Security in East Africa Matters for Great Power Competition

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Kenya has a longstanding reputation as a stable democracy, but recent violent protests have drawn concern from other African states, and from the international community. Following last year's election, which saw William Ruto secure the country's presidency, many in the Kenyan opposition did not accept his win as legitimate and demonstrated in the streets. Those protests have persisted, with the protesters demanding that the government provide receipts on the election results and solutions for the high living costs.

This unrest should be a concern for U.S. policymakers, considering America's unfolding great power competition with China and its strategic, longstanding partnership with the East African state. Kenya's geopolitical importance to the Indo-Pacific directly affects the efforts of the U.S. and its allies to compete with China in that region.

KENYA'S CACHET

Indeed, the Indo-Pacific accounts for roughly two-thirds of global GDP and half of global trade flows – features that make it a vital component of American strategy, as well as that of its allies in the Quad grouping (Japan, Australia, and India). Kenya, meanwhile, plays an important part in this equation, serving as a major U.S. and Quad state ally as well as a gateway to continuing the flow of technology, goods, and services.

This is so for three main reasons.

The first is economic. Presently, Beijing is the "largest financer of African infrastructure," which helps to limit the influence of the Quad states in Kenya and throughout East Africa. Moreover, China views the Port of Mombasa, Kenya's leading international port, as a key target for its Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). This is so for good reason. The Port of Mombasa is one of the busiest in East Africa and is responsible for providing a trade link to Africa's landlocked countries and acts as a gateway to the Indo-Pacific. Through its MSRI, China seeks to attain a number of geostrategic objectives, including gaining more control over energy supply chains, hurting the strategic interests of regional rival India, and projecting greater political influence throughout the region.

Strategically, too, Kenya – and East Africa writ large – is vital to securing the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. Navy's presence in Diego Garcia is designed to "provide critical support to U.S. and allied forces forward deployed to the Indian Ocean, while supporting multi-theater forces operating in CENTCOM, AFRICOM, EUCOM, and PACOM." Nearby partners, such as Kenya, aid America's ability to project power from and operate militarily on the island, while also securing the economic interests of both Quad and African states, including the protection of sea lanes transporting vital supplies of raw materials.

Lastly, a robust Kenya can play a role in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. China is currently active in Kenyan ports, as exemplified by the Chinese-built Lamu Port, which was offered as a way to bolster Kenya's bid to become the major trade hub in East Africa. If China's influence over Mombasa continues to grow, it could end up shifting the balance of great power relationships.

A DIFFERENT WAY FORWARD

As a result, the socio-economic, political, and security issues in East Africa need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the Western approach to great power competition. Washington would do well to consider a *4-D* approach toward East Africa as part of a larger strategy designed around competing with Beijing:

Development – specifically, a focus on job creation, increase in economic trade, and assistance with local forces through health and education. President Ruto, for instance, is prioritizing HIV/AIDS control by 2025 through Kenyan-owned and funded programs. The United States could assist these goals by strengthening Kenya's healthcare systems and HIV management via the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

Diplomacy – namely, assuring Kenya, and other East African states, that it is an important ally of the United States and the Quad, something that can be signaled through stepped-up diplomatic trips to the region and by demonstrating a growing willingness to play an active role in conflict resolution.

Defense – an increase in joint exercises and greater security cooperation (and funding) for infrastructure assistance in order to combat al Shabab. The Islamist terrorist group not only threatens the security of East Africans but U.S. military personnel and infrastructure as well. In 2020, it attacked Camp Simba, killing U.S. servicemembers and destroying aircraft and vehicles.

Dignity – the United States needs to advance religious freedom efforts, promote individual dignity and worth, support the democratic process, continue peace-building efforts, and assist with strengthening the rule of law in the region.

THE AFRICAN CONNECTION

Africa is no stranger to violence, with constant security issues in Somalia, civil wars in Sudan and Ethiopia, and the recent coup in Niger. As a result, it is important for the United States to find ways to invest resources and work with local African allies, like Kenya, to bring stability to the region.

Doing so will help advantage African prosperity and independence. Without it, regional states are liable to fall more deeply into Beijing's orbit, resulting in a more aggressive and advantaged China.

The lesson is clear: if the United States truly wants to compete with China and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, East Africa matters.

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