

## Research paper

# Reviving Tanzania's regional leadership and global engagement

## Priorities for an effective foreign policy reset

### Summary

- Tanzania has recently begun to re-emerge from a period of damaging isolationism under former president John Magufuli. This isolationism obstructed international investment and undermined the country's credible history of global and continental leadership. Following Magufuli's death in 2021, his successor, Samia Suluhu Hassan, commissioned an official review of foreign policy strategy – seeking a first refresh of policy for over two decades. This review provides a chance to consolidate Tanzania's revival as an economic and diplomatic leader.
- Tanzania's rising economic influence and its ambitions to complete major cross-border railway and energy infrastructure projects will demand a more active leadership role on regional integration efforts, alongside commitments on peacekeeping and conflict mediation.
- Re-engagement with a range of international partners is already delivering greater choice and resilience in trade and foreign investment links. Examples of this are the pursuit of stronger ties with countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam; the consolidation of emerging strategic partnerships, particularly with the Gulf Arab states; and a repair of established relations with China, India and Western partners.
- A gradual renewal of Tanzania's commitment and voice on international and multilateral issues is also under way. But this renewal is yet to be reinforced by decisive action to rejoin frameworks from which the country withdrew at the peak of its isolationism under Magufuli. President Samia's foreign policy review may target further opportunities for leadership on global challenges and opportunities, including on climate change, critical minerals and peacebuilding.
- Entrenched suspicion of external investment remains a significant obstacle in the pursuit of partnerships, exacerbated by a lack of coordination between economic diplomacy objectives and incomplete domestic governance and democratic reforms. The suppression of public debate – most notably in relation to controversy surrounding investments in Tanzanian port infrastructure by Gulf states – risks making this obstacle larger still.
- Bolder steps are needed to create long-term safeguards against a return to isolation or cautious disengagement. The foreign policy review currently under way must target a refreshed strategic vision that emphasizes the assertive and positive dimensions of non-alignment.

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## Conclusion and policy recommendations

Tanzania has reaped some early rewards from its return under President Samia from the isolationism of her predecessor, taking significant strides towards rebuilding diversity and trust in its international relations. The breadth and variety of engagements – many owing to the agency and initiative of the Samia administration – have unlocked increased choice and provided greater resilience in the pursuit of major economic projects and goals.

### **Tanzania has reaped some early rewards from its return under President Samia from the isolationism of her predecessor, taking significant strides towards rebuilding diversity and trust in its international relations.**

But the insularity of the Magufuli administration did not develop in a vacuum, nor have its negative consequences been fully addressed. A rush for political legacy via infrastructure deals with China in Jayaka Kikwete's second term as president helped to fuel a backlash after 2015, while Magufuli's legacy still looms large in reactionary regional spats and ongoing suspicion of new investment projects. The long-term risk of slipping into a default mode of cautious disengagement – or worse, a return to full isolation – still therefore exists.

The government's current review of foreign policy presents a critical opportunity to respond to these concerns. The review will undoubtedly provide encouragement on numerous issues raised in the Chatham House research paper. Many of these are straightforward and uncontroversial: quick wins could be achieved simply by including passing references to the 'blue economy' or climate change, for example. These issues are indeed important priorities, but their inevitable inclusion should not encourage complacency.

The real task for Tanzania's foreign policy review lies in outlining a more assertive strategic vision, delivering proactive implementation, and aligning both of these with more effective internal coordination. The latter must include giving foreign policy a central role in Tanzania's Vision 2050 development strategy, and aligning other policies on climate change and critical minerals to take full advantage of global opportunities.

In the regional setting, Tanzania's relations with neighbours including Kenya and Mozambique have been placed on a more stable footing under Samia's presidency. There is now a clear platform to boost institutional leadership by ratifying initiatives such as the Tripartite Free Trade Agreement (TFTA), reasserting commitment to mediation and conflict resolution, and rejoining the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR). Such steps would be commensurate both with Tanzania's historical role in the region and its anticipated economic trajectory.

External investment in major infrastructure projects has emerged at the forefront of economic diplomacy, and influences engagement with a group of emerging strategic partners. But as the controversy around Dar es Salaam port

shows, the government's actions have suffered from a lack of transparency and clear communication of benefits, fuelling a perceived separation between state and public interests that has been exacerbated by a repressive response against critical voices from civil society, churches and political opponents.

## **External investment in major infrastructure projects has emerged at the forefront of economic diplomacy, and influences engagement with a group of emerging strategic partners.**

A straightforward reassertion of non-aligned economic diplomacy would not fully reflect the proactive work that has already been done to rebuild Tanzania's global image, nor the work that is still to be done. President Samia has stated that the goal of her foreign policy is for Tanzania to return to its 'proper place' of international leadership.<sup>1</sup> A foreign policy refresh that is assertive and highlights positive aspects of strategic neutrality would be a significant step towards achieving that goal.

The following recommendations are intended to assist Tanzanian leaders in the design and implementation of their new foreign policy strategy. They may equally help to foster better understanding of Tanzania's foreign policy among its external partners.

— **Take a more proactive approach to regional economic integration.**

Tanzania must seize opportunities in its immediate region, better anticipating its expected rise as the largest economy in East Africa and helping to safeguard the viability of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) and Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) projects. Beyond minimizing brinkmanship and disputes with Kenya in particular, priority actions should include ratifying the TFTA and endorsing a more active role for the Tanzanian Investment Centre in supporting Tanzanian investments in the wider region.

— **Consolidate the country's role in regional conflict resolution.** Such an effort would not only highlight Tanzania's historical record and the established reputation of Arusha as a location for hosting talks, but increasingly provide a role for Zanzibar. As Tanzania joins the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mission in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), it could mitigate accusations of divided loyalties by leading more actively on other aspects of East African Community (EAC) security cooperation, particularly in the maritime space, which is set to be a new strategic focus under the foreign policy review.

<sup>1</sup> FIRST Strategic Insight (2022), *The United Republic of Tanzania: Strengthening Relations, Promoting Multilateralism*, report, <https://firstforum.org/publishing/reports/the-united-republic-of-tanzania-2022>.

- **Rejoin multilateral governance and legal initiatives**, particularly the AfCHPR and the Open Government Partnership. To further signal a clear break with the unpredictability of the past, Tanzania should put in place legal reforms to require parliamentary approval for future withdrawals from international frameworks.
- **Ensure the new strategy explicitly highlights a goal to engage with, and learn from the experience of, other middle-income countries.** This could include working with existing partners in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as further developing relations with Indonesia and Vietnam. In the interests of maintaining geopolitical balance and avoiding the risks of personalized relationships, engagements should clearly demonstrate a separation of the CCM party and the Tanzanian state.
- **Effectively align international trading relationships with long-term economic ambitions.** Recognizing its expectation to graduate from least-developed country status (see recommendation above), Tanzania could consider how resuming the Economic Partnership Agreement negotiation process with the EU might secure commitment to increased funding support on areas such as phytosanitary standards and mineral-processing.
- **Embrace international leadership opportunities to advance core principles of South–South cooperation.** For example, Tanzania could signal its intent to seek non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the first time since 2006, signalling harmony with its existing peacekeeping contributions.<sup>2</sup> A campaign for the UNSC could be tied in with a call for wider reform of the UN system for greater African representation, building on President Samia's existing statements on the subject.<sup>3</sup>
- **Be transparent about foreign investment agreements and allow dissenting views on foreign policy to be aired freely.** It is vital for the sustainability of a more open foreign policy that Tanzanian political leaders avoid the temptation of short-term populism, including in public consultations on the new strategy – particularly ahead of elections in 2025. One of the main lessons from the Dar es Salaam port controversy is that a heavy-handed response to criticism can encourage the emergence of conspiracy theories, exacerbate isolationist tendencies and in turn discourage the involvement of external partners in essential major projects, such as Bagamoyo port.
- **Go beyond simple platitudes when mentioning climate change and other environmental issues.** The new foreign policy strategy is expected to include specific mentions of climate change and the environment for the first time. The review must not merely touch on these subjects, but instead help to create a reference point for Tanzanian officials, particularly as they engage

<sup>2</sup> Tanzania has served two UNSC membership terms previously, in 1975–76 and 2005–06. During the first of those terms, it championed African liberation struggles, while in the second, it focused on issues of the Great Lakes region. See Shule (2014), 'From Southern Africa to the Great Lakes Region: Challenges to Tanzanian Foreign Policy and Conflict Resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa', PhD thesis, University of Newcastle, Australia, <http://ogma.newcastle.edu.au:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/uon:15179>.

<sup>3</sup> Business Standard (2023), 'India, Tanzania to work together on reform of UNSC through expansion: MEA', 9 October 2023, [https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/india-tanzania-to-work-together-on-reform-of-uns-c-through-expansion-mea-123100900702\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/india-tanzania-to-work-together-on-reform-of-uns-c-through-expansion-mea-123100900702_1.html).

in international forums alongside Tanzania's pursuit of the EACOP and natural gas projects. The development of a critical minerals strategy should also be aligned with the country's objectives in economic diplomacy and its public statements on climate change.

- **Signal the new approach and distinguish the new foreign policy strategy from that of the previous administration with refreshed terminology.** To be effective, the new strategy must be seen as a turning point, and must reject entrenched norms of hesitation or suspicion in external relations. Merely retaining the same basic strategic framing of economic diplomacy and non-alignment, while simply adding new themes, would convey a message of greater passivity than Tanzania's ambitions deserve. Zambia's references to 'positive neutrality', India's 'multi-alignment' and Malaysia's 'equidistant diplomacy' all provide guiding examples in this respect.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Vandome, C. (2023), *Zambia's developing international relations: 'Positive neutrality' and global partnerships*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135553>.

## Full version of the report

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/reviving-tanzanias-regional-leadership-and-global-engagement>

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