



2026 NAIROBI GEOPOLITICS FORUM

Navigating Geopolitical Dynamics: Maritime Access, Strategic Corridors, and Regional Stability in Eastern and Southern Africa

Date: 22nd April 2026

Venue: Nairobi, Kenya

Background

Maritime access remains a defining challenge for many landlocked states in Africa, particularly within Eastern and Southern Africa. For countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, and Zambia, access to seaports through reliable transit corridors is not only a matter of economic convenience but a strategic necessity. According to recent analysis, these landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) face logistics costs significantly higher than coastal states, as transport can consume up to 20% of import value, while overall costs may be nearly double those incurred by maritime economies.¹

For instance, Ethiopia depends heavily on transit via the neighboring Port of Djibouti, through the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and associated corridor, with over 95% of its external trade passing through this route.² According to the Ethiopian government, reliable access to seaports is essential for reducing transport costs, fostering industrial growth, and enhancing competitiveness in both regional and global markets.

Across East Africa, the network of strategic corridors, such as the Northern Corridor (connecting to the Port of Mombasa in Kenya) and the Central Corridor (linked to the Port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania), underpins regional trade and integration initiatives.³ In Southern Africa, the Deep South corridor traverses Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa and links them to the Port of Durban.⁴ Collectively, these networks underscore the regions' reliance on secure, efficient, and well-governed transit routes to sustain commerce and integration.

¹ Henok Tadele Haile (Oct 23, 2023). How imperative is access to sea for Ethiopia. New Business Ethiopia. https://newbusinessethiopia.com/nbe-blog/how-imperative-is-access-to-sea-for-ethiopia/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² The Ethiopian Herald. (2024, October 29). East Africa: Ethiopia's valid concerns behind its interest for sea outlet. AllAfrica. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202410300605.html>

³ East African Community (n.d.). Road Transport in East Africa. <https://www.eac.int/infrastructure/road-transport-sub-sector>

⁴ The Northern Corridor and Transport Coordination Authority (n.d.). The Northern Corridor Transport Network. <https://www.ttcanc.org/northern-corridor-transport-network>

While such corridors provide vital access, they are also points of vulnerability: congestion, infrastructure bottlenecks, port inefficiencies, or political instability in transit or coastal states can severely disrupt trade.⁵ Moreover, growing interest from external powers in infrastructure development, port control, and maritime security adds a new dimension, turning what were economic and development issues into potential geopolitical fault lines.⁶

Introduction

The interplay between maritime access, strategic corridors, and regional stability has evolved into a critical geopolitical question for countries in the Eastern and Southern African regions. As landlocked countries intensify efforts to secure dependable transit to the sea, coastal and transit states, along with external actors, are increasingly engaging in corridor governance, port development, and maritime security arrangements. In some cases, these efforts have been framed as economic cooperation, but in others as strategic positioning. This dual nature underscores how maritime access is not only about trade logistics but also about power projection, influence over regional supply chains, and broader security dynamics.

Recent moves by some coastal states to formalize maritime rights and regulate access for landlocked neighbors demonstrate the urgency of this issue. For example, in April 2024, Kenya proposed a regional maritime treaty in coordination with Djibouti and IGAD to govern how landlocked states in East Africa can access coastal ports under commercial terms. The aim is to balance LLDCs' access needs with coastal states' sovereignty and maritime security concerns.⁷

Despite these initiatives, critical gaps remain: corridor infrastructure is often uneven, administrative and customs arrangements vary across borders, and institutional frameworks for transit governance and maritime security are weak or fragmented. In contexts where external powers invest in port or naval infrastructure, there is a risk that economic corridor management becomes a platform for geopolitical competition rather than inclusive regional development.

Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need for structured dialogue among governments, policy think tanks, scholars, and regional bodies to assess how maritime access, corridor governance, and security interplay, and how the region can safeguard open, stable, and equitable access for landlocked and coastal states alike. Accordingly, the 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum seeks to convene stakeholders to unpack these dynamics and explore pathways for cooperative, rules-based, and resilient corridor governance. This important forum will facilitate dialogue on evolving maritime security trends, the strategic implications of emerging trade routes, and policy options to strengthen regional stability while safeguarding access for landlocked economies. The discussion aims to generate practical insights to inform national strategies and regional cooperation mechanisms.

⁵ Tesfaye B. Takele & Tassew D. Tolcha (2021), 'Optimal transit corridors for Ethiopia', *Journal of Transport and Supply Chain Management*, 15(0), a567. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jtscm.v15i0.567>

⁶ Paul Nantulya (March 10, 2025). Mapping China's Strategic Port Development in Africa. Spotlight. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-port-development-africa/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁷ Duncan Miriri (April 11, 2024). Kenya proposes maritime treaty to defuse Ethiopia-Somalia tensions. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenya-proposes-maritime-treaty-diffuse-ethiopia-somalia-tensions-2024-04-11/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

The 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum will also take place at a strategically significant moment for Kenya, and the wider Eastern Africa region, as Kenya will host the 11th Our Ocean Conference in Mombasa and Kilifi Counties from 16–18 June 2026. As host, Kenya will place Africa’s maritime interests, blue economy priorities, and ocean governance challenges at the center of global dialogue. The conference will convene governments, private sector actors, researchers, youth leaders, and civil society to advance action on sustainable ocean management, marine conservation, ocean finance, the fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU), and investment in the sustainable blue economy. In this context, the Nairobi Geopolitics Forum serves as an important regional policy platform to interrogate the geopolitical dimensions of maritime access, strategic corridors, and regional stability ahead of the global summit. By convening policymakers, scholars, and regional institutions in April 2026, the Forum aims to generate policy insights and strategic recommendations that can help inform Kenya’s positioning and regional coordination ahead of the 11th Our Ocean Conference.⁸

Objectives

The 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum aims to:

1. Provide a platform for stakeholders to analyze current patterns of maritime access, corridor governance, and transit dependence in Eastern and Southern Africa.
2. Examine the strategic, economic, and security dimensions shaping control over maritime routes and transit corridors, including the influence of external powers and regional actors.
3. Identify challenges and structural gaps in existing corridor infrastructure, customs and border management, transit governance, and maritime security frameworks.
4. Explore cooperative policy options, institutional arrangements, and regional governance mechanisms to safeguard equitable and stable access to ports and corridors for landlocked states.
5. Generate actionable recommendations to strengthen regional integration, resilience of trade networks, and long-term stability, balancing states’ economic interests with security and sovereignty concerns.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcome of the 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum includes:

- A deeper understanding among participants of the interdependencies between maritime access, transit corridors, and regional stability.
- A set of actionable recommendations for Kenyan policymakers and stakeholders.
- Identification of research gaps and priorities for further empirical action.
- Strengthened networks and partnerships for future collaboration.
- A policy brief summarizing key insights and recommendations.

⁸ <https://www.ouroceanconference.org/conferences/mombasa-2026/>

Expected Outputs

The expected outputs of the 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum include:

- **A Workshop Report:** A document outlining the key discussions, insights, and recommendations emerging from the event.
- **A Policy Brief:** A concise policy brief synthesizing key insights, policy recommendations, and strategic considerations emerging from the discussions
- **Areas for Further Research:** Identification of gaps in the current evidence base and suggestion of future studies to enhance understanding.
- **Expanded Policy Dialogue Networks** connecting policymakers, diplomats, scholars, and development partners.
- **Input into Future Strategic Dialogues:** Insights that can inform subsequent editions of the Nairobi Geopolitics Forum and related policy dialogues such as the 11th Our Ocean Conference.

Target Participants

The 2026 Nairobi Geopolitical Forum will bring together about 50 key foreign policy stakeholders from coastal, landlocked, and transit states in Eastern and Southern Africa. They include:

- Senior government officials and policymakers
- Distinguished diplomats
- Scholars and academic researchers
- Experts and analysts from think tanks
- Select members of the private sector
- Media representatives

Venue

The 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum will be held at **Kwetu Nairobi, Curio Collection By Hilton**, a 5-star boutique hotel located on Peponi Road in Nairobi.

Time

The 2026 Nairobi Geopolitics Forum will run from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM.

Contact Persons

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Tentative Program

TIME	ACTIVITIES
8:00 – 8:30	Arrival and Registration
8:30 – 9:00	Opening Session Welcoming Remarks Opening Remarks Featured Address Keynote Address
9:00 – 09:20	Research Presentation
09:20 – 10:50	High-Level Roundtable Discussion and Dialogue
10:50 – 11:00	Photo Session
11:00 – 11:30	Tea Break
11:30 – 13:00	Panel Discussion 1 Maritime Access and Regional Stability
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch Break
14:00 – 15:30	Panel Discussion 2 Strategic Corridors and Regional Stability
15:30 – 16:00	Tea Break
16:00 – 16:30	Closing Ceremony Rapporteur's Summary Vote of Thanks Closing Remarks

Organizing Partners

International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK)

IRSK is the premier professional body for the international affairs and diplomacy fields in Kenya. The Society serves as a policy-neutral forum for thought leadership, networking, and collaboration among those involved in the study, teaching, and practice of international relations and diplomacy in the country. Through policy research, dialogue, and advocacy, IRSK works to raise awareness, promote informed decision-making, and catalyze action on pressing international and diplomatic issues at national, regional, and global levels.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)

KAS is a German political foundation, present in over 100 countries around the globe, and has been active in Kenya since 1973. The KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, and academia, building strong partnerships along the way. The Foundation seeks to intensify political cooperation at the national and international levels through the promotion of productive diplomatic engagements and shared democratic values.

Global Centre for Policy and Strategy (GLOCEPS)

The Global Centre for Policy and Strategy (GLOCEPS), headquartered in Nairobi, is a premier interdisciplinary think tank dedicated to action research, strategic policy engagement, and thought leadership. We convene distinguished professionals, scholars, and practitioners to advance policy solutions on global, regional, and national challenges, with a strong emphasis on knowledge production and practical application. GLOCEPS work cuts across five pillars, namely, security and defence; foreign policy; transnational organized crimes; governance and ethics; and development. This is guided by our mission, which is to contribute to global peace and prosperity through action research in diplomacy, security, and development.