

POLICY BRIEF

Somalia in the East African Community

Opportunities and challenges

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Somalia's entry into the East African Community (EAC) presents both opportunities and challenges for the country and for the bloc. For the EAC, the rapid expansion presents economic prospects such as increased intra-regional trade, enhanced geopolitical influence, strengthened collective security and more coordinated regional responses to conflict. A crucial question, however, is how the EAC can capitalise on the prospects of Somalia's entry into the bloc while managing the challenges that accompany it.

Key findings

- ▶ There is a strong will from the Somali government to be quickly integrated into the EAC.
- ▶ Despite this political will and desire for expedited integration, Somalia still faces significant internal security challenges, including al-Shabaab terrorism, clan conflicts and fragile federal governance, which could hinder its integration.
- ▶ Somalia's ethnolinguistic and cultural spread into the greater East Africa and the Horn of Africa makes its entry into the EAC a natural and fitting one.
- ▶ Somalia has weak institutional capacity and structures that will affect the EAC's harmonisation and standardisation process.
- ▶ The entry of Somalia into the EAC presents significant strategic, economic, political and foreign policy opportunities for both Somalia and for the bloc.

Recommendations

EAC:

- ▶ Should support Somalia's integration through a model that would allow the country to be integrated into the EAC gradually.
- ▶ Should provide technical support to Somalia as it aligns its domestic policies, legislation and frameworks to the EAC Treaty, laws and frameworks.
- ▶ Should revise its peace and security architecture to help Somalia deal with internal security challenges as the EAC's system faces structural, operational and administrative limitations.
- ▶ Should provide technical and capacity-building support to Somalia, including training for the establishment of a ministry responsible for EAC affairs.

Somali government:

- ▶ Should fast-track the implementation of the integration roadmap, which includes the domestication of the EAC Treaty and easing travel requirements for citizens of other EAC members.
- ▶ Should engage EAC organs and institutions for technical support for an effective and expedited integration process.
- ▶ Should quickly develop an integration strategy to expedite the integration process.
- ▶ Should deal with domestic federal governance issues that may affect the integration process.

Introduction

The East African Community (EAC) has undergone rapid expansion. Unlike the Economic Community of West African States, which has seen three of its members withdraw,¹ the EAC has welcomed three new members over the last eight years. Somalia became the EAC's eighth member in March 2024, joining Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Africa's most integrated regional bloc.

Somalia's geography, ethnolinguistic and socio-cultural affinities closely align with the East African geographical scope. The Somali people, a Cushitic ethnoreligious group, have significant populations in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. Due to a history of conflict, many Somali people have migrated to other parts of East Africa, including South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania. Renowned for their economic tenacity, industry and resilience, the Somali people have also expanded beyond the Horn of Africa, creating large diasporic communities in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Asia and Australia.

The country first applied for membership of the EAC on 20 March 2012 during the presidency of Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. However, Somalia's interest gained momentum when Hassan Sheikh Mohamud became president in August of that year. The 14th EAC Summit acknowledged Somalia's application in November 2012. As fate would have it, it was under the second tenure of Mohamud that Somalia was admitted to the EAC.

Article 3 of the Treaty Establishing the EAC outlines the criteria for membership, which include geographical proximity to EAC partner states, commitment to good governance and willingness to adhere to the principles of EAC integration.² A Verification Committee was established in August 2013 to assess Somalia's eligibility for membership.³ During this time, there was high insecurity in Somalia, which caused delays in the deployment of the verification mission. After years of delays, in July 2022, the EAC Heads of State urged the Council of Ministers to fast-track the verification in line with admission procedures.

The mission was finally conducted in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, between 25 January and 3 February 2023. The 21st Extraordinary Summit, held in Bujumbura on 31 May 2023, then launched the accession negotiations.⁴ Talks between Somalia and the EAC partner states were held in Nairobi from 22–30 August 2023, resulting in an agreement on the terms of accession.

The negotiation report was reviewed at the 44th Council of Ministers meeting in November 2023, clearing the path for Somalia's entry. The 23rd Ordinary Summit on 24 November 2023 approved Somalia's admission and authorised the signing of the Treaty of Accession. The Treaty was signed on 15 December 2023, and Somalia deposited its instruments of ratification on 4 March 2024, formally completing the accession process.

The last three entrants into the EAC have histories of conflict, which could affect both its short- and long-term stability

Somalia's entry into the EAC introduces both opportunities and challenges for the country and the bloc. The accession could enhance intra-regional trade, boost the EAC's geopolitical influence and strengthen collective security, while enabling more coordinated responses to regional conflicts.⁵ A key question remains how the EAC can leverage these opportunities effectively while addressing governance, institutional and security challenges associated with Somalia's membership.

The last three entrants into the bloc – South Sudan, the DRC and now Somalia – have histories of conflict and continue to face stability challenges, which could affect both the short- and long-term stability of the EAC. Concerns have been raised about the EAC's capacity to absorb new members, particularly in terms of its institutional strength.⁶ While the bloc is driven by a mission to widen and deepen integration, rapid expansion has triggered a financial crisis that now threatens the economic integration agenda.⁷ As the EAC grows, serious questions arise about how to balance expansion with its integration goals.

Chart 1: East African Community



Source: Authors

Through qualitative methods, this policy brief assesses Somalia's entry into the EAC. Primarily, it examines Somalia's interests in EAC membership and interrogates the benefits and challenges from a peace, security, political and economic standpoint. It relied on both

primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from key informants and EAC policy experts involved in the verification mission. Secondary data included EAC documents such as the Treaty Establishing the EAC, EAC Summit and Council reports and the verification report.

Chart 2: Milestones in Somalia's EAC accession process

| Date | Milestone |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 20 March 2012 | Somalia submits its first formal application for EAC membership |
| 30 November 2012 | 14 th EAC Summit acknowledges Somalia's application and directs a verification of eligibility |
| August 2013 | EAC forms a Verification Committee, but insecurity in Somalia delays on-site assessment |
| February 2018 | 19 th EAC Summit renews the directive to verify Somalia's readiness; Somalia asks for postponement due to internal challenges |
| 22 July 2022 | 22 nd EAC Summit urges fast-tracking of the Somalia verification mission |
| 25 January – 3 February 2023 | EAC conducts a verification mission in Mogadishu to assess Somalia's conformity with membership criteria |
| 31 May 2023 | 21 st Extraordinary EAC Summit adopts the verification report and authorises the start of accession negotiations |
| 22–30 August 2023 | Accession negotiations between Somalia and EAC partner states take place in Nairobi |
| 24 November 2023 | 23 rd Ordinary EAC Summit approves Somalia's admission and the signing of the Treaty of Accession |
| 15 December 2023 | Somalia signs the EAC Treaty of Accession in Arusha, Tanzania |
| 4 March 2024 | Somalia deposits its instruments of ratification, becoming a full EAC member state |

Source: Authors' compilation

Overview of the EAC

The EAC is one of the world's oldest regional integration blocs, with its origins in the early colonial period when the British established the Kenya-Uganda Customs Union in 1919.⁸ This early framework served as a precursor to modern EAC regionalism and regional integration. Established in 1967, the first East African Cooperation was made up of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. After early attempts at regional integration, the bloc disintegrated in 1977 due to ideological differences among the member states.⁹ Attempts to revive the defunct body began in 1993 with the establishment of the Permanent Tripartite Commission for the East African Cooperation.

These efforts culminated in the signing of the Treaty for the Establishment of the EAC in 1999, which entered into force in 2000 with Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania as its founding members. Over time, it has welcomed new members, including Rwanda and Burundi in 2007, South Sudan in 2016, the DRC in 2022 and, most recently, Somalia in 2024, as the eighth partner state.

The EAC's rapid expansion has both benefits and drawbacks. A larger EAC means a bigger internal market, more bargaining power on the global stage and the potential for more coordinated approaches to security, trade and infrastructure.¹⁰ However, the regional bloc is facing a financial crisis as most EAC partner states fail to pay their annual contributions to the bloc's budget. This fiscal shortfall impedes the Secretariat's ability to

implement integration protocols, support fragile new entrants and operate its institutions effectively.

In the 2024–2025 financial year, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania fully met their annual contributions, each remitting about US\$7 million of the total US\$56 million budget. Other partner states paid a smaller share of their dues. Burundi paid 19% of its contribution, the Democratic Republic of Congo 14%, Somalia 50%, and South Sudan just 7%. Overall compliance across the EAC was 58%, with total outstanding obligations reaching US\$55 million. There is a sharp deterioration in the contributions in the 2024–2025 financial year, with a compliance rate of 36.62% and total arrears almost doubling.

The regional bloc is facing a financial crisis as most EAC partner states fail to pay their annual contributions to the bloc's budget

Even contributors that have been historically reliable, like Rwanda, have seen a decline in performance.

The operations of the EAC organs, such as the Secretariat, the East African Legislative Assembly and the East African Court of Justice, depend on the timely contributions of member states.

Regional integration is further complicated by ongoing conflicts and state fragility in these newly admitted members, including Somalia, South Sudan and the DRC.

Chart 3: EAC Partner State Contribution (2025–2026, US\$ million) as of November 2025

| Partner | Arrears as at 1 July 2025 | Contribution due | Contribution paid 2025/2026 | | Total outstanding |
|--------------|---------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Burundi | 15.77 | 7.01 | – | 0% | 22.77 |
| DRC | 20.71 | 7.01 | – | 0% | 27.71 |
| Kenya | – | 7.01 | 7.01 | 100% | – |
| Rwanda | – | 7.01 | 0.87 | 12% | 6.13 |
| Somalia | 3.51 | 7.01 | – | 0% | 10.51 |
| South Sudan | 14.82 | 7.01 | – | 0% | 21.82 |
| Tanzania | 0.12 | 7.01 | 7.01 | 100% | 0.12 |
| Uganda | 0.15 | 7.01 | 5.66 | 81% | 1.19 |
| Total | 55.08 | 56.08 | 20.55 | 36.62% | 90.25 |

Source: EAC

The EAC is composed of four main pillars: the Customs Union, established in 2005, the Common Market, established in 2010, the Monetary Union and the Political Federation, which have yet to be achieved. The Customs Union aims to promote regional economic integration by eliminating trade barriers, while the Common Market aims to promote intra-regional trade through the free movement of goods, services and people.¹¹ Another pillar is the Monetary Union, which seeks to achieve a single currency by 2031. The last pillar is the Political Federation – an ambitious commitment aimed at a single federated community.

Motivations for Somalia's entry into the EAC

While the imperatives for the EAC's expansion have been discussed within the broader context of the bloc's gains, it is important to understand why Somalia sought membership.

Somalia has always viewed EAC membership as a pathway to greater stability and legitimacy on the international stage. One expert noted, 'Somalia is a nation in search of a state,' making reference to the ethnoreligious homogeneity of the Somali people and the paradox of state collapse and protracted conflict.¹² Decades of conflict and international isolation have led Somalia to view EAC membership as a platform for stability, particularly because the EAC is a functional regional economic community with relatively stable members.¹³

By joining the EAC, Somalia aims to strategically strengthen the centre, Mogadishu, against the challenges of federalism that threaten the country's stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁴ Furthermore, Somalia's organic socio-cultural and geographical spread makes it an intrinsic part of the East African fabric through its expansive diasporic and refugee populations in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Similar to the economic pull factors that motivated South Sudan and the DRC, Somalia views membership as an opportunity to benefit from the EAC Common Market and the free movement of people, goods and services. The EAC Customs

Union Protocol will also benefit Somalia by providing access to a tariff-free market once it is fully integrated into the bloc.¹⁵ A combination of the African Continental Trade Area, of which Somalia is already a member, and the EAC bloc offers an opportunity for further economic collaboration, such as regulatory harmonisation. A scholar on economic regional integration noted, 'Intra-regional trade will help fill Somalia's import gaps, for instance, through Tanzania's rice exports or Kenya's fish and tobacco products.'¹⁶ Regional infrastructure projects also motivated its entry, he added.¹⁷

From the EAC's standpoint, Somalia's entry bolsters the region's geostrategic influence. A key informant involved in the verification mission noted, 'Somalia's 3 300 km coastline offers the EAC critical maritime access to the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden and Red Sea Corridor, creating vital maritime access to the North, Central and Middle Eastern markets.'¹⁸ Somalia's ports, notably Kismayo, Mogadishu and Berbera could enhance regional maritime logistics and reduce trade costs.¹⁹

Somalia's population of about 19 million increases the EAC's total market to around 339 million people, and its combined GDP to about US\$361 billion

Another economic benefit that could be accrued from Somalia is its natural resources, including maritime, energy, fisheries and livestock. Its potential in oil and gas will be crucial not just in its domestic economy but also regionally. Somalia's population of about 19 million increases the EAC's total market to around 339 million people. Following Somalia's entry, the EAC's combined gross domestic product (GDP) stands at about US\$361 billion.

Somalia also views its entry into the EAC as a platform for collective security as it tries to address persistent security challenges, including terrorism, piracy and humanitarian crises. These challenges can potentially be addressed through collective security within the EAC's peace and security architecture.

Chart 4: EAC partner states' GDP and population (2024 estimates)

| Country | GDP (US\$ billion, current) | Population (million) |
|--------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Kenya | 124.5 | 56.4 |
| Uganda | 53.7 | 45.9 |
| Tanzania | 78.8 | 68.5 |
| Rwanda | 14.3 | 14.3 |
| Burundi | 2.2 | 14.0 |
| South Sudan | 4.7 | 11.9 |
| DRC | 70.8 | 109.3 |
| Somalia | 12.1 | 19.0 |
| Total | 361.1 | 339.3 |

Source: Authors' compilation from World Bank GDP and population data

Strategic opportunities

Somalia's integration into the EAC offers four main strategic advantages according to expert and secondary data analysis. These include economic prospects, political and foreign policy gains, security enhancements and institutional benefits.

Economic prospects

Somalia's entry into the EAC expands the bloc's market to about 339 million consumers, thereby increasing access to Somalia's market through enhanced cross-border trade and investment. 'It is expected that Somalia's entry will enhance cross-border ventures in agriculture, trade and manufacturing and diversification of exports,'²⁰ said an economist interviewed. According to World Bank data, Somalia's current exports to Africa are less than 5%.

Somalia's exports to the EAC countries are much lower than its imports from the region. This shows it relies heavily on regional imports for its goods and services. By joining the EAC, this gap could be filled with increased

intra-regional trade. For example, Somalia imports large quantities of rice from India and Pakistan, with other significant sources coming from the United Arab Emirates and Oman.²¹

Tanzania and Kenya, two EAC member states that are also significant rice producers, could supply rice to Somalia at a lower and more convenient rate following their entry into the bloc.²² An economic expert noted further that Kenya, which is already an exporter of tobacco and other goods such as pharmaceutical products, tea and coffee to Somalia, could spur intra-regional trade.²³

Somalia brings significant natural resources to the EAC. It has one of the biggest populations of livestock in Africa – sheep, goats and camels – a resource that, with EAC integration, could find larger regional export markets and enhance regional food security. The blue economy potential of Somalia's waters could be unlocked through formal EAC cooperation in sustainable fishing, aquaculture and coastal tourism.

Chart 5: Somalia's economic outlook (2024 estimates)

| General economic indicators | Value |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Population | 19 million |
| GDP | US\$12 billion |
| GDP per capita | US\$637 |
| GDP growth, annual % | 4.1% |
| Remittances inflow | US\$1 735 million |

Source: Authors' aggregation from the World Bank, national statistical organisations and central banks, national accounts data files, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

Chart 6: Somalia's coastal and marine resources

| Resource – sector | Description and potential |
|---|---|
| Coastline and maritime territory | Africa's longest coastline (3 300 km), supports diverse marine ecosystems and offers high maritime potential |
| Fisheries and marine species | Rich fish resources, including large migratory species such as tuna, smaller fish, crustaceans and reef species |
| Blue economy diversification opportunities | Opportunities beyond fisheries: aquaculture, maritime transport, tourism, biotechnology and sea-based trade and licensing |
| Offshore and other natural resources | Untapped reserves of offshore oil and gas and other mineral resources |

Source: Authors' aggregation from World Bank, Federal Republic of Somalia

The country has abundant fisheries resources.²⁴ Furthermore, its unexplored natural gas, oil and renewable energy resources offer new investment opportunities that could diversify the EAC's energy mix and open doors for joint ventures.

Political and foreign policy benefits

There are significant political and foreign policy benefits associated with Somalia's EAC membership. Somalia's entry gives the EAC greater regional influence and access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, strengthening its geostrategic position in the Horn of Africa. The region now extends from the Central, Eastern and Horn of Africa with access to both the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Somalia's membership also gives it international leverage with 'greater international legitimacy and a platform to advance its interests regionally and globally.'²⁵

Somalia's entry gives the EAC greater regional influence and access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

Somalia's membership in EAC decision-making bodies, including the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), Council of Ministers and Summit ensures its interests are considered and facilitates cooperation with partner states.

Institutional benefits

Somalia stands to gain significant institutional and structural benefits by joining the EAC. Membership allows

it to participate in the EAC Customs Union and Common Market protocols. To fully leverage these opportunities, Somalia must rapidly integrate into these frameworks. This requires establishing a robust governance structure, including the creation of customs authorities and standards agencies,²⁶ to ensure compliance, facilitate trade and enhance regional integration.

As Somalia harmonises its laws, regulations and frameworks to align with EAC standards, it will strengthen its domestic policy frameworks and reduce regulatory gaps with other EAC partner states. Integration into the EAC, including the harmonisation of statistics and financial standards, will improve policymaking and facilitate the effective monitoring of EAC integration over time. EAC institutions, such as the EALA, the East African Court of Justice and the Secretariat, will further enhance Somalia's institutional capacity. By actively participating in these organs through staff representation, Somalia can leverage regional expertise to support the maturation of its domestic institutions.

Challenges of Somalia's entry into the EAC

While there are benefits to Somalia's accession, many challenges still exist. Somalia's entry, like that of the last two entrants, South Sudan and the DRC, presents economic, political and legal challenges as well as security and institutional barriers to the community.

Economic challenges

While we have noted the economic benefits that Somalia and the EAC will accrue following its admission

into the bloc, Somalia still has a relatively weak economic base with limited fiscal capacity. Agriculture and livestock remain the backbone of the economy, employing about 65% of the labour force.²⁷ Somalia's economic activities are concentrated in Mogadishu, the capital, and security concerns continue to dominate business in the country.²⁸

Another concern in Somalia's economy is that it remains highly dollarised. According to the International Monetary Fund, about 90% of the currency in circulation in the economy is US dollars, which makes it difficult for the Central Bank of Somalia to establish an effective monetary policy.²⁹ The informal sector also dominates Somalia's economy, conducting market-value activities that could contribute to tax revenue and GDP if they were recorded correctly.³⁰ Its population lives below subsistence level and is largely engaged in small-scale business.³¹

The Institute for Security Studies African Futures notes that Somalia's economy has significant agricultural and livestock potential with 8.5 million hectares of arable land, but faces challenges from unstable weather, water scarcity and insecurity. This makes farmers vulnerable to drought and exacerbates food insecurity.³²

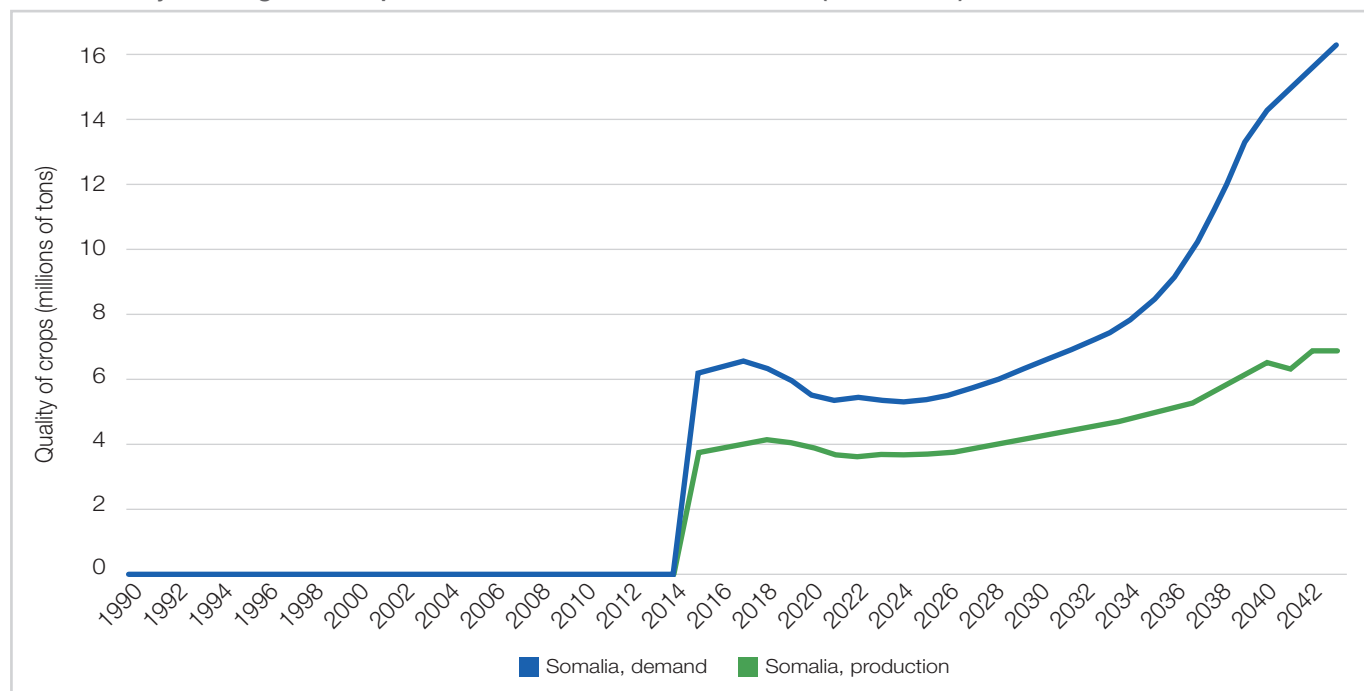
Political and legal challenges

Somalia's internal governance fragility poses a big challenge to EAC integration prospects. In 2004, Somalia's new constitution introduced federalism as a system of governance. This system has been criticised as being unfit for Somalia due to implementation challenges.³³ Federalism has often been seen as a system that accommodates ethnically diverse societies that have or continue to experience conflict, such as Somalia. The central government in Mogadishu continues to struggle with the overarching powers of the federal states of Puntland and Jubaland, which could hinder EAC integration. An ongoing constitutional process is debating Somalia's governance system.

Continued disputes by federal states, such as Puntland's 2024 announcement that it would no longer recognise the federal government, further complicate integration. One expert noted that 'such internal disagreements will complicate the coordination of national positions and the implementation of EAC functions.'³⁴

The verification mission also observed a challenge in Somalia's legal system. Somalia employs the Sharia system, which differs from the majority Common Law legal system of other EAC partner states. The supremacy

Chart 7: Projected agriculture production and demand in Somalia (1990–2043)



Source: <https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/countries/somalia/#economics>

of Sharia Law and Somalia's relations with Somaliland, which declared independence in 1991, and the self-governing Puntland, were major concerns for the verification mission and some EAC member states.³⁵ An economist observed that this may impede Somalia's harmonisation with EAC systems and thereby poses a challenge to Somalia's integration.³⁶

Security challenges

Among all the challenges, security remains the biggest concern for Somalia's integration into the EAC. The country continues to grapple with insecurity due to al-Shabaab, a terror organisation that controls large sections of Somalia. The threat of terror spillover has already been felt in neighbouring Kenya, and the EAC's free movement provision further threatens the spread of terror-related ideology and insurgency in the region. Somalia's historic clan-based dynamics, which have led to conflicts, also threaten EAC security.

Institutional and implementation challenges

The EAC verification mission report noted that Somalia 'lacks key institutions and agencies which are essential to spearhead and coordinate the implementation of critical aspects of the EAC integration agenda.'³⁷ This institutional gap will complicate Somalia's EAC integration process. The EAC's legal frameworks and harmonisation standards require states to implement the process of integration. Somalia will need to strengthen institutions to comply with EAC frameworks, such as the Customs Union, immigration policies that provide for EAC

passports and permits, trade-related policies, education accreditation and statistics reporting.

Somalia's complex federal structure presents another institutional challenge. The current disagreements within the federal states will complicate the process of short- to long-term EAC integration.³⁸ A case in point is Somalia's approach to nominating EALA members, which faced allegations of bribery and procedural irregularities in the selection of the nine MPs.³⁹ EAC structures require the nomination process to follow democratic principles, something that a section of Somalia's federal legislature argued had been contravened. This highlights the internal institutional weaknesses that could slow Somalia's EAC integration.

Conclusion

While there are significant benefits to Somalia's entry into the EAC, many challenges exist for the country to fully integrate into the bloc. The EAC stands to benefit economically and geostrategically from Somalia's accession but challenges such as security concerns, institutional weaknesses and fragile economic structures threaten the EAC's integration goals. Somalia's domestic institutional inadequacies must be addressed promptly to reap the benefits of regional integration. Integration is a long-term process that requires institutional readiness, political will and sustained commitment from partner states. While Somalia faces an uphill task, its positive attitude towards regional integration will be crucial in consolidating its membership within the bloc.

Notes

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