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EAC LEADERS LAUNCH AGGRESSIVE WAR ON NON-TARIFF BARRIERS

With the decision of East African Community member countries to end barriers to trade, what will business look like? Will the changes come to fruition? **Moses Mulondo** writes about what these changes mean for the business community in the regional bloc.



President Museveni (left) greets his Burundian counterpart, Évariste Ndayishimiye, as Tanzanian leader Suhulu Hassan (second-left) and Kenyan leader William Ruto (third-left) look on. This was during the 25th Heads of State Summit in Arusha, Tanzania, on Saturday

The East African Community (EAC) heads of state have made aggressive resolutions aimed at enhancing the regional bloc's economic integration.

During the 25th Heads of State Summit in Tanzania's tourism city of Arusha last Saturday, the EAC presidents resolved that all necessary measures need to be taken to eliminate the remaining non-tariff barriers (NTBs) undermining the regional common market, which provides for free movement of goods, services, labour and capital within the region.

DIRECTIVE TO COUNCIL

For the business community, including investors and traders, one of the most exciting and aggressive decisions made by the summit is the resolution that the EAC Council of Ministers resolve all outstanding reported NTBs to trade by June 30, 2026.

Speaking shortly before handing over the chairmanship, Kenyan President William Ruto said so much has been achieved in the EAC economic integration efforts. He added that there were several challenges the leaders had decided to solve expeditiously.

"A key obstacle to trade in our region is the ever-evolving NTBs that continue to hinder effective trade between and among partner states. Eliminating NTBs, enhancing infrastructure connectivity and regulatory harmonisation remained a key priority during my stewardship of the community," Ruto said.

The Kenyan president revealed that concerted efforts to eliminate NTBs have yielded results, with the number of reported barriers declining by about 56%, from 61 in 2024 to 27 last year.

Ruto expressed gratitude for the trade volumes during his tenure as EAC chairperson in the last year. The volume of trade among EAC member countries has exponentially grown by nearly 22% from $33b in 2024 to $40.3b in 2025.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION

President Yoweri Museveni implored member states to spare no effort in ensuring that the EAC economic bloc succeeds, to support the wealth-creation initiatives of their citizens.

Arguing that bigger markets accelerate economic growth, Museveni said all the three richest countries in the world, the US, China, and India, have bigger populations, which provide big internal markets for goods and services produced.

"The GDP [gross domestic product] of the whole of Africa is only $6.6 trillion. US's economy is $31.8 trillion. China's GDP is $20.6 trillion and India's economy is $4. 1trillion. When China opened its economy in 1978, its economy was only $149b. When India opened their economy in 1991, their economy was only $270b," he said.

Giving the example of the US President Donald Trump who has announced tariffs on goods from various countries, such as South Korea, President Museveni said. "While we look for foreign markets, the reliable internal market is the internal one," he said.

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President Museveni implored EAC member countries to be committed to the implementation of the charter of the East African Community and the roadmap. He also rallied for commitment to other economic integrations in Africa, including the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the African Continental Free Trade Area, to greatly increase intra-continental trade.

Using the Luganda proverb of *ekitatta Muhima tekimumalako nte ze* (What doesn't kill a Muhima cannot cause him to cease to have cattle), Museveni said Africans can still catch up even when they have lost many opportunities in failed integration efforts.

"What is pushing the migration of the African youth who are dying in the Mediterranean Sea on the way to Europe? It is the narrowness of Africa's money economy that doesn't create the necessary jobs. Investors get frustrated when they cannot even export within the East African Community," Museveni said.

EAC CUSTOMS BOND LAUNCHED

During the summit, the heads of state also launched the East African Community (EAC) customs bond, a single regional customs guarantee that replaces the current requirement for multiple national bonds along transit routes.

Under the new arrangement, traders and clearing agents will secure one bond recognised across all EAC partner states, instead of arranging separate guarantees in each country of transit.

Partner states rolled out the customs bond in January, after it had been successfully piloted in Uganda.

"This trade facilitation instrument will enhance customs security to ensure payment of duties and taxes if goods placed under customs control are not properly delivered or accounted for. The bond is, therefore, a key milestone in strengthening the implementation of the Single Customs Territory and facilitating the movement of goods across our region," Kenyan President William Ruto said.

The summit also involved the launch of the 7th EAC Development Strategy (2026/27-2030/31), which sets the strategic direction for accelerating regional integration and socioeconomic transformation over the next five years.

The strategy builds on achievements and lessons from the previous development cycle and aligns with EAC Vision 2050, the African Union Agenda 2063, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

The state minister for finance in charge of general duties, Henry Musasizi, who was part of Uganda's delegation that attended the 25th EAC Summit in Arusha, said: "The

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