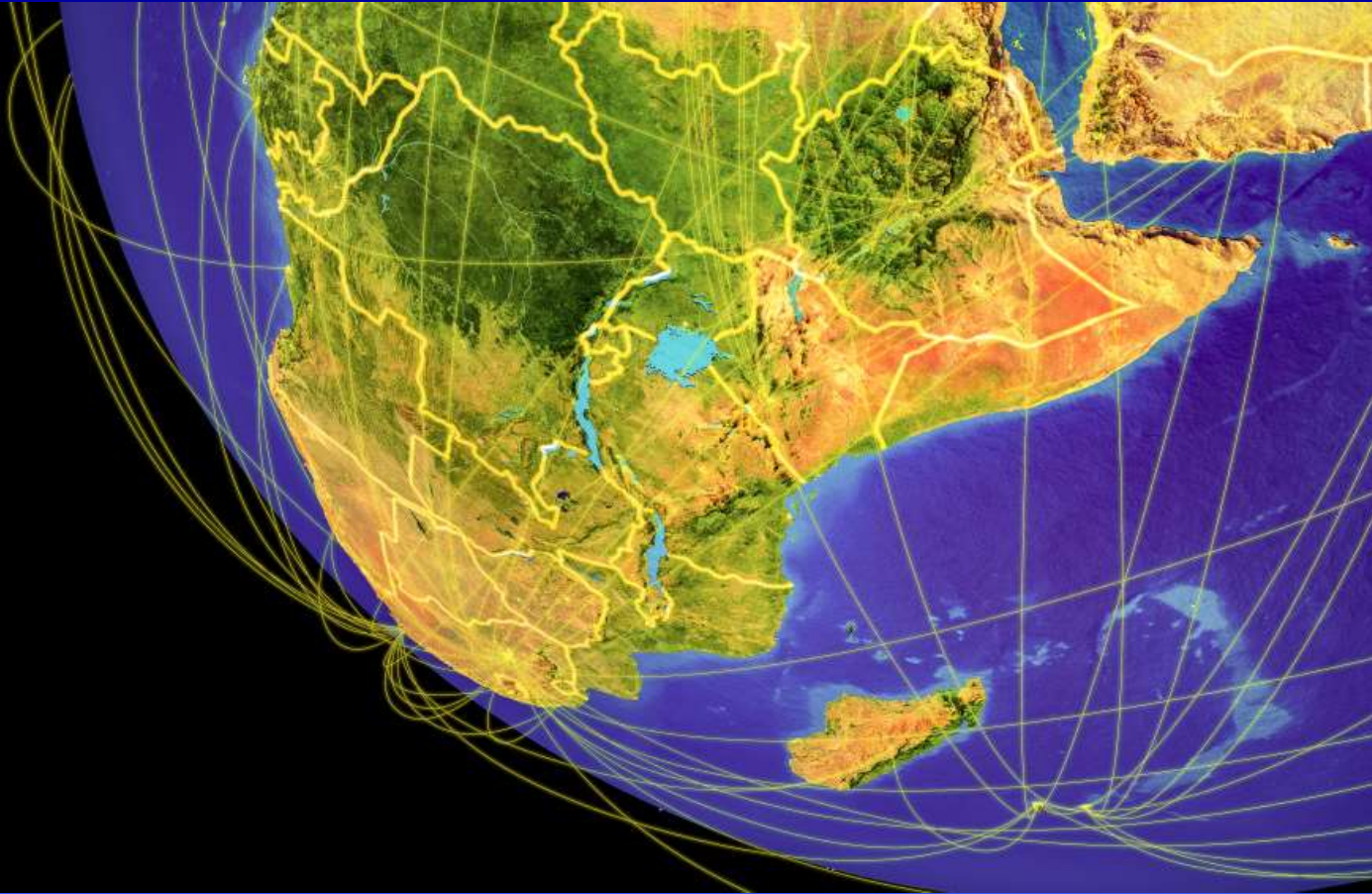# Wilton Park

Report: East Africa Strategic Horizons: Partnerships and Priorities

Wednesday 13 – Friday 15 March 2024

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In association with
The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

This report comes at a time of significant geopolitical and regional change across East Africa. The 'East Africa Strategic Horizons' exchange held at Wilton Park in March 2024, summarized in this report, sought to make sense of these seismic shifts, and to provide recommendations for future engagement and planning derived from evidence-based assessments of the trajectory of the region to 2030.

Bringing together experts from civil society, policy, international organizations and academia, this meeting considered plausible futures for East Africa through the prisms of conflict, climate change, and trade, in a transforming global context. This the beginning of an ongoing to discussion to support stakeholders in adopting more proactive and collaborative approaches to addressing systemic challenges, managing multiple acute crises, and providing pathways to sustainable development and regional stability.

Key themes

The need for sustained international attention and resources for crises in East Africa: There is a need to move beyond reactive responses to crises and towards the development of sustained attention and resourcing to address, and get ahead of, the challenges facing the region.

The increasing complexity of conflict dynamics: Conflicts within East Africa are increasingly fragmented and regionalized, challenging traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. The emergence of 'middle powers', such as the Gulf states, shifts traditional power dynamics and necessitates a recalibration of strategic approaches.

Towards an agenda of 'mini-multilateralism': In the context of the rising complexity of regional crises, concerns persist regarding the capacity of regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC) to intervene in these crises alongside multilateral organizations such as the United Nations. There is a need for reforms tailored to East Africa's unique challenges and opportunities which engage in more agile, context-sensitive policy and programming. Deepening localization is an important, and often overlooked, requirement of these reforms.

Climate change as a cross-cutting issue: East Africa faces cascading climate-related challenges, including food insecurity, disease outbreaks, displacement, migration, and conflict. This underscores the urgency of comprehensive

climate resilience strategies. The region grapples with limited space for resilience-building efforts amidst persistent crises, necessitating innovative solutions and proactive measures. East Africa must prioritize dedicated climate financing separate from development funding to address the unique challenges posed by climate change in the region.

Safeguarding humanitarian access: Norms surrounding humanitarian access are under threat in East Africa and in the wider global landscape, necessitating concerted efforts to uphold humanitarian principles and ensure access to vulnerable populations.

Promoting South-South trade and trade integration: Facilitating South-South trade partnerships can unlock economic opportunities and foster mutual development among East African countries and other emerging economies. East Africa must prioritize comprehensive trade integration efforts beyond the removal of barriers to foster sustainable economic growth and regional cooperation.

Context

Projections of East Africa's path to 2030 will always be informed by the past. The East African region is facing several compounding and cascading challenges, emerging from both within and outside the region. By some estimates, the Horn of Africa is seeing the most significant political change since the early 1990s, which combined current and unfolding crises may result in development reversals.

There are a number of daunting and interlocking challenges facing the region between 2024-2030. The war in Sudan that broke out in April 2023 is an urgent issue, only increasing in its severity and implications for the region. Ongoing and expanding conflict dynamics in Ethiopia and increased geopolitical tensions across the Red Sea continue to be a focal point for political tension and humanitarian concern. Climate-induced shocks, such as cyclical drought, famine and flooding raise acute humanitarian needs for populations least able to recover. And at the precise moment where humanitarian needs across East Africa are at their most acute, international attention and resources are often directed to other important global crises.

Underlying these contemporary challenges there are deep-seated historical and political concerns in the *long durée* that frustrate attempts at greater levels of cooperation and solidarity across the region. These have to do with diverging colonial and post-colonial histories, contested understandings of the community and the nation, and the histories of autocratic leadership.

Facing these monumental challenges is a task that will occupy East African states, communities and international actors alike well past 2030, but there must be a start. There remain opportunities to bring together development, political, and economic levers to strengthen the cooperation of East African states with one another, and with international partners.

Preparing for the future: options for action

In a global context defined by multiple international crises, and with the increasing politicization of aid funding, it is difficult to sustain focus and resources on challenges in the region. The contemporary politics of managing the 'crisis of the day' as it arises prevent action on emerging issues before they deepen or reach boiling point. A key challenge is how actors can ensure that political and humanitarian crises, such as the war in Sudan, remain at the center of international attention and receive the critical resources needed to be addressed.

The proposals outlined below provide options for action that can help to unlock regional and international cooperation towards crisis management and sustainable economic and political development.

Strengthening multilateralism and institutions

Encouraging regional diplomatic architectures that support international actors to engage coherently throughout the region. It is important for international actors to speak with a coherent voice, and to engage concerns about political, social, and economic challenges in a joined-up manner across portfolios.

Build 'mini-multilateralism', bringing together actors with different views, interests, and capabilities for short- to medium-term planning around specific events, enabling agile, all- encompassing cooperation. There is a need for stronger multilateralism that avoids competing efforts to counter the many challenges the region will face leading to 2030 and

beyond. Cross-cutting partnerships bringing together peace, security, and economic priorities are necessary to face the challenges of the future.

Identify opportunities for common efforts in some contexts. Multilateral actors and bilateral partners must develop strategies to understand and engage with the 'non-traditional actors' in East Africa. These include new 'middle powers' such as Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE, but also Russia and China, whose impact through material engagement in the political space in East Africa is significant.

Engage on the capacity of regional organizations, such as IGAD, and opportunities for reform and support. In the case of the United Nations, the Summit of the Future is an opportunity to determine how to better engage with actors across the political and development divide.

Collaboration and coherence

Create cross-regional and thematic portfolios that better reflect the region's identity, relations and change. As the East African region becomes increasingly embedded in global politics, it is important for international actors to find ways to become more agile while also overcoming silos. Knowledge silos, compartmentalized in 'Africa briefs' and 'Middle East briefs', for example, risk creating gaps in analysis and action.

Identify areas of mutual interest under which a coherent 'East African identity' can continue to emerge. These include issues such as the management of ungoverned spaces, countering violent extremism (CVE), climate change and its

impacts, and food insecurity. While collective action in terms of politicized and sensitive issues such as maritime security may be less easy to achieve, there is latitude to develop cross-cutting dialogues to face these common and transboundary issues. Examples of forums that do this work include the Horn of Africa Initiative. Learning from these initiatives for new development partners could assist in wider collaboration across the critical concerns mentioned above.

Develop institutions that are flexible, but also support holistic action across diplomatic, trade, and development portfolios. It is imperative to bring together trade and development agendas. An underexplored mechanism is the critical role of the private sector, as private actors can play a role in helping to maintain stability and promoting economic development throughout the region. In both Somalia and Kenya, the private sector actively engages with the political class in meaningful ways. Capturing these discussions through policy dialogues, decision-making processes and public-private partnerships can produce constructive outcomes.

Facilitate cross-border management of critical resources, such as water. In locations such as the Mandera triangle (the geographic area where Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya meet) there are deep opportunities for actors to collaborate around common risks and interests. While initiatives on developing access to deep ground water resources do exist (World Bank, UN, among others), there are limited linkages between them, and these could be brought together as a regional initiative. Developing opportunities for

the common pursuit of critical issues can deepen regionalization, increase resilience to climate-induced shocks, and increase prosperity for populations across these common borders.

Reduce regional barriers to trade and encourage regional connectivity, including through infrastructure projects. Development and diplomatic efforts can support the growth of partnerships that increase trade between the region's two largest economies (Kenya and Ethiopia) and critical infrastructure partnerships, which could be key wins for all parties. Regional connectivity involves not only physical infrastructure but also people-to-people connections. This could include youth exchange programs, cultural and professional exchanges, and other cross-border engagements.

Deepening localization

Develop a connective tissue between the local and international. International priorities need to engage regional objectives, but they must also find relevance with the communities in contention. Narrowing the gap between those 'influenced' and those 'influencing' is essential. Affected communities can no longer be conceptualized as simple 'beneficiaries' of programmes, but instead understood as the drivers and definers of their own futures. Civil society and constituencies outside of state and civil society must be front and centre in determining priorities. Customary and religious leaders, who have long been relied upon to mediate crises, are also a necessary part of creating political legitimacy for reform

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coalitions. Developing a connective tissue between the local and international requires an ethic of leveraging existing capacities, understanding intergroup relations, establishing political buy-in, and co-designing frameworks that will outlive any one project.

Engage and rely upon information from communities on the ground, including specialists such as African academics, to strengthen and broaden understandings about needs and possibilities for engagement. It is important not to rely solely on information and expertise generated outside of the region, but to support existing institutions with the capacity to generate critical local knowledge and priorities, as the erosion of norms of humanitarian access in conflict-affected areas has had the compounding effect of reducing timely knowledge about the scope of complex catastrophes.

Empower local business solutions and engage in dialogue with the private sector, as sustainable economic development and conflict prevention priorities. In Kenya and Somalia, the private sector is critical for the maintenance of stability and engages with the political class. Meaningful engagement with the private sector actors can support political and economic development priorities.

Structure engagement of diaspora groups in humanitarian aid, political stability work, and development initiatives. This can be developed as part of a wider coalition. It is critical to engage diaspora finance alongside the local business community, which enhances the

likelihood of success for collaboration and strategic partnerships.

Responding to climate change

Centre climate change adaptation as a priority across portfolios, and not as a siloed concern. Climate change is a cross-cutting issue in East Africa, affecting everything from humanitarian priorities to conflict agendas. It is important to understand how communities experience and understand climate issues, which may be different from international partners, for example as discrete issues (such as food security, displacement, flooding, and locusts).

Develop longer-term flexible funding systems, with a higher level of risk tolerance. This is critical for local communities to see the benefit of their work. The twin concerns of resourcing and implementation continue to be impediments to the attainment of adaptation systems. Access to climate finance is critical. However, climate finance should not be repurposed development funding under a new name.

Increase implementation and better use of existing systems. There already exist functional and accurate Early Warning Systems in the region, but the challenge is to motivate political will and resourcing in sufficient time to make a difference. The difficulties in implementation and adaptation in the region require comprehensive analysis and urgent action.

Defining the challenge to 2030: conflict, climate change, and trade integration

The options for action above were grounded in analysis and evidence presented during plenary discussions. The East African region has seen marked political and social transformations in recent decades. Africa is a remarkably young continent, with some 70% of the population under the age of 30. Without adequate work, African youth often find themselves in circumstances of 'waithood' where 'youth not only wait for economic development, they wait for maturation and growth in their own lives, as they struggle to attain normative expectations for the life course and become adults' (Stasik et al, 2020, 1). East Africa is also rapidly urbanizing, which poses challenges such as informal employment, inadequate infrastructure, and urban poverty. With these demographic and spatial shifts as a backdrop, the region is facing challenges across issues of state stability, climate change, and economic development.

State stability and conflict trends

"The architectures of regional cooperation are no longer fit for purpose and therefore require new thinking and investment."

There have been important structural transformations to East African states that are important to consider. In Sudan and Ethiopia, hegemonic orders that were consolidated over the course of three decades have been contested and even upended. Armed conflict in these countries have raised concerns about the impacts on neighbouring countries and the wider region, particularly as people take refuge in neighbouring countries that are ill equipped to manage their acute humanitarian needs. The steady erosion of humanitarian

access norms has also been part and parcel of the increasing complexity of conflict in the region. It is important to consider the ways that conflict dynamics in East Africa have been characterized by the parallel trends of fragmentation and regionalization, and the consequences of this for pathways to peace.

Fragmentation can be understood as the increasing proliferation of armed groups, and the advancement of conflict dynamics to previously unaffected regions. Rapid state decay encourages the growth of ungoverned spaces, ethnic polarization, and difficulty in predicting conflict lines. In Sudan, fragmentation manifests as the proliferation of militias and armed groups, representing political, religious, or even displaced constituencies. In Ethiopia, fragmentation manifests as ethnic polarization, where elite actors within ethnic groups are fragmented within their own constituencies. This creates concerns for the possibilities of peace, as there are few elites with enough influence to appreciably bring violence to an end. Elite fragmentation can lead to further externalization and regionalization of conflict dynamics, as fragmented actors can more easily find support across borders for their own agendas.

The regionalization of conflict in East Africa has led to an increasing protractedness of conflict patterns, narrowing options for peaceful resolution. There are concerning signs that South Sudan could be pulled into the Sudanese war theatre, particularly as some 60-75% of the country's oil revenues have been disrupted due to the Sudanese conflict (Wilton Park, 2024). Transitional processes in South Sudan,

including constitutional review and multiparty elections, are being frustrated by the increasing enmeshment of South Sudanese political elites into conflict dynamics in Sudan, putting an already fragile situation at even greater risk of outbreak of violence.

The regionalization of conflict can also be catalysed by engagements with actors farther afield, as East Africa is embedded in the politics of the Red Sea. Rising international tensions and crises have direct consequences for the stability of East African states reliant on imports of food to feed their populations. Populations in East Africa are extremely vulnerable to spiking food prices and scarcity.

As the Red Sea region faces increased insecurity due to the reverberations of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, similar questions about the reliability of food imports arise. Ethiopia's pursuit of access to the Red Sea, most recently seen in the controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the self-declared breakaway state of Somaliland, demonstrates the importance of control and access in this critical region. Indeed, there remains the possibility that these demands for Ethiopian Red Sea access may trigger further conflict, including potentially renewed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Key to these trends is the increase in multipolar geopolitical competition globally, and the growing engagement of 'non-traditional actors' in East Africa, including Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In some

analyses, the Horn of Africa is best understood as part of the 'wider Middle East' as much as Africa. These regional actors have historically acted both as mediators and created challenges for the peaceful reconciliation of conflict. The political economy of warfare is a case in point, where the UAE has interests in Sudan, including parties to the conflict and exports. Other international actors, such as Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are also important actors in the region. As an increasing number of international actors, including China and Russia, have come to view the East African region as a strategic location for investment and competition, it is important to develop strategies to engage and work effectively on common priorities.

The growing complexity of conflict dynamics in the region has reduced the impact of regional organizations and regional cooperation. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has played an important role in conflict mediation and resolution in the region in the past, but has faced difficulty navigating the politics and interests at play in current conflicts. Indeed, IGAD played a significant role in conflict mediation processes in South Sudan, but there are concerns that the increase in the number of external actors involved may lower the efficacy of future interventions if South Sudan were to experience significant instability or conflict. There is significant concern that the architectures of regional cooperation are no longer fit for purpose and therefore require new thinking and investment.

Climate change

Climate change has inflicted severe outcomes on East Africa, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and challenging socio-economic development. The Sixth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) argues that 'the most vulnerable people and systems have been disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change' (IPCC, 2023), with East Africa considered a 'global hotspot of high human vulnerability' (IPCC, 2023). Extreme weather events such as floods and cyclones have become more frequent, causing widespread damage to infrastructure, and disrupting livelihoods.

There are three significant challenges emerging from climate change in the region: food insecurity, disease, and conflict and displacement. Some 80% of people in East Africa rely on agriculture for food, and between rising temperatures and crop failures, an estimated 50% of people in the region are at risk of food crisis (Wilton Park, 2024). As temperatures continue to rise, the geographic scope of those vulnerable to malaria and Rift Valley Fever is expected to increase. Increased temperatures and changing precipitation patterns have led to prolonged droughts, desertification, and water scarcity, adversely affecting agriculture, livestock, and food security.

The impacts of climate change have already been felt in the region, manifested through humanitarian crises and mass displacement. Climate-induced shocks exacerbate existing social tensions and increase the likelihood of the outbreak of

violence. Transboundary resources like water, access to pasture, and land rights continue to be the source of political and social instability.

This region already prone to conflict has witnessed heightened tensions over dwindling resources and exacerbating existing humanitarian crises. While all communities are affected by climate change, marginalized constituencies within those communities are impacted in acute ways. Girls face a higher risk of child marriage due to economic insecurity, curtailing educational attainment and possibilities for social mobility. On a rapidly urbanizing continent, the growing communities of urban poor may lack the social protection of the countryside, while also lacking access to urban services. However, the largest impact of climate change is felt by those displaced by flooding or drought, and IGAD estimates 10% of the region's population to be at risk of climate-related displacement. This significant amount of human mobility of those with acute humanitarian needs places pressures on host cities and regions.

"It is critical to ensure that economic development priorities centre the need for sustainable, local markets for food."

These compounding challenges erode the region's ability to recover. Where cyclical crises emerge one after the other (communal conflict, locusts, drought, flooding), communities are overwhelmed by the scale of the challenges and the resources required to adapt. Taken together, impacts of climate change pose significant challenges to the resilience and sustainability of communities in the Horn of Africa and

East Africa, necessitating urgent adaptation and mitigation efforts to safeguard lives and ecosystems.

Economic trends: trade integration and preferential access

Climate change and emerging risks of political instability can block much needed economic transformation. Political instability and violent conflict disrupt economic livelihoods and destroy essential infrastructure. Put simply, conflict is costly. According to the World Bank's Ethiopia Damage and Needs Assessment (2022), Ethiopia's conflict costs between 2020-2021 had already been estimated at some 'US$22.69 billion, while the total reconstruction and recovery needs are estimated at about US $19.73 billion.' The World Bank found evidence of widespread damage spread across social sectors (such as health, housing, and education), productive sectors (agriculture, industry, and finance) and infrastructure (transport, energy, water, sanitation & hygiene, and information & communication technology) among many others. This demonstrates the material impact of conflict on communities, and the need to address holistically the economic and political consequences of armed conflict.

There has been hope that increased regional trade facilitated through the East African Community (EAC) and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) could help bolster economic transformation in the region. However, despite strong economic growth in some countries, the increase in trade growth has yet to fully materialize. While the EAC leads the continent in its trade integration ambitions

(promising free trade, a customs union, a common market, and even a common currency), official figures still note only 15% of intra-regional trade, which is below the continental average of 18% (Wilton Park, 2024). With the accession of conflict-affected states to the EAC, such as South Sudan and Somalia, there remain concerns about the feasibility of full implementation. However, informal trade across borders, not captured by these data points, is much likely higher than reported. This can create exploitative contexts, such as the export of primary products produced in conflict-affected countries by business interests in neighbouring countries.

Preferential market access schemes to high income economies, such as the United States' African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the United Kingdom's Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) have not had the material impact that had been hoped.

Food insecurity cuts across the challenges of climate change, violent conflict, and economic transformation. The high dependence on food imports in countries such as Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Burundi renders communities vulnerable to external shocks and political crises. Inflation is a significant concern for the region, spiking significantly due to supply issues following the COVID-19 pandemic and remaining high due to a combination of international and local factors. For countries with high dependence on food imports, it may be important to focus on

ways to lower tariffs and make access to food cheaper as larger projects for food sufficiency are underway.

Agricultural production for export has negative impacts on local food security, as agricultural resources are diverted for cash crops. A study of the impact on export incentives in Kenya and Uganda on food security and availability found 'substantial resource allocation and distributional effects' as 'export crops such as oilseeds and other cash crops expand at the expense of the food crop sector' (Aragie et al, 2023, 6). While the overall impact of agricultural exports on African food availability will continue to be debated, it is critical to ensure that economic development priorities centre the need for sustainable, local markets for food.

Conclusion

"There are important and practicable agendas that regional partners share upon which collaboration can be built."

The multifaceted challenges confronting East Africa demand a comprehensive and collaborative approach that overcomes silos and prioritizes values, strategic partnerships, and innovative solutions.

In the context of deepening crises across East Africa, delegates emphasized the importance of common values in deepening international partnerships and developing common visions. Successive international crises have eroded long-established international norms, as well as the mechanisms that exist to protect them. Unimpeded access for humanitarian aid, information and press access, and diplomatic access is not just a moral imperative but a critical

component for addressing the region's myriad of challenges, including conflict, displacement, and food insecurity.

Values such as respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law serve as fundamental pillars for stability, prosperity, and sustainable development in the region. Efforts to counter the erosion of these norms must be prioritized through diplomatic engagement, advocacy, and concerted action by the international community to ensure that aid reaches those who need it most, without obstruction or delay.

It is clear that there need to be changing international responses to the shifting needs in the region. The increasing complexity of political dynamics requires flexible and agile responses, and more connected thinking among international actors. More flexible financing strategies for climate adaptation, flexible development partnerships that engage across the social spectrum, and flexible responses to crises are crucial. This can be accomplished through platforms that bring together regional actors, donors – old and newly established – to draw on communal priorities and develop regional agendas. While the East African region faces significant challenges in the near horizon, there are important and practicable agendas that regional partners share upon which collaboration can be built: countering violent extremism and promoting state stability, facing climate-induced challenges and managing adaptation, and promoting economic prosperity and trade integration.

Dr. Surer Qassim Mohamed
Wilton Park | 29 May 2024

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