



Singapore's Outreach to East Africa: Navigating Uncertainty with New Partnerships

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By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

Singapore's announcement to embark on negotiations for a free trade agreement with the East African Community (EAC) signals a strategic approach to reappraising opportunities and laying down cooperative frameworks amid the shifting global order.

COMMENTARY

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam's [inaugural visit to Tanzania](#) – a first for a Singaporean President – was marked by the announcement that Singapore would begin [negotiations for a free trade agreement \(FTA\)](#) with the East African Community (EAC). If "[pathfinder multilateralism](#)" is urgently needed in a world where institutions appear to be weakening faster than they are being constructed, this endeavour reflects Singapore's commitment to multilateral institution-building, while attending to its own national interests.

At first glance, one might question its significance, given that Singaporean businesses have relatively limited economic engagement with the region as a whole. Much of that is concentrated bilaterally in a few countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, and Tanzania, where the [total bilateral trade](#) with these three economies amounted to under \$650 million in 2025 – roughly a tenth of Singapore's annual trade with Cambodia, by comparison. Yet moving the framework to the regional level signals a level of ambition that exemplifies Singapore's new strategy for devising trade resilience amid "great global volatility", as Foreign Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan [recently described it](#).

Regional Background

Among Africa's multiple Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the EAC is one of the most deeply integrated. It already enjoys a common market, regional passport, free movement of peoples, and customs union. Targets include a [monetary union](#) (the protocol has already been signed in 2013) and even [political federation](#). If that seems ambitious, it is worth pointing out that federation is also on the African Union's 2063 Agenda and deeply rooted in the shared philosophy of Pan-Africanism.

Yet there is even more than this in this particular region. While the EAC was officially formed in 1967, its roots go far deeper back into colonial times, when Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika (the predecessor to Tanzania, which philatelists might recognise) enjoyed monetary, postal, and customs unions. Along the way, it has faced some notable turbulences, including the dissolution of the EAC from 1977 to 1999, such that the REC did not exist when Tanzania invaded Uganda to overthrow Idi Amin in 1979.

Yet since its reformation, it has become among the most dynamic RECs in Africa. All but two [EAC member states](#) (Burundi and Somalia) presently exceed the IMF's 2026 forecast for Africa's continental average GDP growth of 4% (which already makes it the second-fastest growing region of the world), with Rwanda and Uganda leading the charge at over 7% each, for a regional average of 5.7% growth.

Moreover, the EAC has rapidly expanded in recent years, with new additions of South Sudan (2016), DRC (2022), and Somalia (2024). This gives it a total population above 340 million and an over \$350 billion regional economy – roughly where ASEAN was 35 years ago in both growth rates and gross market size, as President Tharman [noted](#). This is all encompassed within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which began operating in 2019. The EAC may thus serve as a gateway to the AfCFTA, which is the world's largest FTA by participating countries (54), and will form a continental market of over 1.4 billion people.

Known and Unknown Uncertainties

Media coverage tends to focus on disruptions, and Africa is unfortunately depicted poorly. The 2026 [recurrence of Ebola](#) in the DRC and Uganda as well as ongoing conflicts in the new members, [DRC](#), [South Sudan](#), and [Somalia](#) (including the unresolved issue with [breakaway Somaliland](#)), remain cause for concern. These challenges are serious and not to be underestimated, but their spillover potential into the wider EAC is relatively limited. Citizens in other parts of the EAC may be wholly unaffected and indeed frequently unacquainted with these challenges, due partly to their distance from everyday reality in the rest of rapidly-growing East Africa.

Singaporean businesses also have a less-established footprint in the region, although this is [rapidly changing](#). In embarking on negotiations for an FTA, officials will be cognisant that this merely opens the door: businesses will need to step through it. Difficulties like cultural differences, a lack of business networks, and unfamiliarity with laws and policies will matter. One might term these the "known unknowns" as Singaporean enterprises engage with a new region.

While these remain challenging, the “unknown unknowns” have been growing in once-stable parts of the world where deep trade relations were built. If 2025 was marked by unpredictable tariffs, the war in Iran has made 2026 even more challenging. For all Africa’s flashpoints and historical challenges, most of the continent has been steadily growing throughout this century. There may not be any inevitability about it, but one might recall China, India, and other giants moving through these developmental stages in recent decades.

Developing Latent Potentials

Africa is now the world’s only region with a rapidly-growing population. This means the future of both labour and markets will be concentrated here. Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan [drew attention](#) to her nation’s opportunities in logistics, mining, energy, agriculture, and financial services – areas in which a convergence of interests and mutual benefit could play out.

Mindful of the difficulties mentioned earlier, Singapore has prudently identified a region for future connectivity because of its rapidly-developing governance institutions and the vibrant economic growth to show for it. The EAC’s recent expansion may make political federation dreams more complex, but the ambition is unmistakable.

Singapore brings its own experience of regional integration to the table. This may bode well for eventual EAC-ASEAN interconnectivity whose combined population would exceed a billion people. Moreover, the Indian Ocean region was a historic centre of trade and perhaps “[the world’s first ‘cosmopolitan’ maritime arena.](#)” The east coast of Africa, from Egypt down through Zanzibar and the Cape of Good Hope all played a vital part in this story. Its rapid growth may be less surprising when one thinks longer term of the shifting weight of economic gravity, with Kishore Mahbubani predicting that the second half of the 21st century will be an ‘[Afro-Asian](#)’ century.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, a journey of a thousand miles always begins with the first step, and Singapore has reached out to new partners in East Africa to begin another journey. In pressing ahead of its businesses, Singapore is laying down the connectivity infrastructure for future resilient frameworks that will be vitally important as other parts of the world face a destabilising world order.

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