

It's Later Than You Think: Why East Africa Must Unite Now

The region has the people, the resources, and the history. What it lacks is the state to organise them — and the clock is running.

[Byline placeholder: Timothy A. Bryant]

Imagine the morning of Federation Day, 2040. In Arusha, where the consultations began a decade and a half earlier, the charter is read aloud — in Swahili first. In Mombasa, the fleet of a unified East Africa Navy takes station over the sea lanes its civilisation has sailed for a thousand years. In Goma, a city the world once used up and abandoned, a battery plant ships its first export run to Dar es Salaam. A child in Bujumbura starts her school day in her mother tongue, continues it in Swahili, and will learn, as her third language, the English that opens the world without owning her.

None of this is fantasy. Every element exists today as capacity. What is missing is only the decision to organise the capacity as a state.

The Cost of Waiting

East Africa is home to 330 million people, more than the United States. Its combined territory is larger than India. It holds 60% of the world's cobalt, vast deposits of copper, gold, and rare earths, and the youngest population on Earth. It speaks a common language — Swahili — across two hundred ethnic groups. It has a thousand-year history of commerce, cosmopolitanism, and self-governance that predates every European empire.

Yet, it negotiates with the world as eight weak states, each played off against the other. Foreign navies crowd its coast. Foreign miners extract its minerals on terms set elsewhere. Foreign banks price its currency. Its armies are fragmented, its electricity grids disconnected, its wheat imported from countries that have less land and less sun. The region does not lack resources. It lacks the political architecture to convert resources into power.

The cost of this fragmentation is not abstract. It is measured in the four out of five Congolese who have no electricity. It is measured in the Somali farmer who cannot get his grain to Nairobi because there is no rail. It is measured in the Tanzanian graduate who builds apps for London because there is no venture capital in Arusha. It is measured, most painfully, in the wars — Kagera 1978, the Great Lakes 1996–2003, Tigray 2020–2022,

eastern Congo today — that break out every generation because there is no regional power strong enough to prevent them.

What Federation Would Mean

A unified East African state — a confederation of the eight Partner States under a single constitution — would change these facts at a stroke. A single currency, backed by a sovereign mineral fund, would end the dependency on foreign-exchange markets. A unified defence force would secure the coast and the borders without relying on foreign bases in Djibouti. A single energy grid would link Inga's hydroelectric power on the Congo River to the industries of Nairobi, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam. A common agricultural policy would convert the region from a wheat importer to a grain exporter.

These are not new ideas. The East African Community has been talking about them since 1967. The difference is the civilisational frame. Previous attempts at East African union treated the region as a collection of nation-states borrowing Western institutions. A new book, *Azania Reborn*, proposes something different: a state built on the region's own civilisational grammar — the Swahili tradition of rooted cosmopolitanism, the African ethic of consensus and communal land tenure, the Athenian devices of sortition and audit adapted to a federation of 330 million people.

Five Decisions That Cannot Wait

Azania Reborn firmly advances the argument that everything reduces, for the people who must act, to five decisions. None can be deferred to 2039.

1. **Settle the language question now.** Kiswahili is already the lingua franca of the region. Make it the first official language of the confederation, with English as the second, and commit to a twenty-year transition to Kiswahili-medium technical education colleges. A state that thinks in another civilisation's language will govern in that civilisation's interests.
2. **Found the sovereign fund now.** The next decade of mineral contracts is being negotiated today. Without a confederation-wide fund to capture the value, those contracts will be signed by individual states under pressure from foreign miners, and the wealth will leave as it always has.
3. **Sign the core-group pact now.** Not all eight states will move at the same speed. A core group of five — Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi — could begin the confederation and open it to the others. The alternative is another decade of communiqués and no action.
4. **Write the collective defence clause now.** The region's security architecture is being shaped by foreign powers with interests of their own. A unified defence force, under civilian command and a rotating presidency, would secure the region's interests rather than those of distant capitals.
5. **Promise the referenda now.** A state born of summit deals is a deal, not a founding. A state born of popular consent is a civilisation reclaiming itself. Schedule the referenda, publish the constitution in Swahili, and let the peoples decide.

The Crime of Succeeding Without Permission

There is one more thing the drafters should know, and it comes from the most instructive comparison in modern history: India and China. In 1980, both were poor, populous, post-colonial states. India followed the Western advice — liberalise first, protect later, let the market decide. China did the opposite — protect first, liberalise later, let the state direct. Today China is a pole of the world system; India is still struggling to industrialise. The difference was not culture or geography. It was the sequence.

China did not become the enemy of the Western world because of its authoritarianism. The world is full of obedient dictatorships the West arms and embraces. China became the enemy because it succeeded without permission — because it proved, at the scale of a billion people, that the development lecture was a lie, that the ladder to prosperity was real and had simply been kicked away, and that a poor country could find it again on its own terms.

That is the one thing the empire of values can never forgive. Not the prisons — everyone has prisons. The unforgivable sin is the example, the demonstration that a different model works, that a civilisation can modernise on its own terms, and that the poor need not wait for the rich to approve their development.

East Africa should expect the same immune reaction. A federation that controls its minerals, currency, and coast; that feeds itself and powers itself; that speaks in its own language and negotiates on its own terms — will not be applauded by the powers that currently negotiate with eight weak states one at a time. Expect the pressure: through finance, through narrative campaigns about governance, through courtship of individual states to break the core.

The answer is not to seek permission. The answer is to become unignorable. The East African Community, at 330 million people, has the scale to run the China sequence: industrial policy first, strategic protection, state-directed credit, literacy and health before liberalisation, and only then, from strength, engagement with the world. What it lacks is the state apparatus to operationalise it consistently over the next two decades. That is what federation would provide.

For the Children

The median East African is under twenty. She has no memory of the first Community's collapse in 1977 and no stake in the jealousies of her parents' ministries. The state of 2040 is being built for her, and by her, because she is the one constituency that cannot lose.

Bob Marley sang it on the record he titled *Survival*, while Africa's last liberation wars were still being fought: "Unite for the benefit of your people, for it is later than you think." The five autonomies were never abstractions. They are bread not priced by foreign wars, light in the houses of the four in five Congolese now in darkness, a currency that keeps its value, a defense shield that actually shields. Union is not the project; the benefit is the project. Union is its only vehicle.

The constitutional window is 2026–2030. The federation is 2040. The deadline in the song is not rhetoric. It is the audit.

— *This essay is drawn from **Azania Reborn: The Civilization-State and the Constitution of East Africa**, a new book on the political economy of East African federation.*