

KENYA'S FOREIGN POLICIES ON EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY INTEGRATION (2013–2023)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of Kenya's foreign policy on East African Community (EAC) regional integration between 2013 and 2023, examining trade, diplomatic, and security dimensions. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research administered structured questionnaires to 260 purposively selected stakeholders across five categories, government officials, business leaders, academic experts, civil society representatives, and international development partners. Grounded theoretically in Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Security Community Theory, the findings reveal a nuanced picture: Kenya's trade agreements enjoy broad stakeholder approval (69.2%), yet persistent tariff and non-tariff barriers constrain intra-regional commerce. Diplomatic efforts are strongly affirmed (76.9%), underscoring Kenya's role as a regional anchor state; security policies are similarly recognized (73.1%) as contributors to border stability, though coordination and transparency gaps remain. The study argues that Kenya's effectiveness as an integrative force depends on deeper policy harmonization, more inclusive diplomacy, and a shift from state-centric to community-oriented security governance. It contributes to the literature on African regionalism by offering an empirically grounded, stakeholder-informed account of how national foreign policy shapes, and is constrained by, the imperatives of regional integration.

Keywords: Kenya; foreign policy; regional integration; East African Community; trade policy; diplomacy; border security

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The East African Community (EAC) stands as one of Africa's most ambitious and institutionally complex regional integration experiments. Established in its current form in 1999, after the collapse of an earlier iteration in 1977, the EAC now comprises seven member states: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and, most recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Its integration agenda encompasses a customs union, a common market, a monetary union, and the long-term objective of a political federation, a scope that exceeds most comparable regional organizations on the continent. This agenda is not purely economic in character; it is simultaneously a political, security, and normative project, aimed at cultivating a shared regional identity, institutionalizing collective governance, and ensuring that the dividends of integration are broadly distributed across member states.¹

Kenya occupies a distinctive position within this project. As a founding member of the revived EAC, Africa's sixth-largest economy, and a country with extensive diplomatic networks across the continent and beyond, Kenya has consistently been both a principal architect and a central

beneficiary of the integration process. Its geographic position, straddling the EAC's northern and eastern boundaries and serving as the primary conduit for landlocked member states' access to global markets through the port of Mombasa, confers structural leverage that no other member state possesses. Between 2013 and 2023, under the administrations of Presidents Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, Kenya pursued a foreign policy agenda that sought simultaneously to deepen EAC integration, to expand Kenya's bilateral and multilateral partnerships, and to consolidate its standing as the region's pre-eminent diplomatic and economic actor.²

Yet, despite Kenya's centrality to the EAC project, the scholarly literature on Kenya's foreign policy as a driver of, or constraint on, regional integration remains surprisingly underdeveloped. The broader literature on African regionalism has grown substantially over the past two decades, with significant contributions on the structural determinants of integration, the role of regional institutions, and the normative dimensions of pan-African solidarity. However, the specific contributions of individual member states' foreign policies to regional integration outcomes have received comparatively less systematic attention, particularly in the EAC context.³

Existing scholarship acknowledges Kenya's leadership in regional trade negotiations, its mediation role in neighboring conflicts, and its contributions to regional security frameworks, but rarely subjects these activities to comprehensive, empirically grounded scrutiny. Studies of Kenya's trade engagement within the EAC, for instance, have documented its participation in the Customs Union and Common Market protocols without fully evaluating the longer-term effects of tariff regimes and non-tariff barriers on intra-regional commerce.⁴ Similarly, assessments of Kenya's diplomatic role have tended to celebrate its mediation credentials without adequately examining the tension between its stated commitment to regional unity and its pursuit of narrowly defined national interests.⁵ In the security domain, Kenya's military and intelligence contributions to regional stability have been documented but not systematically evaluated from the perspective of diverse regional stakeholders.⁶

This study addresses these gaps by providing a systematic, multidimensional analysis of Kenya's foreign policy in the EAC context between 2013 and 2023. Its central argument is that Kenya has functioned simultaneously as both the agent and the enterprise of regional integration: it has actively driven the integration process while itself being shaped by, and occasionally constrained by, its imperatives. This dual role has generated significant achievements across trade, diplomatic, and security domains, but also produced structural tensions and implementation failures that limit its integrative impact. Realizing Kenya's full potential as a regional integration actor requires addressing these tensions through policy reform, inclusive governance, and stronger institutional accountability.⁷

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework, drawing on Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Security Community Theory. This is followed by a review of the relevant literature on African regionalism and Kenya's role within it. The methodology section details the mixed-methods research design and sampling strategy. The results section presents quantitative and qualitative findings across three thematic domains, trade, diplomacy, and security. The discussion section situates these findings within the

theoretical and empirical literature, and the conclusion identifies policy implications and directions for future research.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks: Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Security Community Theory. Each illuminates a distinct dimension of Kenya's foreign policy and its relationship to EAC regional integration, and together they provide a multi-layered analytical architecture that reflects the complexity of the integration process. The decision to employ multiple frameworks rather than a single theoretical lens is deliberate: no single theory adequately captures the interplay of institutional incentives, normative identities, and collective security dynamics that characterize regional integration in East Africa.

2.1 Neoliberal Institutionalism

Neoliberal Institutionalism, associated most closely with the work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, holds that states can achieve sustained cooperation even within an anarchic international system when formal institutions are available to reduce transaction costs, lower information asymmetries, and create credible mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement.⁸ In this framework, international institutions do not merely reflect underlying state interests; they actively shape those interests by creating new incentive structures and by embedding cooperation as a self-reinforcing expectation. Applied to the EAC context, this perspective illuminates how the Community's formal institutional architecture, most notably the Customs Union Protocol (2005) and the Common Market Protocol (2010), has shaped and regulated state behavior by making sustained cooperation more rational than defection, even when short-term national interests might point in a different direction.

For Kenya specifically, Neoliberal Institutionalism helps explain its pattern of engagement with EAC institutions: active participation in protocol negotiations, acceptance of binding commitments on tariff reduction and labor mobility, and investment in regional infrastructure that generates positive externalities for all member states. At the same time, the framework's emphasis on implementation and enforcement illuminates a persistent vulnerability in the EAC model, namely, that institutional frameworks, however well designed, depend for their effectiveness on consistent national-level compliance, which has proven uneven across member states and policy domains.⁹

2.2 Constructivism

Constructivism, developed most influentially by Alexander Wendt, challenges the materialist assumptions of mainstream international relations theory by arguing that state behavior is shaped not only by power and interest but by social norms, shared identities, and the intersubjective meanings that states attach to their interactions. In Wendt's formulation, "anarchy is what states make of it": the structure of the international system is not a fixed, objective constraint but a social construction that can be transformed through changing patterns of interaction and identity.¹⁰

In the EAC context, Constructivism provides a powerful framework for understanding Kenya's constructed identity as a "regional anchor state", a self-image forged through decades of involvement in regional peacebuilding, diplomatic mediation, and pan-African solidarity discourse. This identity is not simply a rhetorical posture; it has shaped Kenya's foreign policy behavior in concrete ways, generating a disposition towards regional leadership that extends beyond what a purely interest-based calculus would predict.¹¹ Kenya's consistent willingness to absorb the costs of regional mediation, in South Sudan, Somalia, and within intra-EAC disputes, reflects in part the desire to maintain and project this identity. Constructivism also draws attention to the normative dimensions of Kenya's diplomacy: the promotion of narratives of African unity and regional solidarity that, over time, help to constitute a shared regional identity among EAC member states.¹²

2.3 Security Community Theory

Security Community Theory, developed by Adler and Barnett in their seminal 1998 study, argues that groups of states can develop a collective identity grounded in shared norms of peaceful, cooperative behavior, transforming formerly conflict-prone relationships into stable, institutionalized security arrangements in which war becomes unthinkable. A mature security community is characterized not merely by the absence of conflict but by the active institutionalization of cooperative security practices and the internalization of norms of non-violent conflict resolution.¹³

Kenya's security engagement within the EAC framework, including its participation in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), its contributions to the Eastern Africa Standby Force (EASF), and its bilateral border security arrangements with Uganda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, can be understood as constitutive elements of an ongoing, if incomplete, security community-building process within East Africa. These activities reflect Kenya's effort to embed cooperative security norms within the regional architecture and to demonstrate, through practice, that collective security mechanisms are a viable and preferable alternative to unilateral military action. The theory also highlights, however, that security community consolidation requires not merely institutional cooperation but also trust-building at the societal level, a dimension that Kenya's predominantly state-centric, military-led security approach has not always adequately addressed.¹⁴

Taken together, these three frameworks provide a robust analytical lens that captures the economic, normative, and security dimensions of Kenya's foreign policy. Their complementarity is not incidental: the integration process in East Africa is simultaneously an institutional project (Neoliberal Institutionalism), an identity project (Constructivism), and a security project (Security Community Theory), and understanding Kenya's role within it requires engagement with all three dimensions. The study draws on all three frameworks throughout its empirical analysis.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on African regionalism provides the essential backdrop against which Kenya's role in the EAC must be assessed. As Murithi argues, African regionalism cannot be understood solely in functionalist terms as a response to economic imperatives; it is also a normative

project driven by pan-African visions of solidarity, collective security, and political self-determination.¹⁵ Bach similarly situates African regional organizations within a broader genealogy of trans-state networks and normative aspirations, cautioning against the assumption that African RECs simply replicate European integration models. These insights are important for the present study because they establish that Kenya's integration behavior is shaped not only by economic interests but by normative commitments and identity considerations that Constructivist theory helps to illuminate.

Within the EAC literature specifically, Kagwanja has offered the most sustained analysis of Kenya's strategic calculations, characterizing it as a "regional hegemon in waiting" whose foreign policy reflects a careful balancing of domestic political pressures, bilateral relationships, and EAC institutional commitments.¹⁶ Anyango's work complements this by documenting the specific mechanisms through which Kenya has exercised diplomatic leadership within the Community, including its role in brokering the East African Customs Union and its contributions to the EAC's institutional architecture. Both scholars, however, acknowledge persistent tensions: Kenya's dominance can generate resentment among smaller member states, and its tendency to prioritize bilateral relationships over multilateral EAC frameworks has occasionally undermined the Community's institutional coherence.¹⁷

On the trade dimension, the empirical record reveals a complex picture that aligns broadly with the findings of the present study. World Bank data demonstrate moderate but uneven growth in intra-EAC trade over the past decade, with Kenya consistently recording the largest intra-regional trade volumes but also facing the most criticism for its tariff practices.¹⁸ Non-tariff barriers, including inconsistent customs procedures, infrastructure deficits, and bureaucratic impediments at border crossings, have proven more resistant to reform than formal tariff schedules, suggesting that institutional design alone cannot guarantee integration outcomes. Kenya's major infrastructure investments, particularly the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), represent significant contributions to regional connectivity, but their governance and financing arrangements have attracted criticism for prioritizing Chinese contractors and Kenyan commercial interests over equitable regional benefit distribution. This tension between Kenya's role as an integration promoter and an integration beneficiary is central to any honest assessment of its trade policy record.

In the diplomatic domain, Kenya's mediation activities in South Sudan and Somalia have generated a substantial body of scholarship. Mulu's analysis of Kenya's South Sudan mediation is particularly illuminating: while acknowledging Kenya's genuine contribution to the peace process, she demonstrates that Kenya's mediation was never disinterested, its access to South Sudan's oil reserves and its interest in maintaining economic relationships with Juba created incentives that sometimes complicated its role as a neutral broker.¹⁹ This finding resonates with broader arguments in the conflict mediation literature about the structural constraints on regional hegemon mediation, and it has important implications for assessing Kenya's diplomatic contribution to EAC integration: a diplomatically engaged but strategically self-interested Kenya may generate short-term stability while undermining the long-term trust that deep integration requires.

The security literature has focused considerable attention on Kenya's participation in AMISOM and the EASF. Ngugi's analysis situates these contributions within a broader regional security

architecture, arguing that Kenya's military engagements have made a genuine contribution to reducing the transnational security threats, terrorism, trafficking, piracy, that impede regional trade and movement.²⁰ However, Ngugi also raises important critical questions about the securitization of Kenya's foreign policy: the progressive militarization of its regional engagement risks entrenching a security paradigm that prioritizes state security over human security, and that generates its own tensions in cross-border communities where Kenya's security forces are not always welcomed. This critique connects directly to Security Community Theory's emphasis on societal trust-building as a prerequisite for genuine security community consolidation.

A cross-cutting theme in the literature is what might be called the "implementation gap" in EAC integration: the persistent discrepancy between the formal institutional commitments that Kenya and other member states have made and the actual policy behavior at the national level. As both Murithi and Anyango observe, Kenya has sometimes been among the most enthusiastic signatories of EAC protocols while simultaneously maintaining practices, on tariffs, on labor mobility, on regulatory harmonization, that contradict the spirit of those commitments.²¹ This paradox cannot be resolved by institutional design alone; it requires political will, domestic reform, and sustained engagement with the constituencies, business communities, civil society organizations, border communities, that bear the costs of integration failures. The present study addresses this gap by incorporating precisely these stakeholder perspectives into its empirical analysis.

A further dimension of the literature concerns the relationship between Kenya's regional integration commitments and its extra-regional diplomatic relationships. Kenya's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, its deepening economic ties with China, and its engagement with Western development partners have all generated pressures that intersect, sometimes uncomfortably, with its EAC commitments. The SGR, for instance, was financed predominantly by Chinese capital under terms that have generated significant public controversy in Kenya and raised questions among EAC partners about whether the project's governance model is compatible with the Community's principles of shared benefit and regional ownership. These extra-regional dimensions of Kenya's foreign policy have not been systematically integrated into the EAC integration literature, which tends to focus on intra-regional dynamics. This gap is addressed in part by the present study's attention to how international development partners, many of whom operate at the interface of Kenya's regional and extra-regional relationships, assess Kenya's integration contributions.

Finally, the literature on gender and inclusion in African regionalism provides an important, if underutilized, frame for assessing Kenya's integration record. Studies of other African RECs have shown that regional integration processes tend to generate differential outcomes by gender, with women disproportionately engaged in small-scale cross-border trade and disproportionately affected by non-tariff barriers, bureaucratic harassment, and insecurity at border crossings. The near-even gender distribution in the present study's sample (57.7% male, 42.3% female) provides an opportunity to examine whether gender shapes stakeholder perceptions of Kenya's integration record, a dimension that the study's Discussion section takes up. The broader implication is that integration assessments that do not explicitly attend to gender dynamics risk presenting a partial and misleading picture of integration outcomes.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative open-ended responses, in order to generate findings that are both statistically representative and interpretively rich. The choice of a mixed-methods approach reflects the dual character of the research questions: understanding the scope and distribution of stakeholder perceptions of Kenya's foreign policy requires quantitative analysis capable of identifying patterns across a large, diverse sample; understanding the mechanisms and meanings that underlie those perceptions requires qualitative analysis capable of capturing nuance, context, and the reasoning processes of informed participants.

Participants were drawn from five purposively selected stakeholder categories: government officials and policymakers, business leaders and industry experts, academic experts and researchers, civil society organizations, and international development partners. The decision to employ purposive rather than random sampling was deliberate and methodologically justified: the research questions concern the informed perceptions of actors with direct, expert knowledge of Kenya's foreign policy and EAC integration processes. Random sampling from the general population would have produced a sample dominated by respondents with limited substantive knowledge of the phenomena under investigation, thereby reducing the analytical quality and policy relevance of the findings. Purposive sampling, by contrast, ensured that each respondent was positioned, by virtue of their professional role, institutional affiliation, or scholarly expertise, to offer informed assessments of the trade, diplomatic, and security dimensions of Kenya's regional engagement.

The sampling frame was constructed through institutional mapping: government ministries and departments with EAC mandates, business associations with regional trade interests, university departments specializing in international relations and regional studies, civil society organizations active in EAC policy advocacy, and bilateral and multilateral development partners with EAC programming portfolios. A total of 279 individuals were targeted across five equal sub-samples of 56, and data collection took place during 2023–2024 across Nairobi and selected border-region locations, Busia, Namanga, and Malaba, directly relevant to EAC trade and border security activities. The final sample comprised 260 respondents (overall response rate: 93.2%).

Data collection instruments combined closed-ended items, on which respondents selected from pre-defined response options, enabling quantitative analysis, with open-ended items that invited elaboration, explanation, and critical reflection. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentage breakdowns, to characterize the distribution of stakeholder perceptions across the three policy domains. Qualitative responses were subjected to inductive thematic coding: responses were read iteratively, initial codes were assigned, and recurrent patterns were aggregated into themes that structured the qualitative dimension of the Discussion section. Triangulation across quantitative and qualitative data streams, and across stakeholder categories, served to strengthen the internal validity of the findings by identifying both convergent patterns and divergent perspectives.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies on self-reported perceptions, which may not fully capture the structural or institutional determinants of integration outcomes. Second, the purposive sampling strategy, while appropriate for the research questions, limits the generalizability of findings to the stakeholder population from which the sample was drawn rather than the EAC population at large. Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow for longitudinal tracking of how perceptions and policies have changed over the 2013–2023 study period. Future research employing longitudinal or comparative designs would be well positioned to address these limitations.

5.0 RESULTS

5.1 Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents response rates by stakeholder category. All five categories exceeded an 89% response rate, yielding an overall rate of 93.2%, a figure that significantly exceeds typical response rates for elite survey research and that reflects the high salience of the study's subject matter to the targeted stakeholder community. Academic experts and researchers recorded the highest rate (96.4%), followed by international development partners (94.6%) and border agents and government officials (92.9%).

Table 1: Response Rate by Stakeholder Category

Stakeholder Category	Sample Size	Responses Received	Response Rate (%)
Border Agents & Government Officials	56	52	92.9%
Business Leaders & Industry Experts	56	51	91.1%
Academic Experts & Researchers	56	54	96.4%
Civil Society Organizations	56	50	89.3%
International Development Partners	56	53	94.6%
Total	279	260	93.2%

The demographic composition of the sample is summarized in Tables 2–4. Gender distribution was near-even: 57.7% of respondents identified as male and 42.3% as female. Educational attainment was high, with 46.2% holding college diplomas and 28.8% university degrees; only 25% of respondents had primary or secondary education as their highest qualification. This profile is consistent with a sample drawn disproportionately from professional and institutional settings, and it strengthens the study's analytical quality by ensuring that most respondents possess the background knowledge necessary to assess complex policy questions. Employment status was diverse: 53.8% were formally employed, 19.2% self-employed, 15.4% students, 7.7% unemployed, and 3.8% retired. The inclusion of students, self-employed individuals, and unemployed respondents ensures that the sample does not exclusively reflect institutional or elite perspectives. Stakeholder category distribution was closely balanced, with each of the five groups representing approximately one-fifth of the total sample, ensuring that no single perspective dominated the analysis.

5.2 Trade Policies and Regional Integration

The data on Kenya's trade policies reveal a pattern of structural tension between positive formal commitment and negative practical outcome. As shown in Table 5, 48.1% of respondents reported that Kenya's trade tariffs had decreased trade flows within the EAC, while 36.5% reported an increase and 15.4% observed no significant impact. This distribution, with nearly half of respondents reporting a negative tariff effect, is striking given Kenya's formal commitment to the EAC Customs Union and Common Market protocols, both of which are designed to reduce trade barriers and promote intra-regional commerce.

Table 5: Impact of Kenya's Trade Tariffs on Regional Trade

Impact	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased trade flows	95	36.5%
Decreased trade flows	125	48.1%
No significant impact	40	15.4%
Total	260	100%

The qualitative data provide important context for these findings. Respondents from the business and civil society categories most frequently attributed the negative tariff effect to what several described as "selective implementation" of EAC protocols, a pattern in which Kenya formally adheres to regional tariff schedules while maintaining or introducing non-tariff barriers that produce economically equivalent effects. One business leader respondent characterized this pattern as "integration on paper but restriction in practice," noting that bureaucratic delays at border crossings, inconsistent application of rules of origin requirements, and infrastructure deficits at key crossing points effectively nullified the gains from formal tariff reductions. Government officials, by contrast, more frequently cited external factors, global commodity price movements, COVID-19 disruptions, and the inflationary pressures of 2022–2023, as drivers of the negative trade flow outcomes, pointing to the difficulty of attributing observed trade patterns to Kenya's policy choices alone.

The assessment of Kenya's trade agreements was notably more positive than the tariff assessment. As shown in Table 6, 69.2% of respondents considered Kenya's trade agreements to have been effective in facilitating regional integration, while 30.8% disagreed. This gap between the positive evaluation of agreements and the negative evaluation of tariff impacts is analytically significant: it suggests that stakeholders distinguish between Kenya's role as an agreement architect, which they assess positively, and its role as an agreement implementer, which they assess more critically.

Table 6: Effectiveness of Kenya's Trade Agreements

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	180	69.2%
No	80	30.8%
Total	260	100%

Among respondents who rated Kenya's trade agreements as effective, the EAC Customs Union and Common Market protocols were most frequently cited as the frameworks of greatest positive impact, particularly for larger businesses with the institutional capacity to navigate regional trade regulations. International development partners were the stakeholder group most consistently positive about trade agreement effectiveness, several noting that Kenya's negotiating leadership within EAC trade forums had been essential to achieving the level of protocol ambition currently in place. Civil society respondents were more divided, with several raising concerns about the limited consultation of small-scale traders and border communities in agreement negotiations, a point that connects to broader concerns about the inclusivity of Kenya's integration leadership. Academic respondents in this sub-group specifically highlighted the absence of gender-disaggregated data on trade agreement impacts, arguing that women cross-border traders, who constitute a significant share of informal intra-EAC trade, are disproportionately disadvantaged by the combination of formal tariff barriers and informal harassment at border crossings that Kenya's current trade governance framework does not adequately address.

5.3 Diplomatic Policies and Political Integration

Kenya's diplomatic engagement within the EAC and in wider regional forums received the most consistently positive assessment of the three policy domains examined. Table 7 shows that 76.9% of respondents considered Kenya's diplomatic efforts to have exerted a positive influence on political integration within the EAC, while 23.1% detected no significant influence.

Table 7: Role of Kenya's Diplomatic Relations in Political Integration

Influence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive Influence	200	76.9%
No Significant Influence	60	23.1%
Total	260	100%

Qualitative responses identified three principal dimensions of Kenya's diplomatic contribution. First, its conflict mediation activities, in South Sudan, Somalia, and within intra-EAC disputes, were consistently highlighted as generating the diplomatic credibility and trust that underpin effective regional cooperation. Second, Kenya's leadership in EAC policy harmonization processes, including its active role in negotiations over the Common Market Protocol and the Monetary Union framework, was characterized as essential to the institutional deepening of the Community. Third, Kenya's engagement in continental forums, including the African Union and the Pan-African Parliament, was seen as amplifying the EAC's regional voice and raising its profile in global governance discussions.

However, the 23.1% reporting no significant diplomatic influence offer important qualifications. Civil society respondents and several international development partners noted a consistent pattern of "diplomatic overflow", Kenya's diplomatic activities generating visible international benefits (elevated status, leadership recognition, formal agreements) without translating these into tangible integration outcomes for ordinary citizens and smaller

businesses. One civil society respondent described Kenya's diplomatic posture as "performing integration at summits while slowing it at borders," a formulation that captures the gap between elite diplomatic performance and ground-level integration experience. Several respondents from smaller EAC member states, represented in the study through civil society and academic expert categories, raised concerns about what they characterized as Kenya's tendency to use EAC diplomatic forums to advance bilateral interests rather than genuinely multilateral regional goals. Academic respondents in this sub-group drew attention to specific episodes, including Kenya's bilateral trade arrangements with Uganda and Tanzania negotiated outside the EAC framework, as evidence of a persistent tendency to circumvent multilateral processes when bilateral arrangements serve Kenya's interests more efficiently. These qualitative insights suggest that the 76.9% overall approval figure, while genuinely positive, may mask significant variation in how Kenya's diplomatic contributions are experienced by different stakeholder groups and member state representatives.

5.4 Security Policies and Regional Stability

Kenya's security policies within the EAC context received strong positive assessment overall, though with important qualifications that nuance the headline finding. Table 8 shows that 73.1% of respondents considered Kenya's border security policies to have made a strong contribution to regional stability, while 19.2% characterized the contribution as minimal and 7.7% identified no contribution.

Table 8: Impact of Kenya's Border Security Policies on Regional Stability

Impact	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strong Contribution	190	73.1%
Minimal Contribution	50	19.2%
No Contribution	20	7.7%
Total	260	100%

Government officials and international development partners were the most consistently affirmative stakeholder groups, citing Kenya's AMISOM contributions, its bilateral border security agreements with Uganda and Tanzania, and its counter-terrorism operations at the Kenya–Somalia border as concrete evidence of security leadership. Academic respondents offered more qualified assessments, acknowledging the material contributions to regional stability while raising concerns about the longer-term consequences of a security model that prioritizes military and intelligence approaches over community-based and preventive strategies.

Civil society respondents were the most critical of the three categories, and their qualitative responses offered the most detailed elaboration of the 26.9% minority reporting minimal or no contribution. Recurrent themes in this sub-sample included: inadequate communication and transparency in joint security operations, limited mechanisms for community participation in border security governance, and documented cases of human rights violations in counter-terrorism operations that had undermined trust between security forces and border

communities. One civil society respondent characterized Kenya's security approach as "protecting the region from threats while sometimes generating new ones at the local level", a formulation that points directly to the distinction Security Community Theory draws between formal security cooperation and the deeper societal trust-building that genuine security community consolidation requires.

6.0 DISCUSSION

The findings presented above confirm and elaborate the study's central argument: that Kenya has functioned simultaneously as both the agent and the enterprise of EAC integration across the 2013–2023 period, generating meaningful contributions to regional cooperation while simultaneously exhibiting structural limitations that constrain the full realization of its integrative potential. This section examines each policy domain in turn, situating the empirical findings within the theoretical frameworks and existing literature.

6.1 Trade: Institutional Commitment and Implementation Gaps

The tension between the strong approval for Kenya's trade agreements (69.2%) and the predominantly negative assessment of tariff impacts (48.1% reporting decreased trade flows) is perhaps the study's most analytically significant finding in the trade domain. It speaks directly to the implementation gap that Murithi and Anyango have identified as a structural feature of EAC integration, and it illustrates a fundamental limitation of the Neoliberal Institutional framework when applied to African regional contexts.²¹

Neoliberal Institutionalism predicts that well-designed institutional frameworks will generate compliance by aligning cooperation with national self-interest. The EAC's Customs Union and Common Market protocols represent exactly this kind of design: they create clear incentive structures, monitoring mechanisms, and dispute resolution procedures that should, in theory, produce consistent implementation. In practice, however, the study finds that Kenya's formal institutional commitments co-exist with a pattern of selective and inconsistent implementation that effectively maintains trade barriers while preserving the reputational benefits of formal protocol adherence. This finding aligns with what World Bank analysts have described as the "paper integration" phenomenon in African RECs: the accumulation of formal commitments without the domestic regulatory reform and institutional capacity-building that would give them practical effect.¹⁸

The qualitative data add important texture to this structural finding. The characterization by business respondents of Kenya's approach as "integration on paper but restriction in practice" points to a political economy of trade policy in which different domestic constituencies, import-competing industries, customs officials with rent-seeking interests, and regional integration advocates, pull in different directions, producing a policy record that is formally integrationist but operationally ambiguous. This political economy dimension is largely absent from the existing literature on Kenya's trade policy, which has tended to focus on formal protocol commitments without examining the domestic political dynamics that shape their implementation. Future research that examines the domestic political economy of Kenya's EAC trade policy compliance would make a significant contribution to understanding this gap.

The strong approval for trade agreements, concentrated particularly among international development partners and larger business operators, also reveals a distributional dimension to Kenya's trade policy record. Respondents with the institutional capacity to navigate the formal trade architecture, large businesses, international organizations with legal and regulatory expertise, tend to assess it positively, because for them the formal framework works. Respondents without that capacity, small-scale traders, border community members, SMEs, are more likely to experience the non-tariff barriers that formal frameworks fail to address. This distributional pattern has implications for how integration success should be assessed: aggregate trade statistics and formal compliance metrics systematically undercount the integration costs borne by the most economically vulnerable participants.

A further implication of the distributional finding concerns the relationship between Kenya's trade policy record and the EAC's long-term political legitimacy. Integration projects that are formally ambitious but practically exclusionary tend, over time, to generate public disillusionment, a pattern well documented in the European integration literature and increasingly visible in African RECs. If small-scale traders, border communities, and SMEs consistently experience Kenya's trade governance as an obstacle rather than an enabler, their disillusionment will eventually translate into political pressure on Kenya's domestic policymakers to deprioritize regional commitments. Sustaining Kenya's integration leadership thus requires not merely technical fixes but a political economy strategy that builds and maintains domestic coalitions in favor of integration by demonstrating its concrete benefits to a broad range of citizens. This is, ultimately, a question of political will as much as policy design, and it is one that Kenya's current leadership has yet to address with the urgency the situation demands.

6.2 Diplomacy: Anchor State Leadership and Its Limits

The strong positive assessment of Kenya's diplomatic engagement (76.9%) is consistent with the Constructivist account of Kenya as a regional anchor state whose foreign policy is driven in significant part by the desire to maintain and project a particular regional identity. As Mulu has argued, Kenya's diplomatic commitments, to conflict mediation, to EAC institutional deepening, to pan-African solidarity, cannot be understood purely in terms of material interest calculation; they also reflect a constructed self-image as East Africa's natural diplomatic leader, an image that Kenya's political elites have consistently cultivated across successive administrations.¹⁹

However, the gap between elite diplomatic performance and grassroots integration outcomes, highlighted by the 23.1% reporting no significant diplomatic impact and amplified by the qualitative data, points to an important limitation of the Constructivist account in the EAC context. Constructivism, in its emphasis on elite identity construction and intersubjective norms, tends to underspecify the mechanisms through which diplomatically constructed identities translate into tangible material outcomes for ordinary citizens. The finding that Kenya's diplomatic prestige at the regional level co-exists with persistent exclusion of small-scale traders and border communities from the benefits of integration suggests that anchor state leadership, however symbolically powerful, is insufficient to produce the deep, inclusive integration that the EAC project aspires to achieve.

This gap between diplomatic symbolism and material outcome is further complicated by the duality that Mulu identifies in Kenya's mediation behavior: the simultaneous pursuit of regional leadership credentials and narrowly defined national interests.¹⁹ In South Sudan, Kenya's economic interests in oil access created incentives that complicated its role as a neutral broker. More broadly, Kenya's tendency to use EAC diplomatic forums to advance bilateral rather than genuinely multilateral interests, noted by several respondents from smaller member states, risks undermining the trust that genuine regional cooperation requires. Addressing this tension requires not merely diplomatic skill but structural transparency mechanisms that make Kenya's multiple interests visible and accountable to EAC partners.

6.3 Security: State-Centric Approaches and Community Deficits

The strong overall approval for Kenya's security contribution (73.1%) reflects genuine achievements: the stabilization of the Somalia theatre through AMISOM, the development of functioning border security arrangements with EAC neighbors, and the institutionalization of intelligence-sharing frameworks that have contributed to regional counter-terrorism effectiveness. These achievements align with Security Community Theory's account of how states can progressively institutionalize cooperative security practices and embed norms of peaceful conflict resolution within a regional framework.¹³

However, the critical minority, 26.9% reporting minimal or no contribution, and particularly the qualitative evidence from civil society respondents, points to a structural deficit in Kenya's security model that Security Community Theory helps to identify. Adler and Barnett distinguish between nascent, ascending, and mature security communities: in a nascent community, formal institutional cooperation is established but societal trust and shared identity remain thin; in a mature community, expectations of peaceful relations are deeply internalized across both elite and societal levels. Kenya's security engagement suggests that the EAC remains, at best, an ascending security community, with functional cooperation mechanisms in place but without the deep societal trust and community-level participation that full security community consolidation requires.¹³

The specific civil society concerns about human rights violations in counter-terrorism operations and inadequate community participation in border security governance are analytically important in this context. They suggest that Kenya's security model, by prioritizing state-level cooperation over community-level trust-building, risks generating security in the aggregate while producing insecurity, or at least alienation, at the local level. Ngugi's concern about the securitization of Kenya's foreign policy is directly relevant here: when security policy is defined primarily in state-centric, military terms, it tends to marginalize the human security dimensions, freedom from fear, access to economic opportunity, protection of civil and political rights, that are ultimately the most meaningful indicators of integration success for ordinary citizens.²⁰

A practical implication follows directly from this critique. Kenya should explore the development of community security liaison mechanisms at its principal EAC border crossings, formalized structures through which border community representatives, civil society organizations, and local authorities can engage with security forces on a regular basis to raise concerns, flag abuses, and contribute local intelligence. Such mechanisms exist in various

forms in comparable regional security arrangements elsewhere on the continent, and their absence in Kenya's current border security framework represents an institutional gap that undermines both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of Kenya's security contribution to EAC integration.

6.4 Cross-Cutting Themes and Theoretical Implications

Across all three domains, the findings reveal a consistent structural pattern that the study characterizes as Kenya's dual role as agent and enterprise of integration. As an agent, Kenya has actively shaped the EAC's institutional architecture, diplomatic culture, and security arrangements in ways that have genuinely advanced the integration project. As an enterprise, a country that is itself shaped by, and in some respects constrained by, the imperatives of integration, Kenya has had to navigate domestic political pressures, competing external relationships, and the demands of its own development agenda in ways that have not always been compatible with consistent regional commitment.

A further cross-cutting finding concerns the divergence of stakeholder perspectives across the five categories sampled. Government officials and international development partners consistently offered the most positive assessments across all three domains, while civil society organizations and, to a somewhat lesser extent, business leaders registered the most critical perspectives. This stakeholder divergence is itself analytically significant: it suggests that Kenya's foreign policy generates what might be termed "integration at the top and friction at the bottom", a pattern in which institutional relationships and elite-level cooperation function well, while the communities most directly affected by trade, diplomatic, and security policies experience the gaps and failures most acutely. This pattern has important implications for how integration success is measured and reported: official EAC progress reports and donor assessments, which draw primarily on institutional and government sources, may systematically overestimate the depth and breadth of integration achievements.

The temporal dimension of Kenya's integration role also warrants explicit attention. The 2013–2023 period studied here encompasses two distinct administrations with somewhat different foreign policy emphases. The Kenyatta administration (2013–2022) prioritized infrastructure-led integration, with the SGR as its flagship project, alongside active diplomatic engagement in regional peace processes. The Ruto administration (from 2022) has placed greater emphasis on debt restructuring, economic diplomacy, and the politics of EAC expansion following the DRC's accession. While the cross-sectional design of the present study does not permit systematic tracking of these temporal variations, the qualitative data offer some suggestive evidence: several respondents noted that the DRC's accession has introduced new integration dynamics, including security concerns about eastern DRC instability, that have complicated Kenya's established integration strategies. Future longitudinal research should attend to these temporal shifts as a central analytical dimension.

This dual role has important theoretical implications. It suggests that the either/or framing sometimes found in the African regionalism literature, Kenya as integration leader versus Kenya as integration obstacle, is too crude to capture the complexity of its actual role. The more productive framing is the one this study proposes: Kenya as simultaneously driving and being driven by the integration process, with all the tensions and contradictions that this dual

role entails. Addressing those tensions requires not merely better policy design but also more robust institutional accountability mechanisms, more inclusive stakeholder engagement, and a more honest reckoning with the distributional consequences of Kenya's integration leadership. What the present study demonstrates, above all, is that the measurement of integration progress must extend beyond formal institutional milestones to encompass the lived experiences of the citizens and communities for whom integration is ultimately undertaken.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study has examined Kenya's foreign policy engagement with EAC regional integration across the trade, diplomatic, and security domains during 2013–2023, drawing on mixed-methods analysis of 260 stakeholder responses and situating its findings within Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Security Community Theory. Its central argument, that Kenya has functioned simultaneously as the agent and the enterprise of EAC integration, captures both the genuine achievements of Kenya's regional engagement and the structural limitations that constrain its full realization.

In the trade domain, the study finds a significant gap between formal institutional commitment and practical implementation, with nearly half of respondents reporting that Kenya's tariff regime has reduced rather than expanded regional trade flows. This finding extends existing scholarship on the EAC's implementation gap and adds important qualitative texture by identifying the political economy dynamics, selective compliance, non-tariff barrier maintenance, distributional inequity, that drive it. In diplomacy, Kenya's anchor state identity generates strong positive assessments from most stakeholders, but the gap between elite diplomatic performance and grassroots integration outcomes points to the limits of top-down diplomatic leadership in a community who's deepening ultimately depends on inclusive, citizen-level engagement. In security, Kenya's material contributions to regional stability are widely acknowledged, but the civil society evidence reveals a deficit in community-level trust-building that Security Community Theory identifies as essential for mature security community consolidation.

The policy implications are direct. On trade, the priority must shift from agreement architecture to implementation infrastructure: customs harmonization, non-tariff barrier reduction, capacity-building for SMEs, and transparent monitoring of protocol compliance. Specifically, Kenya should champion the establishment of a dedicated EAC non-tariff barrier monitoring mechanism with civil society participation, and should prioritize the regulatory streamlining of its three busiest border crossings, Busia, Namanga, and Malaba, as flagship implementations of its formal commitments. On diplomacy, Kenya must develop institutional mechanisms for more inclusive engagement, consulting border communities, small-scale traders, and civil society organizations as partners in integration rather than as passive recipients of elite-negotiated agreements. The creation of structured EAC civil society consultation platforms, modelled on comparable mechanisms in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), would represent a concrete step towards bridging the gap between diplomatic leadership and grassroots integration outcomes. On security, a genuine transition from state-centric, military-led approaches to community-oriented, human-security frameworks is necessary for the EAC to progress towards security community maturity. Across all domains,

accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure that Kenya's integration leadership is perceived, and demonstrated, as serving regional rather than exclusively national interests.

The study's theoretical contributions are also significant. By employing Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Security Community Theory in a genuinely integrated manner, applying each framework to interpret specific empirical findings rather than treating them as alternative single-theory accounts, it demonstrates the analytical value of multi-framework approaches in regional integration research. The tension between institutional design and implementation compliance (illuminated by Neoliberal Institutionalism), between identity performance and material outcome (illuminated by Constructivism), and between formal security cooperation and societal trust (illuminated by Security Community Theory) are not competing explanations but complementary dimensions of a complex integration dynamic that no single theoretical lens can fully capture. The study also makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating that stakeholder-grounded mixed-methods research, sampling across government, business, civil society, academia, and international partners, can generate insights that institutional analysis and elite interviewing alone cannot, precisely because it captures the distributional heterogeneity of integration experience across different social positions and interests.

For practitioners and policymakers engaged with EAC integration, the study's findings offer several actionable insights. Kenya's EAC policymakers should commission an independent audit of non-tariff barrier incidence across the Community's major trade corridors and use its findings to develop a time-bound reduction programme with clear compliance benchmarks. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should develop a structured framework for civil society engagement in EAC diplomatic preparations, ensuring that the perspectives of small-scale traders, women's organizations, and border community representatives are systematically incorporated into Kenya's negotiating positions. The National Security Council should commission an independent review of the human rights implications of Kenya's border security operations, with a view to developing community engagement protocols that build rather than erode trust between security forces and the populations they serve. These recommendations are not primarily technical; they require political will and a genuine commitment to the proposition that integration is not merely an elite project but a transformation that must be experienced as beneficial by the full range of citizens it affects.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. First, longitudinal research tracking changes in stakeholder perceptions and policy behavior over the 2013–2023 period would provide important insights into whether the patterns identified here represent enduring structural features or contingent responses to specific political conjunctures. Second, the role of non-state actors, diaspora communities, regional civil society networks, multinational corporations, and informal trade associations, in shaping EAC integration outcomes remains significantly underexplored and warrants systematic investigation. Third, comparative analysis of how other EAC member states navigate the tension between national interest and regional commitment would contextualize Kenya's experience and contribute to broader theoretical debates about the conditions under which regional hegemons support or undermine integration. Fourth, research specifically examining the gender dimensions of Kenya's EAC trade and security policies, attending to the differential experiences of women cross-border traders and female border community members, would address an important gap in the existing literature.

Finally, community-level research on the integration experiences of border populations, who bear both the costs and the potential benefits of deeper integration most directly, would provide a crucial counterpoint to the elite and institutional perspectives that currently dominate the literature.

NOTES

1. Kagwanja 2021; Murithi 2020.
2. Mulu 2023; Ngugi 2022.
3. Anyango 2021; Kagwanja 2020.
4. Murithi 2022; Mulu 2021.
5. Kagwanja 2020.
6. Ngugi 2021.
7. Ngugi 2022; Mulu 2023.
8. Keohane and Nye 2017.
9. Murithi 2022.
10. Wendt 1999.
11. Mulu 2021.
12. Murithi 2020.
13. Adler and Barnett 1998.
14. Ngugi 2021.
15. Murithi 2019; Bach 2016.
16. Kagwanja 2020.
17. Anyango 2021.
18. World Bank 2022.
19. Mulu 2018.
20. Ngugi 2021.
21. Murithi 2022; Anyango 2021.

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