of countries for military and security partnerships.²¹ Nevertheless, ports infrastructure such as Bagamoyo in Tanzania or the new Kenyan port at Lamu, which is being constructed by the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), offer tempting locations for the future string of bases envisioned by Beijing.²²

The result of Chinese, Japanese, and American interest in Kenya and East Africa is that the region

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is now becoming another Indo-Pacific frontline, akin to Southeast Asia, the islands of the South Pacific, and the Persian Gulf. The question now becomes how can Kenya deal both proactively and effectively within this high-stakes, high-risk context to maintain and even expand its national interests.

Rationale for a Kenyan Indo-Pacific outlook

By adopting a Kenyan Indo-Pacific perspective, Nairobi would acknowledge the inevitable shift in the geopolitical center of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific region. This recognition not only calls for increased Kenyan focus on the area itself but, more significantly, signals Kenya's willingness to maintain a balance between competing powers.

None of this is new for Nairobi, and senior Kenyan officials across both the Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto administrations have expressed their

views on the Indo-Pacific at various international fora.²³ They both articulated three broad concerns: The ongoing militarization of the Horn of Africa; the challenges posed by piracy and transnational crime; and the negative impact of maritime pollution. In addition, they underscored that Kenya seeks to benefit from the Indo-Pacific concept and related policies in terms of positioning (and maintaining) itself as East Africa's gateway to the continent.

Kenya is an active member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), an important forum for countries with a connection to the Indian Ocean. The association has provided a platform for discussions and programs aimed at addressing challenges such as illegal fishing and maritime insecurity. Its active membership in IORA, in part, led President Kenyatta, as far back as 2013, to assert that Kenya's prosperity was linked to the Indian Ocean Basin and thus the wider Indo-Pacific region, which he described as "the epicenter of seismic economic phenomenon."²⁴ Kenyatta went on to write: "It is one of those boons of geography that Kenya straddles this rapidly emerging [Indo-Pacific] system of trade, investment and security. Being able to exploit it economically while working to make it stable and optimally conducive for commerce is a core priority of our national interests for this and the next generations."²⁵

The development of an Indo-Pacific outlook could assist Kenya to better align its foreign policies with its national interests, particularly in terms of development and economy, as well as the interests of its regional and international partners.

A clear statement from Nairobi defining its national interests in terms of security, economy, and politics in the context of great power politics would not only clarify matters but result in a potential win-win situation for Kenya. Developing an Indo-Pacific outlook or strategy, for example, would send signals that Kenya is not only cognizant of the potentially destructive power of great power rivalry, but that it will not be "played" by one camp or the other. Kenyan officials naturally recognize the fever-pitch geopolitical rivalries that drive the engagement of many countries. However, Kenya is steadfast in rejecting any attempts at being pushed into one geopolitical grouping or the other. The country is, therefore, keen to maintain its agency and freedom of action to further its interests. It is for these reasons, and with minimal risk, that Nairobi could demonstrate its desire to develop a *modus vivendi* with major external states (who also happen to be each other's rivals). This would advertise Kenya's development and infrastructure interests, such as unfinished projects associated with Kenya 2030, and act as yet another "Kenya is open for business" sign. Thus, while potentially furthering its national interests by sending signals of warmth and amity to Tokyo and Washington as well as Beijing, it would avoid any harm associated with drawing too close to one geopolitical pole or the other.

The development of an Indo-Pacific outlook could also assist Kenya to better align its foreign policies with its national interests, particularly in terms of development and economy, as well as the interests of its regional and international partners. A powerful result could be Kenya's enhanced bargaining power and increase in its influence in regional and global affairs, thereby contributing to its overall stability and prosperity. This would generate positive momentum in five key areas.

1. **Regional integration:** Despite the growing great power competition, the Indo-Pacific is becoming an increasingly integrated region, with growing economic, political, and security linkages. Kenya, for example, has expressed

interest in engaging with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with the aim of fostering prosperity.²⁶ East African countries such as Kenya that develop their own Indo-Pacific outlooks can potentially position themselves to take advantage of these emerging opportunities and become more active participants in regional integration.

- 2. Competition for influence:** The development of its own Indo-Pacific outlook—a process whereby it clearly defines its strategic, long-term interests—would offer Kenyan leaders a better understanding of the implications of great power dynamics on Kenya. Not only could Nairobi avoid being caught in the middle of competing Chinese or American interests, for example, but it may be able to better gauge which states to approach for science and technology, cyber capabilities, or vaccines.
- 3. Geopolitical realignment:** As new alignments and coalitions emerge across the Indo-Pacific, and traditional partnerships are re-evaluated, Kenya can better assess these developments and identify opportunities for advancing Kenyan interests with a concrete strategy in place. In essence, an Indo-Pacific outlook would be a benchmarking document, a waypoint with which Kenya can navigate geopolitics at the dawn of this new age.
- 4. Balancing act:** Having its own Indo-Pacific outlook would give Nairobi potentially greater bargaining power in their interactions with both China and the Indo-Pacific proponent states. Why? Because it would help Kenya balance its interests with those of the major players, such as China and the Quad members, and maintain its independence in decision-making.
- 5. Protection of national interests:** An Indo-Pacific outlook would allow Kenya to better protect its national interests by ensuring that its security and economic concerns are clearly

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defined and given adequate consideration in regional developments.

Releasing a document with the term “Indo-Pacific” featured prominently in it should not be misunderstood as Kenya slavishly pandering the West. It would by no means be akin to buying into an American or Japanese view of the globe. Nor would Kenya need to be won over to Japan’s view of the liberal order. Instead, as Peter Kagwanja, a senior policy adviser and strategist explained a few days after the Indo-Pacific conference in Nairobi, much of Japan’s Indo-Pacific Strategy is about a “whole-of-the-world” approach to diplomacy and its proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation.²⁷ These are certainly non-controversial and hard to disagree with. Thus, rather than being some front to push divisive agendas related to niche issues of human rights (as the U.S. Embassy has unfortunately done), the free and open Indo-Pacific promotes “peace, stability and prosperity” across the Indian and Pacific Ocean worlds.

As seen at the Free and Indo-Pacific conference in Nairobi, the concept’s normativity is largely non-controversial and aspects of it firmly meet the approval of the previous and current Kenyan administrations. Kenya’s release of an official Indo-Pacific document would clarify Nairobi’s global aims and posture as well as send reassuring signals to the U.S., Japan, and India that the country is not only engaged as an important Indo-Pacific state, but willing to do so on its own terms. In essence, the

seesaw would tilt back to something approaching equilibrium in what has been viewed, rightly or wrongly, as Kenya tilting too close to China. Publicizing an Indo-Pacific outlook is also fully in line with Kenya's post-independence political and economic outlook and trajectory as well as its geopolitical role as the gateway to East Africa.

Ideally, an East African Community (EAC) Indo-Pacific outlook would subsequently be promulgated in something akin to ASEAN's region-wide outlook after Kenya's initial and historic move. However, given the history of mistrust and rivalry within the EAC, this seems a tall order.²⁸ As such, Kenya's go-it-alone approach and release of an Indo-Pacific outlook seems necessary. But what would such an outlook look like?

The Nuts and Bolts of a Kenyan Indo-Pacific Outlook

A Kenyan Indo-Pacific outlook would form a guidance document that would explicitly outline the gamut of potential engagement scenarios with Indo-Pacific states, from China to Japan and from India to the U.S. At its heart, a Kenyan Indo-Pacific outlook would showcase that the country's geographic centrality, political stability, and economic prosperity—and Kenya's vision of

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its role in a multipolar world—are inextricably linked to the Indo-Pacific region and emerging order. In short, Kenya is an Indian Ocean state and the gateway to East Africa. It plays a vital role in terms of both maritime and continental affairs. As such, the document would clearly acknowledge and underscore Kenya's interests in the evolving geopolitical realities, and its interests in maintaining its sovereignty of action at all costs.

Since Kenya's strategy document for the Indo-Pacific would also contextualize Kenya's foreign and security policy evolution, it would move the country away from what has been a more pronounced emphasis on partnerships in trade and investment and see it enter and constructively act in the realm of global geopolitics and international relations. In essence, it would more firmly anchor Kenya in the perception of great powers as both the region's gateway and economic leader and as one of Africa's foremost international actors and advocates.

The document, like the EU's *Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*²⁹ or ASEAN's *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*,³⁰ would be expected to contain a number of sections related to the centrality of Kenya's national interests and how those may best be served by integration into and a proactive role within the wider Indo-Pacific region in concert with great, medium, and small powers.

Background and Rationale

This section would highlight the dynamism and centrality of East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean region and Kenya's central place. It would also define and reinforce Kenya's national interests so as to maintain and advance its regional and international standing. Part of the rationale of such a document is that it would clarify Kenya's position on choosing sides in the unfolding great power competition, i.e., it will not do so. Rather, by being inclusive in terms of ideas and proposals, the outlook will make it clear that Nairobi plans to seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments.

Outlook and Objectives

Kenya's outlook on the Indo-Pacific would firmly align with Nairobi's efforts to maintain its regional leadership role in both the EAC and IGAD and, therefore, shape regional security architecture. It could also contain disclaimers such as:

- Kenya supports dialogue and cooperation across the Indo-Pacific rather than rivalry, and inclusive, sustainable development for all.
- Kenya views the Indo-Pacific and East Africa as integrated and interconnected, with Kenya destined to play an important role.
- Kenya is a key contributor to and partner in the maritime domain and evolving regional architecture.

Similar to ASEAN's *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, Kenya could make its objectives clear. For example, it could provide a guide to cooperation with external states as well as its own region. Non-confrontational, soothing language about fostering a conducive atmosphere for peace, stability, and prosperity by addressing shared issues, upholding a rules-based framework both regionally and internationally, and promoting more intimate economic partnerships to build trust and confidence could be included. Additionally, improving Kenya's collaboration with various stakeholders in maritime cooperation, connectivity, Nairobi's sustainable development objectives (SDGs) could also be helpful. In short, Kenya's focus on economy and non-traditional security matters would be reassuring to all parties, regionally and internationally. Nevertheless, references to the rules-based order would highlight Kenya's interest in maintaining its sovereignty of action and engagement while offering a handshake to "free and open Indo-Pacific" advocates like Japan, the U.S., and India.

Another section that details areas of cooperation could delve into specific issues of interest to Kenya, such as promoting maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight, or addressing

the challenges of rapid urbanization, and developing a public-private partnership (PPP) agenda to mobilize resources for connectivity projects in Kenya, the EAC, and the Indo-Pacific. The final point is of particular import because it would signal Kenya's interest in undersea cable connectivity over which 97 percent of global communications are transmitted.³¹ This is essential for Kenya to maintain its role as the technology and entrepreneurial leader of East Africa and the location of the Silicone Savannah.

Security Cooperation

Given the importance of security to Kenya and the instability that regularly infects its wider region, a section on security cooperation may be in order. This could highlight the interconnectedness of Kenya and the Indo-Pacific economies, along with their shared global challenges, and how this creates an inextricable link between Kenya and the Indo-Pacific's shared future. The Indian Ocean is a crucial trade route for Kenya without which Kenya's role as East Africa's gateway, via the port of Mombasa, would suffer. Hence, the stability of this maritime region is a matter of shared concern and cooperation.

The document could demonstrate Kenyan leaders' understanding that with the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific, trade and supply chains, as well as areas related to sensitive technologies (think Huawei 5G and AI), are under significant strain. As such, its primary objective of increasing its engagement is to help maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific for everyone while establishing robust and long-lasting partnerships.

Importantly, a Kenyan Indo-Pacific approach would highlight, like India's, Kenya's goal of inclusivity and its willingness to cooperate with all partners when their interests converge. Simultaneously, it can be expected to safeguard its vital interests and promote its core values—namely democracy and the rule of law—in collaboration with like-minded international partners. As East Africa's foremost democracy, Kenya stands to benefit from

such syntax in the eyes of the major Indo-Pacific proponents: the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia. It will also go down well with the EU without causing any harm to Nairobi's relations with Beijing.

To achieve important security objectives, Kenya could consider developing a strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific by identifying priority areas such as:

- *Digital connectivity, governance, and partnerships:* The development of sustainable, secure, and transparent infrastructure and digital connectivity in the region with a wide variety of partners.
- *Security and defense:* The enhancement of maritime security, including maritime situational awareness and coastguard cooperation, and strengthening regional capabilities to tackle common security threats such as piracy and terrorism.
- *Human security:* An emphasis on partnering with Indo-Pacific states to improve Kenya's healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness, as well as working to reduce Kenya's disaster risks, particularly from climate-related occurrences such as floods, drought, etc.

Kenya's strategy document for the Indo-Pacific would also contextualize Kenya's foreign and security policy evolution; it would move the country away from what has been a more pronounced emphasis on partnerships in trade and investment and see it enter and constructively act in the realm of global geopolitics and international relations.

- *Ocean governance:* The promotion of multilateralism, regional cooperation, and good governance in the Indo-Pacific in full compliance with international law, in particular UNCLOS. In addition, a sentence about working with partners to fight against IUU fishing as well as maritime pollution is important.³²
- *Climate change:* Promoting ways to address climate change and environmental degradation and promoting sustainable development in the region. As a frontline climate disaster country, Kenya should consider making this a key platform and focus of any Indo-Pacific outlook.
- *Green growth:* Emphasizing and developing clean cities, clean growth and industrialization at the same time. Making this a key point would certainly attract Japan's interest given its goals outline at TICAD8 about hydrogen supply chain creation and ammonia production.³³

In terms of hard security, Kenya's cooperation with Indo-Pacific states could entail various measures such as intelligence sharing, joint military exercises and training, coordination on counterterrorism and piracy operations, maritime security cooperation, and joint efforts to combat trafficking of illicit goods and transnational organized crime. Additionally, it could involve diplomatic efforts to promote peace and stability in the region. This would dovetail with Kenya's efforts to bring peace and stability through negotiations to Ethiopia and the DRC. Naturally, the specific nature and extent of such cooperation would depend on the interests and priorities of the participating countries.

Risks and Rewards

None of this is to say that Kenya should not be cognizant of the pitfalls of promulgating a document in which the term "Indo-Pacific" features prominently. Since the term is so closely tied to Japan and the U.S.—both peer competitors of China—Kenya's usage of it may initially result in

diplomatic tensions with Beijing. This is potentially serious, given that China is a major trading partner and investor in Kenya.

The term “Indo-Pacific” is also associated with a particular geopolitical and strategic outlook that is not shared by all countries in the region. If Kenya were to align itself too closely with this concept, it could risk isolating itself from other African and regional partners who do not share this outlook. However, because the term is also relatively new and nuanced, it can be subject to various interpretations. This is a sword that cuts both ways, and Nairobi must be cognizant that its usage of the term and the promulgation of an Indo-Pacific outlook will please some parties and disappoint others. As Peter Kagwanja noted, for Japan, “The Free and Open Indo-Pacific... does not seek to create a new ‘regional multilateral’ institution or to compete with existing ones.”³⁴ Instead, it is a comprehensive response to China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, especially its multitrillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But that is Tokyo’s view, not London’s, Singapore’s or Berlin’s—all of which have some sort of Indo-Pacific outlook. Nairobi’s Indo-Pacific would share some of the normativity and emphasis on rule of law with Tokyo but would by no means be an anti-China proposition.

There are certainly a host of potential rewards for Kenya that should, on balance, outweigh any theoretical risks. These include, enhanced economic opportunities in the form of attracting investment and creating new trade opportunities with various states across the region. In addition, Kenya could reasonably expect to strengthen its relationships with other countries in the Indo-Pacific in the form of regional cooperation on issues of common concern. Most importantly, Kenya could look to improved diplomatic relations with Indo-Pacific proponent states and, thus, greater influence regionally and internationally. By outlining its approach and priorities for the region, Kenya could establish itself as a key player in the Indo-Pacific,

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with a greater ability to shape regional affairs and influence decision-making processes.

Lastly, Kenya could use its Indo-Pacific document to outline its security concerns in the region and signal its readiness to work with other countries to address common security challenges. This could help to strengthen national security and enhance the safety and wellbeing of its citizens.

Conclusion

This issue brief has argued that Kenya should release an official Indo-Pacific outlook as it has the potential to bring substantial rewards in terms of its national interests. By developing a comprehensive policy framework that outlines its vision and objectives for engaging with the Indo-Pacific region, Kenya can position itself as a key player in the region and leverage the economic and strategic benefits that come with it.

One of the primary rewards of such a document is that it would provide clarity and direction to Kenya's foreign policy priorities, particularly in the context of the Indo-Pacific region. With the growing importance of this region, it is imperative for Kenya to have a well-defined strategy that aligns with its national interests and priorities. By doing so, it can build stronger economic and strategic partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, which

would enable Kenya to tap into new markets, access new technology and investment, and strengthen its regional influence.

At the same time, there are certain risks associated with developing an official Indo-Pacific outlook. One of the most significant is that such an outlook could lead to greater competition and tensions in and around Kenya. As China continues to expand (and the U.S., India, and Japan and others attempt to limit) its influence in the Indo-Pacific, for example, Kenya may find itself caught in the middle and be pressured to take sides. Additionally, Kenya may face challenges in balancing its relationships with different countries in the region, particularly those that have conflicting interests or agendas.

The potential rewards of an official Indo-Pacific outlook, however, far outweigh the potential risks. By developing a clear and comprehensive policy framework for engaging with the Indo-Pacific, Kenya can position itself as a key player in the region, build stronger economic and strategic partnerships, and advance its national interests.

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Endnotes

- 1 The Forum was co-hosted by the Embassy of Japan in Kenya and the Global Centre for Policy and Strategy (GLOCEPS), a Nairobi think tank.
- 2 Amb. Dr. Monica Juma [@AmbMonicaJuma], “3/.. and greater prosperity in the grand sphere of our shared maritime domains. We look forward to the ‘Moment of Action’ to advance an Indo-Pacific approach that best advocates the common good,” [Tweet], March 1, 2023, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/AmbMonicaJuma/status/1631249614283177985>.
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- 6 Brendan J. Cannon, and Kei Hakata, (eds.), *Indo-Pacific Strategies: Navigating Geopolitics at the Dawn of a New Age*. Routledge, 2022.
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- 8 S. Abe, “Realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” Project Syndicate, September 26, 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/realizing-vision-of-free-and-open-indo-pacific-by-abe-shinzo-2022-09>.
- 9 Kei Hakata, and Brendon J. Cannon, “How Indo-Pacific Strategies Are Entering a New Stage,” *The National Interest*. March 2, 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-indo-pacific-strategies-are-entering-new-stage-206260>.
- 10 Brendon J. Cannon, “Influence and Power in the Western Indo-Pacific: Lessons from Eastern Africa,” In *Indo-Pacific Strategies*, n. 6 (pp. 216-232). Routledge, 2022.
- 11 The EAC is a regional intergovernmental organization made up of the six countries listed in the text. It was established in 1967 with the aim of promoting economic cooperation, political integration, and social development among its member-states. The EAC has its headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania and its objectives include the creation of a common market, a customs union, and ultimately a political federation in the region. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) officially joined the EAC in 2022.
- 12 IGAD is a regional organization that promotes economic cooperation and peace and security in the Horn of Africa.
- 13 Brendon J. Cannon, “Influence and Power in the Western Indo-Pacific: Lessons from Eastern Africa,” In *Indo-Pacific Strategies*, n. 6 (pp. 216-232). Routledge, 2022. See also, Brendon J. Cannon, “Grand strategies in contested zones: Japan’s Indo-Pacific, China’s BRI and Eastern Africa,” *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2018).
- 14 K. Eikhoff, “Chinese Mega Projects in Kenya: Public Controversies around Infrastructure and Debt in East Africa’s Regional Hub,” [Policy Brief 04] Megatrends Afrika, Berlin, 2022, pp. 1-10.
- 15 I. Katusiime, “Uganda ditches China on SGR,” *The Independent*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.ug/uganda-ditches-china-on-sgr/>.
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- 17 While often overlooked, an unheralded aspect of the BRI is that China will end up losing money, at times, in certain BRI projects because of the host state’s inability or unwillingness to pay the debt. See Brendon J. Cannon, n. 12.
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 - 22 For Zhang Hongming, Deputy Director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ African Studies Institute, “Africa has political, economic, and even strategic resources that China uses in order more effectively to expand its interests – thus turning operations in Africa into a strategic outer line for China’s geopolitical strategy of great power relations.” Quoted in “China’s Strategic Aims in Africa: Hearing before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 116th Cong.” 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/May_8_2020_Hearing_Transcript.pdf.
 - 23 S. Gurjar, “How Kenya Views the Indo-Pacific,” [Issue Brief] Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 2021, https://icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&cls_id=6424&clid=4415&kval=sankalp%20gurjar. See also information about the March 1, 2023, Free and Open Indo-Pacific Symposium hosted by the Global Centre for Policy and Strategy (GLOCEPS) and the Embassy of Japan in Kenya. For example, The Global Centre for Policy and Strategy [@GLOCEPS1], “The Chief Guest, Ambassador (Dr.) Monica Juma, DPhil (Oxon), EGH, National Security Advisor to the President of the Republic of Kenya delivers a Keynote Address during the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Symposium hosted by GLOCEPS and the Embassy of Japan in Kenya,” [Tweet], March 1, 2023, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/GLOCEPS1/status/1631228825412460544>.
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 - 27 P. Kagwanja, “Will Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy win over Africa to liberal order?” *Nation*, March 5, 2023, <https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/will-japan-s-indo-pacific-strategy-win-over-africa-to-liberal-order--4146398>.
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