

The Geostrategic Importance of Tanzania in the Great Lakes Region: An Overview of Security and Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article acknowledges and appreciates the previous work entitled “The Geostrategic Significance of Tanzania in the Great Lakes Region: A security Concern,” which was published in the international journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR), volume 7, issue 4, July – August 2025. And builds upon and expands that foundation, offering a broader analysis within a different contextual framework. Therefore, it analyzes the strategic implications of Tanzania’s regional engagement, focusing on its roles in conflict mediation, peacekeeping, border security, maritime governance, and counterterrorism. It also critically assesses policy gaps such as weak institutional coordination, inadequate border management, insufficient maritime security infrastructure, and the lack of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. The article concludes by offering policy recommendations to enhance Tanzania’s security posture, including the establishment of a National Security Council, integration of human security into national policy, and deeper engagement in regional security frameworks. Ultimately, Tanzania’s stability and proactive diplomacy are pivotal not only for its national security but for the broader peace and development trajectory of the Great Lakes Region.

Keywords: Geostrategy, Great Lakes Region, Tanzania, Regional Liberation, Security, Diplomacy, Geopolitics.

1. Introduction

Tanzania’s geostrategic importance within the Great Lakes Region stems from its unique historical legacy, geographic centrality, and enduring role in regional peace and security efforts (Smith, 2020; Nyerere Institute, 2018). Since independence in 1961, Tanzania has been a key actor in promoting stability across East and Central Africa through its foundational foreign policy of non-alignment, Pan-Africanism, and support for liberation movements (Mwakikagile, 2014). As a frontline state during Cold War-era conflicts and subsequent humanitarian crises, particularly the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath, Tanzania has consistently served as a sanctuary, mediator, and peacekeeping contributor in a volatile regional environment (Reyntjens, 2009; UNHCR, 1996).

Geopolitically, Tanzania’s position bordering eight states, several of which are conflict-prone renders it simultaneously a buffer zone and a potential conduit for security threats, including cross-border insurgencies, refugee influxes, arms trafficking, and violent extremism (African Union, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2022). Its dual membership in the East African Community (EAC) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) further enhances its diplomatic leverage but also

requires careful balancing amid shifting regional alliances and security agendas (EAC Secretariat, 2019; SADC, 2020).

2. Tanzania's Post-Independence Role in Regional Liberation and Security

The geostrategic importance of Tanzania within the Great Lakes Region is deeply rooted in the historical evolution of the region's political and security dynamics, which have been marked by liberation struggles, Cold War rivalries, state formation, and protracted conflict. Situated at the crossroads of East and Central Africa, Tanzania's geographic location alone lends it strategic relevance. However, it is the country's political orientation and historical actions particularly since gaining independence that have firmly entrenched its role as a key regional actor (Mwagiru, 2014; Adebajo, 2020).

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1961 under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, Tanzania adopted a foreign policy grounded in non-alignment, Pan-African solidarity, and strong support for liberation movements across Southern Africa. These pillars did not merely reflect ideological commitments but also shaped the country's diplomatic identity and strategic posture in regional affairs (Shivji, 2009). This orientation positioned Tanzania as a moral and political anchor in a region torn by colonial legacies, apartheid regimes, and Cold War proxy conflicts. By choosing solidarity over neutrality in liberation efforts, Tanzania entrenched itself as a state willing to absorb political risk in service of continental decolonization and African unity. Consequently, this early post-independence foreign policy laid the foundation for Tanzania's enduring involvement in regional security matters (Mazrui & Wondji, 1993; Chachage, 2004).

In the aftermath of independence, Tanzania did more than verbally support liberation causes; it actively emerged as a sanctuary for liberation movements, providing material, political, and logistical support to exiled leaders and guerrilla fighters from countries such as South Africa (ANC), Mozambique (FRELIMO), Zimbabwe (ZANU-PF), and Namibia (SWAPO) (Legum, 1981; Phimister & Raftopoulos, 2004). By hosting these groups, Tanzania became a central node in the regional anti-colonial resistance network. This strategic and ideological alignment placed the country at the intersection of Cold War geopolitics and the African struggle for liberation, attracting both admiration and criticism on the global stage (Selassie, 1996). As a result, Tanzania occasionally became a target of regional instability and external interference, particularly from regimes and actors opposed to the liberation movements it supported. These tensions made the country vulnerable to covert sabotage, diplomatic isolation by some Western-aligned regimes, and entanglements in the broader ideological contest between the Eastern and Western blocs (Westad, 2007).

Tanzania's involvement in regional security became more pronounced during the Uganda-Tanzania War of 1978–1979, a turning point that illustrated a shift from passive solidarity to active military engagement. When Ugandan forces, under Idi Amin, invaded Tanzanian territory, President Nyerere responded with a decisive military campaign that culminated in the toppling of Amin's regime (Avirgan & Honey, 1983). This unprecedented act of regional intervention was significant not only in military terms but also in shaping the norms of African security cooperation. It demonstrated Tanzania's commitment to collective security and regional stability, asserting that state sovereignty could be challenged when it became a threat to peace. However, this bold stance came at a cost, straining relations with some neighboring states and revealing the geopolitical risks of direct military action in a region characterized by fragile interstate trust and divergent security doctrines (Baregu, 2002).

The post-Cold War period introduced new regional crises that tested Tanzania's capacity for humanitarian

diplomacy and security management. Following the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 and the subsequent Great Lakes refugee crisis, Tanzania found itself on the frontline of a humanitarian emergency of continental proportions. The country bore the brunt of massive refugee inflows, particularly into the Kagera and Kigoma regions, as hundreds of thousands fled violence and political collapse in Rwanda and Burundi (UNHCR, 1996). This influx presented significant security challenges, including the proliferation of small arms, the emergence of cross-border insurgencies, and mounting economic and social strain on already vulnerable host communities (International Crisis Group, 2000). Critically, the presence of armed elements among refugees notably from the ex-Rwandan government forces (ex-FAR) and Interahamwe militia—led to the militarization of refugee camps, particularly along the western border. These developments raised security alarms for Tanzania and the wider region, as the distinction between humanitarian refuge and political asylum became blurred, and camps risked becoming launching pads for cross-border violence (Prunier, 2009).

Despite these challenges, Tanzania has remained a key player in peacekeeping operations, mediation efforts, and regional diplomacy, carving out a reputation as a credible and neutral broker in some of Africa's most intractable conflicts. Notably, Tanzania hosted the Arusha Peace Accords for Rwanda in 1993, which sought to resolve the escalating civil war between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Habyarimana regime. Similarly, it played a central role in the Burundi peace process, culminating in the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in 2000, which ended years of ethnic conflict and civil war (Daley, 2006; Curtis, 2012). Tanzania's reputation as a diplomatic hub was further reinforced by its contributions to multilateral peace operations, including its participation in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (United Nations, 2020). Through these engagements, Tanzania has positioned itself as a stabilizing force in the volatile Great Lakes Region, one that leverages historical legitimacy, diplomatic neutrality, and regional cooperation to influence peace trajectories.

3. Geographic Centrality and Regional Security Dynamics

Tanzania occupies a strategically critical position at the nexus of East and Central Africa, sharing borders with eight countries Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (via Lake Tanganyika), Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Kenya which places it at the heart of regional security concerns, refugee flows, trade routes, and transnational threats (CIA, 2025; Geography of Tanzania) .

The Great Lakes Region is marked by a complex web of ethnic, political, and economic tensions, with persistent instability in eastern DRC, inter-ethnic conflict in Burundi, and unresolved political dynamics in South Sudan and parts of Uganda. These overlapping crises form a volatile security belt around Tanzania, generating displaced populations, informal cross-border trade, illicit trafficking, and armed incursions. Such dynamics require robust border security, regional cooperation, and adaptive foreign policy strategies (Foreign Relations of Tanzania; Maritime Security Concerns of the East African Community).

Tanzania's access to the Indian Ocean via the Port of Dar es Salaam further enhances its geostrategic value, making it a critical transit hub for landlocked neighboring countries. This coastal access is economically advantageous, and it handles over 90% of national cargo traffic but also exposes the country to maritime security threats such as smuggling, piracy, and illegal fishing. These risks underscore Tanzania's importance in the broader Western Indian Ocean security framework (IMO, 2024; UNDP, 2024; Wikipedia – Port of Dar es Salaam).

At the regional level, Tanzania is a founding member of both the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), positioning it as a political and economic bridge between East and Southern Africa. Yet, its cautious stance toward EAC military integration and preference for multilateral diplomacy over aggressive security alliances reveal a deliberate balancing act in a competitive geopolitical environment (Foreign Relations of Tanzania)

Additionally, Tanzania's relative internal political stability, particularly when compared to its neighbors, has made it the preferred venue for international diplomatic engagements and peace negotiations. The city of Arusha stands out as a symbolic and functional hub for landmark peace processes, further enhancing Tanzania's diplomatic profile.

However, this strategic position also brings risks. Tanzania's porous borders are vulnerable to cross-border terrorism, trafficking, and insurgent group movements. The presence of extremist cells affiliated with Al-Shabaab and the spillover of violence from Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province into southern Tanzania complicate its security landscape (India–Tanzania maritime ties).

In recent years, the discovery of significant natural gas reserves in southern Tanzania and the construction of major infrastructure projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) and the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) have added economic and strategic depth to Tanzania's regional role. These developments have elevated the protection of critical infrastructure and supply chains to a national and regional security priority.

4. Tanzania's Strategic Role in Regional Security and Diplomacy

Tanzania's geostrategic location within the Great Lakes Region presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities with significant implications for regional security, diplomacy, and foreign policy alignment. Its position as a relatively stable actor in a region marked by protracted conflicts places it at the crossroads of regional stabilization efforts, humanitarian diplomacy, and multilateral security cooperation.

4.1 Regional Security Buffer and Conflict Spillover Risk

Tanzania serves as a geopolitical buffer between the unstable Great Lakes conflict zones and the economically strategic Indian Ocean corridor. Its extended borders with conflict-affected neighbors Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) render it highly susceptible to multidimensional threats. These include:

- Militant incursions in Tanzania's Kigoma and Kagera regions, enabled by dense terrain and weak surveillance infrastructure (ISS, 2024), expose critical gaps in border security. These areas serve as potential entry points for insurgent groups from neighboring conflict zones, posing risks of arms trafficking and regional destabilization. Addressing this requires enhanced surveillance technology, cross-border intelligence cooperation, and greater community engagement to strengthen early warning and resilience.
- Refugee inflows, which have become quasi-permanent due to prolonged conflicts in Burundi and eastern DRC, present complex security and social challenges for Tanzania. These flows frequently include ex-combatants or politically mobilized individuals, creating risks of militarization in camps and tensions with host communities (UNHCR, 2023). Such dynamics not only strain local resources and governance structures but also risk turning refugee settlements into sites of recruitment, arms smuggling, or political agitation. Without stronger screening mechanisms, long-term integration

strategies, and enhanced collaboration with regional and international partners, these camps may evolve from humanitarian spaces into security liabilities.

- Illicit arms trafficking, human smuggling, and contraband trade facilitated by the porous nature of the borders and under-resourced customs institutions point to deep structural weaknesses in Tanzania's border management system. These illicit activities not only undermine national security but also fuel regional instability by empowering criminal networks and armed groups (RECSA, 2022). The lack of adequate surveillance, personnel, and infrastructure allows these networks to operate with relative impunity, eroding state authority in frontier regions. Without significant investment in border control capabilities, inter-agency coordination, and regional intelligence-sharing, these threats are likely to persist and expand

This fragile environment forces Tanzania to adopt a dual security strategy: strengthening traditional border security (military/policing) while enhancing humanitarian resilience mechanisms in refugee-hosting regions. The consistent deployment of forces in Kigoma and the construction of border posts reflect a calculated effort to maintain territorial integrity (Chatham House, 2024). However, this also diverts resources from development goals, creating a security development trade-off in these frontier regions.

Moreover, the spillover risk is not just kinetic it also carries ideological and economic contagion. Protracted instability in neighboring states can fuel radicalization, criminal entrepreneurship, and economic displacement, especially among youth in marginalized Tanzanian border areas.

4.2 Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation Hub

Tanzania's ability to maintain neutrality amid regional tensions has enhanced its diplomatic capital and positioned it as a trusted facilitator of peace:

- **The 1993 Arusha Accords for Rwanda** marked Tanzania's early involvement in regional diplomacy, although the agreements were undermined by the 1994 genocide (Wikipedia, 2025). This early engagement highlighted Tanzania's willingness to facilitate peace in a volatile region, establishing its role as a neutral mediator. However, the failure of the accords to prevent genocide also revealed the limitations of diplomatic efforts in the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms and international backing. It underscores the need for Tanzania's mediation efforts to be paired with stronger regional and international coordination to ensure that peace agreements translate into durable outcomes on the ground.
- **The Agreement for Burundi** showcased Tanzania's ability to host long, contentious negotiations and produce durable frameworks for reconciliation (IRIN News, 2016). This highlights Tanzania's credibility as a neutral ground for peace processes and its diplomatic capacity to manage complex, multi-actor negotiations. The success of the Burundian peace talks reflects not only Tanzania's regional influence but also its strategic use of soft power in conflict resolution. However, sustaining such achievements requires continued political will, institutional support, and alignment with regional and international actors to ensure that peace frameworks are implemented and resilient to relapse.
- **The 2015–2019 Inter-Burundi Dialogue** reaffirmed Tanzania's centrality in East African diplomacy, leveraging its leadership within the EAC and its reputation for non-alignment (EastAfrican, 2015). This role demonstrated Tanzania's continued relevance as a stabilizing force in regional politics and its ability to facilitate dialogue amidst political polarization. By offering a neutral platform, Tanzania reinforced its image as a trusted mediator. However, the limited outcomes of the dialogue also point to the challenges of balancing diplomatic neutrality with the need for assertive engagement, especially when mediating protracted internal conflicts with deep-rooted political divisions.

These efforts reflect Tanzania's underlying doctrine of "peace through facilitation," which emphasizes inclusive dialogue and prioritizes African-led solutions over externally imposed frameworks. Arusha, as the recurring venue for major peace negotiations, has come to symbolize this diplomatic ethos. Its status is further reinforced by hosting key continental institutions such as the East African Community (EAC) Secretariat and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, positioning Tanzania as a cornerstone of African multilateral diplomacy.

However, this diplomatic stature is not without its costs. The credibility of Tanzania's neutrality hinges on a delicate balance that requires disciplined domestic governance, a coherent and principled foreign policy, and careful distancing from shifting regional power dynamics. Any perceived partisanship such as overt alignment with specific regimes or factions' risks eroding the trust that underpins its mediator role. Thus, sustaining this leadership requires constant recalibration to protect Tanzania's legitimacy as a neutral and reliable broker in regional peace processes.

4.3 Role in Regional Security Mechanisms

Tanzania's dual membership in the EAC and SADC grants it significant leverage as a regional connector but also forces it into complex diplomatic balancing acts.

- Within the EAC, Tanzania has been more reserved about deeper military integration. It has favored gradualism and sovereignty preservation, occasionally clashing with Uganda's and Rwanda's more assertive security postures (Chatham House, 2024). This cautious approach stems from a belief that premature militarization could exacerbate tensions in a region still grappling with trust deficits and historical grievances.
- In contrast, within the SADC, Tanzania has been more active militarily. It contributed troops to the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) under the UN MONUSCO mission, tasked with neutralizing armed groups in eastern DRC. More recently, Tanzania's participation in SAMIM (Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique) illustrates its willingness to engage when multilateral legitimacy and strategic interests converge (ISS, 2024). This active military involvement signals a pragmatic shift from Tanzania's traditionally cautious approach to security interventions, reflecting recognition of the direct threats posed by instability in neighboring states. It also highlights Tanzania's strategic calculation to leverage regional partnerships to enhance its security influence while mitigating risks associated with unilateral action. However, such engagements require careful management to balance domestic public opinion and regional diplomatic relationships, ensuring that military involvement does not undermine its broader role as a neutral mediator).

This reflects a dual-tiered engagement model: cautious, economically driven cooperation in East Africa, and proactive peace enforcement in Southern Africa. However, as bilateral defense pacts emerge such as Uganda-Rwanda or Rwanda-Mozambique Tanzania must adapt to avoid marginalization in emerging security architectures.

4.4 Maritime Security and Energy Geopolitics

Tanzania's Indian Ocean frontage makes it a maritime stakeholder in African security, especially given the increasing militarization of the Indian Ocean Rim and the rise of blue economy competition:

- The Port of Dar es Salaam handles over 90% of Tanzania's cargo and is a logistical lifeline for landlocked countries like Zambia, Malawi, Rwanda, and eastern DRC (UNDP, 2024). This underscores the port's critical role not only in Tanzania's economy but also in regional trade and integration. Its strategic importance makes it a focal point for economic growth and regional connectivity, but also a potential vulnerability. Disruptions due to infrastructure challenges, security

threats, or geopolitical tensions could have wide-reaching impacts beyond Tanzania's borders, affecting the supply chains of multiple neighboring states. Therefore, safeguarding and modernizing the port infrastructure is essential for both national and regional stability and prosperity.

- The discovery of offshore gas reserves in Lindi and Mtwara, and the associated construction of processing infrastructure, has turned Tanzania into an energy frontier. This development significantly enhances Tanzania's economic prospects and regional influence but simultaneously introduces complex risks. The concentration of valuable resources can exacerbate resource-related conflicts, particularly if governance and benefit-sharing mechanisms are weak. Additionally, increased maritime activity linked to energy infrastructure heightens vulnerability to piracy and illegal activities, while also attracting geopolitical rivalry from regional and extra-regional actors seeking influence. Thus, Tanzania faces the dual challenge of capitalizing on its energy potential while managing the security and political complexities that accompany this strategic transformation
- The East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), running from Uganda to Tanzania's coast, raises both opportunities and threats. Economically transformative, it also presents vulnerabilities: it could become a target for sabotage, draw opposition from environmental groups, or generate inter-state competition over oil transit fees and regional influence (Chatham House, 2024). This suggests that while EACOP has the potential to significantly boost regional economies through oil exports and infrastructure development, the pipeline's strategic importance simultaneously exposes it to security risks and political tensions. Environmental concerns may mobilize strong resistance, potentially delaying or complicating the project, while disputes between Uganda and Tanzania over revenue sharing and control could undermine regional cooperation. Therefore, balancing economic gains with security measures and diplomatic engagement will be critical to ensure the pipeline's long-term success and stability.).

Maritime domain awareness, naval capabilities, and coast guard modernization are therefore no longer optional for Tanzania they are strategic imperatives.

4.5 Counterterrorism and Radicalization Risks

Tanzania's southern regions are facing growing pressure from violent Islamist extremism, largely emanating from Mozambique's Cabo Delgado insurgency, spearheaded by Ansar al-Sunna, a group affiliated with ISIS.

- The 2020 attacks in Mtwara and Lindi, attributed to cross-border incursions by these militants, highlight the transnational nature of the threat (AP, 2024). This indicates that the security challenges in the region cannot be contained within national borders, requiring coordinated regional responses. The cross-border dynamics complicate efforts to combat militancy, as unilateral actions by individual states may be insufficient to address the root causes or disrupt militant networks. Consequently, effective countermeasures must involve intelligence sharing, joint operations, and diplomatic collaboration among affected countries to prevent further attacks and enhance regional stability.
- Tanzania's counter-response has included joint operations with Mozambican forces, heightened intelligence-sharing, and increased surveillance of suspected radical cells (AP, 2024). This approach reflects a recognition of the transnational nature of the militant threat and the necessity of regional cooperation to effectively combat it. By coordinating military efforts and intelligence activities, Tanzania aims to disrupt militant networks and prevent cross-border attacks. However, the success of these measures depends on sustained collaboration, resource allocation, and addressing underlying

factors driving militancy, suggesting that a multifaceted strategy is essential for long-term security in the region.

However, while military coordination is essential, analysts warn that over-securitization risks alienating local communities, especially in historically marginalized coastal regions with high youth unemployment and poor infrastructure (ISS, 2024). A successful strategy must therefore combine hard security tools with soft preventive measures such as economic inclusion, religious engagement, and De radicalization programs.

5. Policy and Institutional Limitations in Tanzania's Regional Security Engagement

Tanzania occupies a strategically vital position in the Great Lakes Region, serving as a gateway between conflict-affected inland territories and the Indian Ocean corridor. Over the years, the country has played an active role in regional diplomacy, peacekeeping operations, and conflict mediation, often viewed as a stabilizing force in an otherwise volatile neighborhood. However, despite this proactive engagement, Tanzania faces significant policy and institutional limitations that hinder its capacity to fully capitalize on its geopolitical leverage. These challenges range from inadequate border surveillance and overstretched refugee policies to weak coordination in regional security frameworks and underinvestment in maritime and counterterrorism capabilities. As regional security threats evolve driven by transnational militancy, cross-border criminal networks, and maritime insecurity it becomes increasingly imperative to address these internal structural weaknesses to ensure that Tanzania's contributions to regional peace and stability are both sustainable and strategic.

5.1. Inadequate Border Management and Surveillance

Tanzania's borders with Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC cross difficult terrain ranging from dense forests to expansive lakeshores—and rural areas poorly connected by roads. This geography enables cross-border threats such as arms smuggling, rebel incursions, illegal migration, and human trafficking to flourish. Although Tanzania has acknowledged these vulnerabilities, allocation of resources to border policing remains inconsistent and fragmented. Coordinated oversight, including customs, military, and law enforcement collaboration, is insufficient, leaving surveillance gaps in remote border zones and undermining the integrity of border control efforts (RECSA, 2022).

5.2. Refugee and Asylum Policy Constraints

With a long-standing tradition of hosting refugees from Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC, Tanzania's humanitarian reputation is evident. However, its refugee policy framework is increasingly strained. The reliance on encampment policies restricts mobility and access to livelihoods, while screening processes are under-resourced, risking infiltration by armed individuals. More critically, the absence of integration programs promotes dependency, heightens tensions with host communities, and fosters potential security flashpoints within border regions (UNHCR, 2023). Durable solutions such as local integration, access to education, and employment remain underdeveloped or politically unpopular.

5.3. Weak Institutional Coordination in Regional Security Policy

Tanzania's dual membership in both the EAC and SADC positions it as a vital connector in regional security. Yet the absence of a National Security Council or national-level coordinating body greatly compromises strategic integration. Conflicting or fragmented mandates between ministries (Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Home Affairs) results in duplicated efforts and inefficiencies. This coordination vacuum inhibits Tanzania's ability to craft coherent regional strategies that leverage its memberships and can hinder timely responses to fast-moving transnational security crises.

5.4. Limited Investment in Maritime and Coastal Security

Despite growing obligations tied to the blue economy and energy infrastructure, Tanzania's maritime security capacity remains insufficient. Coastal radar systems and naval patrol capabilities lag regional aspirations. Although the UNDP and Government of Japan recently donated patrol boats, such interventions only partially meet the scale of the task which spans piracy, smuggling, fisheries protection, and safeguarding energy installations (UNDP, 2024).

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing alone is estimated to cost Tanzania over TZS 15 billion annually, with nearly half its coastal landing sites lacking formal oversight and nearly half its vessels unregistered (Semberya, 2025). Weak maritime domain awareness and enforcement compromise Tanzania's ability to monetize EEZ resources, protect maritime biodiversity, and secure vital infrastructure such as the Dar es Salaam Port and EACOP corridor (Guardian, 2025; IILSS, 2024).

5.5. Rising Threat of Extremism and Policy Response Gaps

Violent extremism particularly the spillover from Mozambique's Cabo Delgado poses a growing threat to southern Tanzania. The 2020 Ansar al-Sunna attacks in Mtwara and Lindi regions underline the urgency. However, Tanzania lacks a unified counterterrorism doctrine or comprehensive early-warning framework at the national level, leaving weak intelligence networks in high-risk rural areas. Current responses remain ad hoc and reactive rather than coordinated and preventive, creating vulnerabilities to further extremist penetration.

5.6. Civil–Military Relations and Human Security Integration

Tanzania continues to frame security largely through a state-centric lens, prioritizing territorial integrity, counterinsurgency, and border control. However, challenges such as youth unemployment, political marginalization, and environmental degradation, especially in coastal and refugee-hosting communities are drivers of insecurity that fall outside traditional defense mandates. Civil society participation in security policymaking remains peripheral, undermining resilience and social cohesion. Without integrating human security concerns such as economic opportunity, education, and community engagement state-focused security measures risk exacerbating grievances rather than alleviating them (Kilindini, 2025).

6. Policy Recommendations and Strategic Options for Enhancing Tanzania's Regional Security Role

To effectively manage the complex security challenges and fully harness its geostrategic position within the Great Lakes Region, Tanzania must adopt a comprehensive and forward-looking policy framework. This framework should integrate national priorities with regional and international cooperation, emphasizing institutional reform, capacity building, and inclusive security approaches.

6.1. Strengthening Integrated Border Security Systems

Tanzania should prioritize the modernization of its border surveillance infrastructure through the adoption of advanced technologies such as satellite monitoring and biometric identification systems. This effort requires enhanced coordination among the Tanzania People's Defence Forces (TPDF), Tanzania Police Force, immigration authorities, and local governance structures. Additionally, expanding community-based policing and intelligence-sharing programs in vulnerable border regions, particularly Kigoma and Kagera, can improve early detection of militant activities and illicit trafficking, thereby reducing cross-border security threats.

6.2. Reforming the Refugee Management Framework

Given Tanzania's longstanding role as a host to refugees from Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC, there is a

critical need to reform the refugee policy framework. The Ministry of Home Affairs, in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and regional partners, should enhance refugee screening and registration procedures to better identify security risks. Simultaneously, expanding livelihood and social integration programs will facilitate durable solutions and reduce tensions between refugee populations and host communities. Pursuing regional burden-sharing agreements within frameworks like the East African Community (EAC) and African Union (AU) will also help distribute responsibilities more equitably.

6.3. Establishing a National Security Council (NSC)

The Tanzanian government should institutionalize a National Security Council that centralizes the coordination of national security policy across relevant ministries and agencies, including defense, intelligence, foreign affairs, and interior. This body would be tasked with formulating a comprehensive National Security Strategy that integrates external threats such as regional conflicts and terrorism with internal challenges like organized crime and social unrest, thereby ensuring a coherent and unified security response.

6.4. Enhancing Maritime and Energy Corridor Security

Considering Tanzania's expanding blue economy and the strategic significance of energy infrastructure such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), it is essential to invest substantially in maritime surveillance capabilities. The Tanzanian Navy, in partnership with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, should upgrade coastal radar systems and increase patrol operations. Strengthening collaboration with regional maritime security initiatives, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the African Union's maritime security framework, will also be critical for addressing piracy, smuggling, and protecting offshore natural gas reserves.

6.5. Developing a National Counterterrorism Strategy

To address the rising threat of violent extremism, particularly spillover from Mozambique's Cabo Delgado insurgency, Tanzania must develop and implement a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. This should emphasize intelligence-led policing coordinated by the Tanzania Intelligence and Security Services (TISS), community engagement programs aimed at preventing radicalization, and rehabilitation initiatives for De radicalization. Regional cooperation with neighboring countries and multilateral partners, including the East African Standby Force (EASF) and international counterterrorism agencies, will enhance operational effectiveness.

6.6. Deepening Engagement in Regional Security Frameworks

Tanzania's dual membership in the EAC and Southern African Development Community (SADC) provides a unique platform for regional security cooperation. To maximize this advantage, Tanzania should harmonize its security policies and military contributions across these blocs, enhancing participation in joint peacekeeping operations and regional early-warning systems. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation, in conjunction with defense agencies, should advocate for stronger institutional linkages between EAC and SADC security mechanisms to facilitate coordinated responses to transnational threats.

6.7. Mainstreaming Human Security in National Policy

Finally, Tanzania's security paradigm should evolve beyond traditional state-centric approaches to incorporate human security dimensions. This involves integrating security policy with development programs targeting youth unemployment, political inclusion, and environmental resilience. The Ministry of Health, Ministry of Community Development, and civil society organizations must collaborate closely

to address the socio-economic root causes of insecurity, thereby fostering long-term stability and social cohesion.

7. Conclusion

Tanzania's geostrategic location at the core of the Great Lakes Region positions it not only as a natural hub for regional stabilization but also as a frontline state facing an array of increasingly complex and evolving security threats. Its historical commitment to non-alignment, conflict mediation, and humanitarian diplomacy has earned it a reputation for neutrality and reliability within multilateral frameworks. However, in a rapidly shifting regional security landscape, this traditional posture, while commendable, is no longer sufficient. The intensification of cross-border insurgencies, the infiltration of violent extremist networks, rising maritime insecurity, and recurring refugee crises underscore the inadequacy of Tanzania's current security architecture to respond effectively and adaptively to transnational challenges.

The convergence of geographic exposure, porous borders, and proximity to volatile neighbors such as eastern DRC and northern Mozambique—amplifies Tanzania's vulnerability to external shocks. Yet, these same geopolitical conditions also present strategic opportunities. What remains lacking is a coherent and forward-looking security doctrine capable of translating Tanzania's geostrategic location into sustainable regional influence. A reactive, fragmented policy approach undermines its ability to preempt threats and leverage its historical role as a stabilizing actor.

Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift from a narrow, state-centric conception of security to a multidimensional strategy rooted in regional cooperation, technological modernization, and inclusive governance. The security sector must be reoriented to integrate human security dimensions, recognizing that issues such as youth marginalization, environmental degradation, and economic inequality are not peripheral but central to long-term stability. Without addressing these structural vulnerabilities, efforts to contain militancy or cross-border crime will remain episodic and unsustainable. Equally critical is the need for institutional reform. Tanzania's influence as a mediator and peace broker while historically strong depends on the strength of its democratic institutions, the responsiveness of its governance structures, and the credibility of its foreign policy. Investments in strategic intelligence, cyber capabilities, and early-warning systems must be matched by renewed commitments to transparency, civilian oversight, and regional confidence-building. Tanzania's dual membership in the EAC and SADC provides a unique platform for security leadership, but this potential remains underleveraged due to weak policy coordination and limited engagement in operational security mechanisms.

Looking ahead, Tanzania must pursue a holistic security strategy that balances hard power with diplomatic agility, and national sovereignty with regional interdependence. As maritime routes grow in importance and the blue economy becomes central to national development, securing critical infrastructure such as the Port of Dar es Salaam and the East African Crude Oil Pipeline will demand robust maritime domain awareness and strengthened naval capacity. These are not simply economic assets, but strategic lifelines for both Tanzania and the wider region.

In an increasingly interconnected and fragile regional order, Tanzania's internal stability and strategic foresight are not merely national imperatives they are regional necessities. Whether managing refugee flows, mediating peace talks, or safeguarding vital trade corridors, Tanzania's posture over the next decade will help shape the trajectory of security in the African Great Lakes Region. To remain relevant and

resilient, it must evolve from a passive peacekeeper to an assertive regional strategist anchored in both principled diplomacy and adaptive security governance.

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