

An East African Federation Big ambitions, big question-marks

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The idea of a United States of East Africa is less far-fetched than it was

WHAT exactly is “East Africa” these days? Certainly, the parts of old British East Africa—Uganda, Tanzania (first a German colony) and Kenya. They have trodden very different paths since colonial days. Uganda has had coups, turmoil under Milton Obote, bloody convulsions under Idi Amin, and long spells of civil strife. Under Julius Nyerere, an incompetent or saintly authoritarian (depending on who you ask), Tanzania strove for a socialist ideal that kept its people plodding and poor but united and peaceful. Kenya was more dynamic and worldly, but more violent and corrupt. It may now be the least stable of the trio.



In 1967 these three founded the East African Community (EAC) with a view to federation. Little progress was made; the EAC collapsed in 1977, to general rejoicing among Kenyans, who reckoned they were carrying the other two. In 1999, however, the project was revived. In 2007 it even expanded to include Burundi and Rwanda. Many still doubt whether a European Union-style federation can ever be achieved in the region, despite the EAC’s promise to create a single currency by 2015 and to make a customs union work. But recent developments have made further integration more likely.

Tanzania has usually been the one to put the brakes on the EAC, fearing it will be overrun with land speculators and better-educated Kenyans and Ugandans. But Tanzania’s president, Jakaya Kikwete, now says his people should stop moaning and prepare for a common market. The head of Tanzania’s tiny stock exchange reckons there could be a single east African version in a few years. Work is already under way to create a common trading system.

If Tanzania has lagged behind, Uganda has usually encouraged the federal idea, not least because its president, Yoweri Museveni, has long nurtured a wish to end his career as the EAC’s first president.

Paul Kagame, president of tiny, landlocked Rwanda, is also keen to press ahead. His recent rapprochement with Congo, Rwanda’s vast, ramshackle neighbour to the west, was made in the hope of increasing trade via the fledgling EAC’s market. He is now intent on adding value to Congolese raw materials and shipping them to the world market through the EAC, too.

Congo’s government seems willing. China, by some counts the biggest investor in the region, plainly wants Congo’s timber, iron ore and other minerals shipped across the Indian Ocean via the EAC.

For that and other reasons, Kenya, for its part, wants to build a new deep-sea port near the island of Lamu, close to the border with Somalia. Kenyan officials have so far brushed aside concerns for the mangrove swamps and nearby marine sanctuary. They say the port, refinery and new city will be built on the mainland to preserve Lamu’s heritage and tourist industry. The hope is for roads and railways to Mogadishu, Addis

Ababa and Kigali and a pipeline bringing in Ugandan and south Sudanese oil. Funds would flow in from Kuwait and other Arab investors. This would link up east Africa as never before, and a single currency and a customs union would then make much more sense.

And why should an East African federation stop with the club's existing member countries? If defined by the area in which the lingua franca of the Swahili language is used, the range of lorries heading out of the Kenyan port of Mombasa, and the magnet of Nairobi as a hub, east Africa spreads into Ethiopia and includes a chunk of Somalia, a swathe of east Congo, a strip of northern Mozambique and all of southern Sudan, which could become an independent country in 2011, if its people vote in a promised referendum to secede.

The EAC already has 126m people. If it expands, it could add as many as 120m more to that number, making it more than twice as populous as Africa's 28 smallest countries combined—enough, its backers argue, to make a bigger EAC very attractive to foreign investors. The EAC says it would negotiate better deals with the rich world than individual African countries can.

Local businessmen are still sceptical. They argue that the EAC's dream of federation could be botched by a trade row, tribal violence or strangled at birth with red tape by venal politicians and bureaucrats. So the mood is mixed. Could east Africa take off as a regional trading bloc? Or will the idea disappointingly fizzle once again? An early test of the EAC's earnestness will be to see if it can get its member countries jointly to look after Lake Victoria, a common resource that scientists say has been overfished and poisoned by the sewage running off its overpopulated shores.

Questions:

1. What kind of trade bloc exists between the East African Community?
2. Who are the original member of the EAC?
3. Describe how the East African Community (EAC) has changed overtime?
4. What are the advantages of altering the EAC to become a customs union and common currency union, with a bigger population base, with nations such as Somalia, South Sudan and Congo?
5. What are the disadvantages of such a policy?