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Why the Kenya-Tanzania Border Row Undermines Prospective African Free Trade

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Tanzanian authorities have retaliated against Kenya's decision to restrict movement between the Kenya-Tanzania border over Coronavirus by forbidding all automobiles and persons from Kenya. This decision follows fears of cross-border transmission between Kenya and Tanzania that was first expressed by Kenya after identifying the Kenya-Tanzania and Kenya-Somalia borders as hotspots for coronavirus.^[i] As a preventive measure, Kenya maintained that cross-border long distance truck drivers must be tested for Covid-19 before being granted entry into Kenya. The diplomatic tiff^[ii] between Kenya and Tanzania came shortly after President Magufuli skipped the video-conference between East African Community (EAC) heads of state and governments on 12 May 2020.^[iii] According to the EAC, the consultative video-conference was meant to assess the development of Covid-19 in the region in a bid to develop a regional approach. President Magufuli would later in June suggest that Tanzania is free of Covid-19 as God had "answered" their prayers.^[iv]

While public health is essential for both Kenya and Tanzania, bilateral consultation must be conducted between the two countries before any cross-border Coronavirus protocols are developed and implemented. Indeed, such consultation should apply to any other aspects like customs and immigration among others to enable seamless transactions at points of entry. This is the only sure way to promote free trade and enhance good neighbourliness between the two countries. Indeed the standoff has already negatively affected livelihoods of small traders and their communities, and high prices of commodities especially food items are already being reported after the supply chains were disrupted.^[v]

The diplomatic spat between Kenya and Tanzania spells doom for the EAC and by extension the highly ambitious African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) entered into force on 30 May 2019, after 22 countries had deposited ratification instruments. While the dispute between Kenya and Tanzania could be dismissed as "small", it helps put into perspective the enormous challenges awaiting African states in their attempt to eliminate trade barriers under AfCFTA. While AfCFTA is welcome and long overdue, especially for the economic recovery of Africa, African politicians must show leadership if this trade agreement is to succeed. AfCFTA seeks to promote intra-African trade and integrate the African market hence make Africa a strategic player in global trade and policy. As of May 2020, only Eritrea was yet to sign the AfCFTA agreement – which 30 African states have already ratified. If successful, AfCFTA will create a single market for its population of about 1.3 billion people, perhaps the best news for Africa since breaking colonial chains. The implementation of AfCFTA that was set for 1 July 2020 has, however, been postponed indefinitely following the Covid-19 epidemic.

Closer to home in the EAC, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia have ratified AfCFTA. Tanzania and the EAC's lone ranger, Burundi, are yet to ratify. The Kenya-Tanzania border trade dispute following Coronavirus fears exposes African political leaders as the weak link in promoting African

integration. While integration, both political and economic, is always challenging, the opportunities it provides to the African continent are enormous. The United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) would not have attained the level of development they experience today if they had existed and transacted business as individual states. The average population of the EU's single market is at least 520 million, the USA about 330 million, China 1.4 billion while India has 1.3 billion people. There is power in numbers. They are good for negotiating favourable trade agreements and for market access. If fully implemented, the AfCFTA market of about 1.3 billion people will catapult Africa into the league of China and India in terms of market.

As the genesis of the novel Covid-19, China may face backlash from investors and other players. Though not new, the current diplomatic spat and trade rivalry between the USA and China over trade barriers and tariffs levied by the USA and conflicts over technology transfer especially regarding Huawei could be a signal of more strained relations in the future. Indeed the USA-China trade dispute has had ripple effect on other players in Europe and beyond, with many torn between supporting the USA or China, or remaining non-aligned.^[vi] Consequently, Africa under AfCFTA could reap from especially Western investors and manufacturers keen on diversifying their production outside China as they seek to minimise disruptions caused by Coronavirus. For this to be achieved, African leaders must put their political act together to ensure there is the political will required to legislate and domesticate AfCFTA among signatories. While it is too early to celebrate, the fact that Coronavirus has not caused the anticipated devastation in Africa, at least for now, means the continent is resilient and can practise its agency fairly well.

African leaders, including those in the EAC, must therefore look to the bigger picture of African integration even as they battle with Covid-19. The Coronavirus, or cheap political brinkmanship, should not be used to deny East Africans and indeed all Africans the benefits that accrue from integrated markets. There is no pride in ruling starving poor nations, and African integration is part of the solution towards economic freedom for the African people. After all, the international borders of Africa are nothing but a European colonial creation. We must love ourselves and the African freedom.

End Notes

[i]<https://www.president.go.ke/2020/05/16/the-sixth-presidential-address-on-the-coronavirus-pandemic-at-state-house-nairobi-saturday-16th-may-2020/>

[ii]<https://standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001372080/magufuli-uhuru-phone-call-eases-border-tension>

[iii]<https://www.eac.int/communique/1725-communiqu%C3%A9-heads-of-state-consultative-meeting-of-the-east-african-community>

[iv]<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52966016>

[v]<https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/business/-tanzania-kenya-trade-ties-blow-hot-cold-342342>

[vi]<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/14/tensions-with-china-are-rising-whats-next-step/>