

STRATIGMA

East Africa Outlook Series

China, Gulf and Turkey in East Africa

How external partners are shaping infrastructure,
trade and economic diplomacy across the region

*A strategic briefing on the growing presence
of international actors in East Africa's
infrastructure and trade landscape.*

Context

East Africa's transformation is not unfolding in isolation. As infrastructure projects expand and trade corridors gain momentum, the region has attracted increasing attention from external partners.

Among the most visible actors are China, Gulf countries and Turkey — each bringing different priorities, financing models and strategic interests.

This growing presence signals a broader shift: East Africa is becoming a stage for economic diplomacy and infrastructure-driven partnerships.

What's Changing?

1) China's Infrastructure-First Engagement

China has been one of the most prominent partners in East Africa's infrastructure expansion. Its engagement has focused largely on:

- Transport corridors
- Railways and ports
- Industrial zones
- Energy projects

China's approach has emphasized large-scale, long-term infrastructure investments designed to improve connectivity and trade capacity.

This model aligns closely with the region's infrastructure priorities.

2) Gulf Countries and the Search for Food and Logistics Security

Gulf economies are increasingly interested in East Africa for strategic reasons linked to geography and long-term resource planning. Key areas of engagement include:

- Port investments
- Logistics and shipping
- Agriculture and food supply chains
- Renewable energy projects

For Gulf countries, East Africa represents both a nearby market and a strategic partner in ensuring supply chain resilience.

Geographic proximity strengthens this relationship.

3) Turkey's Expanding Economic and Diplomatic Footprint

Turkey's engagement in East Africa has grown steadily over the past two decades. This presence has been shaped by:

- Expanding diplomatic missions
- Increasing trade relations
- Development cooperation projects
- Growing private sector activity

Turkey's approach often combines economic partnerships with broader diplomatic engagement, reflecting a long-term regional outlook.

4) A Shift Toward Multi-Partner Engagement

East African countries are increasingly working with multiple partners simultaneously rather than relying on a single external actor. This diversification provides:

- Greater bargaining power
- Access to different financing models
- Reduced dependency risks

The region is becoming a space of competitive cooperation.

Why It Matters

External partnerships play a significant role in shaping the speed and direction of development in emerging markets.

Infrastructure, logistics and energy projects often require long-term financing and technical expertise, making international partnerships essential.

The presence of multiple external actors creates both opportunities and complexities.

Competition among partners can accelerate development, while diversification reduces strategic dependency.

Strategic Insight

East Africa is evolving into a region shaped by economic diplomacy.

Rather than a single dominant partner, the region is engaging a diverse group of international actors with complementary interests.

This multi-partner landscape allows East African countries to pursue infrastructure development and economic integration while maintaining strategic flexibility.

*In the coming decade, the balance between **partnership, competition and cooperation** will play a defining role in the region's trajectory.*