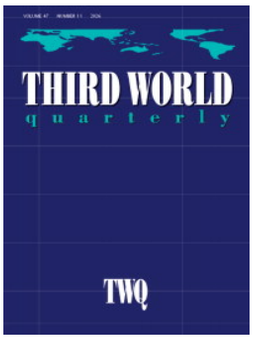

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Pragmatic security shift? How Mozambique bypassed SADC in favour of Rwanda and why it matters

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Mozambique's foreign policy decision to bypass the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in favour of a bilateral security partnership with Rwanda during the Cabo Delgado insurgency. Presented as a pragmatic response to urgent threats, this shift instead reflects deeper transformations in African security governance. Drawing on process tracing and fieldwork in Mozambique, the analysis shows how elite interests, institutional inefficiencies, and regional power dynamics intersected in shaping this choice. Using new regionalism, the rational actor model, and neopatrimonialism, the article argues that the decision was not merely strategic but also deeply political, rooted in informal networks, economic imperatives and the erosion of multilateral legitimacy. The case demonstrates how small states in the Global South can act as strategic agents, challenging assumptions of passivity in global norms diffusion. Mozambique's trajectory contributes to wider debates on sovereignty, African agency and the rise of bilateralism, raising critical questions about the future relevance of regional organisations such as SADC in responding to insurgency, terrorism and other transnational security challenges. More broadly, it shows how bilateral security choices can both reflect and accelerate the weakening of regional multilateral frameworks.

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Introduction

Cabo Delgado, Mozambique's northernmost and least developed province, has long faced socio-economic marginalisation, weak governance and political grievances. These conditions created fertile ground for radicalisation, culminating in an insurgency that erupted in 2017 (Ewi et al. 2022). The crisis, unfolding in a region rich in natural gas and rubies, escalated rapidly, exposing the state's limited capacity to respond and prompting Mozambique to seek external military support.

In 2021, Mozambique bypassed the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and neighbouring partners, instead opting for a bilateral military partnership with Rwanda. This decision illustrates how small and vulnerable states may prioritise rapid and reliable intervention over regional commitments when facing acute threats.

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Comparable patterns emerge in other contexts. In Mali, for instance, authorities opted to engage the Wagner Group rather than rely on the Economic Community of Western States (International Crisis Group 2023a), reflecting similar frustrations with the speed, cohesion and perceived effectiveness of regional multilateral responses. While the contexts differ, both cases point to a broader shift towards bilateral or ad hoc security arrangements, raising questions and underscoring the tensions such approaches create for regional security cooperation frameworks.

Beyond immediate security imperatives, Mozambique's decision must be understood within a complex regional landscape. While the SADC formally constituted the primary multilateral response framework, regional actors such as South Africa and Tanzania played uneven and, at times, ambivalent roles shaped by strategic interests, domestic political considerations and institutional constraints.

In this context, the turn towards Rwanda was not merely a pragmatic deviation, but a politically consequential choice. It illustrates how bilateral security arrangements can both reflect and accelerate the weakening of regional multilateral frameworks in African security governance.

Most analyses of African security have focused on powerful states, often overlooking the dilemmas faced by the weaker ones. This article addresses that gap by asking: *Why did Mozambique bypass SADC and opt for Rwanda as its military partner during the Cabo Delgado insurgency?* Answering this question provides critical insight into how security decision-making is evolving in Africa, particularly as states increasingly turn to bilateral arrangements that may reshape or bypass regional multilateral frameworks.

It argues that the decision reflected a mix of structural constraints, strategic calculations and elite-driven governance dynamics. It highlights Tanzania's disengagement under President Magufuli, concerns about South Africa's hegemonic dominance, particularly over the Liquefied Natural Gas sector; and Rwanda's proven ability to deploy rapidly and effectively.

The case highlights how South–South security cooperation is reshaping African security architectures and challenging assumptions about who has the legitimacy and capacity to intervene. To analyse this decision, the article draws on three complementary lenses: new regionalism, the rational actor model and neopatrimonialism. Together they capture the interplay of institutional inefficiencies, strategic reasoning and elite interests in Mozambique's foreign policy choices.

From regionalism to elite interests: theoretical lenses on Mozambique's security choices

Theoretical frameworks

Regionalism has expanded beyond its initial economic focus into what scholars term *new regionalism*: flexible, multi-actor forms of cooperation shaped by globalisation, security challenges and external actors (Hettne and Söderbaum 1998, 2000). Unlike earlier approaches that emphasised formal, institutionalised arrangements such as economic communities and regional organisations, new regionalism accepts fluidity and hybridity. It highlights how states increasingly resort to ad hoc, issue-based partnerships when multilateral mechanisms prove slow or ineffective.

The rational actor model, popularised by Allison's study of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1971), views states as unitary actors making strategic calculations to maximise utility. Decision makers assess costs and benefits, rank alternatives and select the option that best serves national interests. While the rational actor model has been criticised for overlooking bureaucratic politics and elite influence (Allison and Zelikow 1999), it remains valuable for explaining moments when leaders act decisively under pressure.

Neopatrimonialism, rooted in Weber's concept of patrimonial authority, provides a complementary lens on governance in Africa. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) define it as a hybrid regime where formal institutions coexist with, but are often undermined by, informal networks of clientelism, presidentialism and patronage. Chabal and Daloz (1999), in contrast, highlight the 'politics of disorder', where apparent institutional weakness is intentional and functional. This study primarily adopts the institutionalist strand, while recognising that both perspectives underscore the centrality of informal power relations, a dynamic especially relevant to understanding Mozambique's security choices.

Taken together, these frameworks are treated not as competing explanations but as complementary lenses capturing different dimensions of the same decision processes. New regionalism situates Mozambique's choice within a broader context of shifting and often fragmented regional governance, where formal multilateral mechanisms coexist with more flexible and ad hoc arrangements.

The rational actor model helps explain how decision makers, faced with urgent security threats, evaluated available options and prioritised speed, reliability and effectiveness. Neopatrimonialism, in turn, reveals how these strategic calculations were embedded in informal networks of power, elite interests and personalised governance dynamics.

Rather than operating in isolation, these frameworks interact to provide a multi-layered explanation: institutional constraints shape the available options, strategic reasoning guides the selection among them, and elite dynamics influence both how options are perceived and how decisions are ultimately implemented.

Hypotheses

From these frameworks, three hypotheses are derived:

- **H1: Neopatrimonialism:** If the decision was elite-driven, formal institutions such as Parliament and the Council of State would have been bypassed in favour of informal negotiations within FRELIMO and its economic allies. Preliminary evidence includes the limited formal deliberation reported at the time and the central role of executive networks in shaping security decisions.
- **H2: Rational actor model:** If strategic calculation dominated, the leadership would have opted for the partner offering the most rapid and effective military support with the lowest political and financial cost. Early indicators point to Rwanda's rapid deployment capability and operational effectiveness, which contrasted with slower and more fragmented regional responses.
- **H3: New regionalism:** If operating within the logic of new regionalism, Mozambique would have prioritised flexible bilateral arrangements over multilateral institutional mechanisms. The decision to bypass regional processes in favour of a bilateral partnership provides an initial indication of this preference for flexible, ad hoc security arrangements.

Methodological orientation

This article analyses decision-making processes up to July 2021, when Rwanda deployed its forces. This moment is treated as a turning point: it marked the culmination of internal deliberations and external negotiations that redefined Mozambique's security posture. Later developments, including the continuation of Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) and Tanzania's subsequent bilateral deployment in Cabo Delgado, fall outside the scope of analysis, as they belong to a different phase of security governance.

To investigate the choice of Rwanda over SADC, the study employs process tracing, a method designed to identify causal mechanisms within complex sequences of events (George and Bennett 2005; Beach and Pedersen 2019). A chronological map was constructed covering the period from the first insurgent attack in Mocímboa da Praia in 2017 to Rwanda's deployment in July 2021. Evidence was then assessed through *hoop tests* (necessary but not sufficient conditions), *smoking gun tests* (sufficient but not necessary conditions), and *straw-in-the-wind tests* (weaker but corroborative indicators).

The empirical material is based on 10 semi-structured interviews conducted in Mozambique in two rounds of fieldwork (November 2023–January 2024 and July–August 2024) with political actors, government officials, civil society representatives, security officers, SADC representatives, diplomats, journalists and regional analysts. Given the sensitivity of security issues, interviews were anonymised and often accessed through personal networks, providing elite-level insights rarely captured in public sources.

To strengthen validity, interviews were triangulated with extensive documentary analysis, including government communiqués, press releases, parliamentary debates, SADC summit minutes, civil society reports, and national and international media coverage, allowing perspectives to be cross-checked across official, civil and external domains. Statements obtained from interviews were compared against official records, media reports and independent analyses to assess consistency, identify discrepancies and evaluate the credibility of competing narratives.

Particular attention was paid to areas of convergence across different types of sources, as well as to contradictions, which were further investigated through additional evidence or follow-up interpretation. This approach allowed the study to move beyond single-source accounts and strengthen causal inference in a context marked by limited transparency.

This combination of sources was particularly important in Mozambique's opaque decision-making environment, where informal networks often substitute for institutional deliberation. By systematically cross-checking interview testimony with documentary evidence, the study evaluates whether Mozambique's decision is best explained by institutional inefficiencies (new regionalism), rational cost–benefit reasoning (rational actor model), or elite-driven dynamics (neopatrimonialism).

Tracing the decision: methods and evidence

This study used a qualitative design, combining elite interviews and process tracing to reconstruct Mozambique's decision to bypass SADC in favour of Rwanda. Given the closed nature of decision-making and scarce formal records, qualitative methods allowed hidden processes to be traced through triangulation of multiple sources.

Positionality

As a Mozambican researcher with professional experience in governance and humanitarian sectors, I had privileged access to political networks and decision-making circles. This insider status enabled me to reach a more nuanced interpretation of informal dynamics that are often inaccessible to external researchers. At the same time, it required careful reflexivity to mitigate risks of over-identification and confirmation bias.

To address these challenges, the study combined insider access with systematic triangulation across diverse sources, including external observers and independent reports, and maintained analytical distance by critically assessing interview narratives rather than treating them as authoritative accounts. Where possible, interpretations were cross-checked against alternative perspectives to avoid reproducing dominant or politically convenient narratives.

Process tracing and hypotheses

Process tracing was used as the core analytical tool, enabling a structured causal analysis of decision-making (George and Bennett 2005; Beach and Pedersen 2019). A chronological map of events, from the first insurgent attack in Mocímboa da Praia in 2017 to the deployment of Rwandan forces in July 2021, was constructed. Each turning point was assessed against three hypotheses derived from the theoretical frameworks.

Each hypothesis was assessed through hoop tests (necessary but not sufficient conditions), smoking gun tests (sufficient evidence), and straw-in-the-wind indicators (weaker, corroborative evidence). This framework allowed evidence to be systematically organised and evaluated, avoiding reliance on single sources or anecdotal accounts.

Illustrative tables

Tables 1–3 summarise the types of evidence expected for each hypothesis. These tables are methodological tools: they specify indicators and sources without pre-empting the empirical findings, which are developed in subsequent sections.

Table 1. Testing the neopatrimonialism hypothesis.

Type of evidence	Example (generic)	Type of test
Absence of institutional records or debates	No mention of the decision in official proceedings (Parliament, Council of State)	Hoop test
Testimony from insiders about informal decisionmaking	Statements indicating that a narrow elite circle took the decision	Hoop test
Indications of economic or corporate influence	Links between ruling elites and business actors aligned with the decision	Smoking gun
Centralisation of power in the executive	Evidence of decisions concentrated in the presidency	Hoop test

Table 2. Testing the rational actor model hypothesis.

Type of evidence	Example (generic)	Type of test
References to urgency in official statements	Leadership frames the situation as requiring immediate action	Hoop test
Timelines contrasting options	Delays in one option contrasted with speed of another	Smoking gun
Testimony about strategic or logistical reasoning	Officials cite effectiveness, cost or feasibility as main drivers	Hoop test
Comparison of political and financial costs	Preference for the option with lower domestic and international cost	Hoop test/straw-in-the-wind

Table 3. Testing the new regionalism hypothesis.

Type of evidence	Example (generic)	Type of test
Choice of bilateral partner over regional body	Direct engagement outside multilateral mechanisms	Hoop test
Criticism of regional inefficiency	Statements or postponements highlighting slow collective response	Hoop test
Evidence of external funding or support	Bilateral partner externally financed, minimising domestic costs	Smoking gun
Comparative regional cases	Similar ad hoc bilateral partnerships in other contexts	Straw-in-the-wind

A chronological map of events (2017–2021) was used to trace turning points, while triangulation of interviews with policy documents and diplomatic records clarified how institutional inefficiencies, strategic calculations, and elite dynamics shaped Mozambique's choice.

Laying the groundwork: Mozambique's internal, bilateral, regional and international security efforts before Rwanda

Internal context: the driving forces behind Mozambique's shift in foreign policy

Mozambique's turn from an SADC-centred response to a bilateral arrangement with Rwanda was rooted less in external opportunity than in internal political dynamics. Decision-making was highly centralised in the presidency and within Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), with formal checks playing a limited role. Under President Filipe Nyusi's dual leadership of state and party (since 2015), key security choices increasingly bypassed consultative bodies, reinforcing informal loyalty networks and a personalised, elite-driven style of governance consistent with neo-patrimonial patterns.

This concentration of authority pre-dated the insurgency but intensified as violence escalated. In April 2021, the National Defence and Security Council publicly framed the threat as 'external aggression', marking a turning point that coincided with accelerated presidential diplomacy. On 28 April 2021, Nyusi travelled to Kigali; within weeks, groundwork for Rwanda's deployment was in place and forces arrived in July 2021. Throughout this period, information control was tight and parliamentary visibility minimal as reflected in limited parliamentary debate and the absence of detailed public disclosures in official communications.

Elite testimony indicates that neither the Council of State nor Parliament was substantively consulted on the invitation to Rwanda, a claim consistent with the absence of formal records or deliberations in parliamentary proceedings during this period. As one senior insider put it: 'Neither Parliament nor the Council of State was consulted' (Anonymous Senior FRELIMO member 2024). Another high-ranking associate described the party's Political Bureau as 'operat[ing] acephalous[ly], without the capacity for substantive debate on key security and governance issues' (Former government official, interview, June 2024). These accounts reinforce the image of a decision taken within Nyusi's innermost circle, bypassing formal checks and reducing institutional scrutiny.

The legal framework offered little resistance. Although the constitution grants the Assembly of the Republic certain competences in defining defence and security policies (Article 179), it does not confer powers to approve or supervise foreign military deployments. As António Boene, a member of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, acknowledged: 'There

is no constitutional or legal provision that gives the Assembly the power to supervise or monitor defence and security policy or to instruct the Head of State with regard to strategies in this sector' (parliamentary session, 2021). This institutional asymmetry further concentrated authority in the executive, reinforcing a pattern in which key security decisions were taken with limited formal oversight.

The transition from President Guebuza to President Nyusi was accompanied by the hidden debts scandal and intense intra-party tensions. Several interviewees suggested that, in this context, there was a tacit understanding within FRELIMO that the new president should be allowed to consolidate as much power as possible, both to distance himself from his predecessor and to stabilise the party.

This arrangement, however, gave Nyusi wide latitude to bypass institutional checks. As one party insider observed: 'It was necessary to let the new president consolidate power … decisions on Cabo Delgado were centred in the presidency itself' (party interview, July 2024). Nyusi's consolidation of power was also institutional: following the 11th FRELIMO Congress in 2017, his allies dominated the Political Bureau, sidelining figures linked to former president Armando Guebuza. This reconfiguration reduced internal resistance and allowed Nyusi to align security decisions with his political base, particularly the Makonde elite.

Economic alignments reinforced this logic. The LNG sector had become a focal point of elite patronage, with strategic contracts linked to Nyusi's inner circle. Process tracing indicates that meetings with international energy actors during the Palma crisis (March-May 2021), as reflected in diplomatic engagements and public reporting at the time, provided a 'smoking gun': safeguarding LNG investments raised the premium on rapid, controlled intervention. As one civil society analyst argued: 'The decision was not only about security; it was about who could guarantee the protection of gas' (interview, August 2024).

In short, the internal context combined executive centralisation, weak institutional checks and elite economic stakes. These conditions, reflected both in elite accounts and in the limited institutional visibility of decision-making processes, help explain why Mozambique privileged a bilateral arrangement with Rwanda over a multilateral SADC response. From a neopatrimonialism perspective, the decision was less a collective institutional choice than an elite-driven strategy shaped by patronage networks and political survival.

Mozambique–Tanzania: from historic allies to strategic divergence

Mozambique and Tanzania share an 860 km border and overlapping ethnic and linguistic identities, reinforced by a historical friendship forged during Mozambique's liberation struggle (1964–1974), when Tanzania hosted FRELIMO bases and provided critical support (Campbell 1987). This solidarity extended into later decades: Mozambique assisted Tanzania during the 1978 war with Uganda, while Tanzania reciprocated during Mozambique's civil war between 1977 and 1992 (Roberts 2014).

The first presidents of the two countries, Samora Machel and Julius Nyerere, valued these ties, and successive leaders maintained this cooperation until 2015, when John Magufuli and Filipe Nyusi took office in Tanzania and Mozambique, respectively. Magufuli's leadership marked a change in the bilateral relationship, as he showed limited interest in the historical ties between the two countries.

A senior Tanzanian government official (personal communication, 10 July 2024) attributed this change to Magufuli's focus on domestic politics, relegating foreign policy to the

background. The violence that broke out in Mozambique in October 2017 began in Cabo Delgado, a province that borders Tanzania (Mtwara region), which had experienced similar attacks between 2012 and 2017, and also, like in Cabo Delgado, discovered gas reserves (Bofin 2022).

Mozambique and Tanzania have discovered substantial natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin, making them important emerging actors in the regional energy landscape. Mozambique's estimated 100 trillion cubic feet (TCF), identified in 2009 (Gqada 2013), represents the largest known reserves in Sub-Saharan Africa, while Tanzania followed in 2010 with around 48 TCF in the Mtwara region (Embassy of Tanzania in Turkey 2021).

However, on a global scale these reserves remain modest, and both countries face weak negotiating positions and uncertainty over whether the gas will be fully developed or deliver on expectations.

This historical trajectory is critical for understanding the significance of Tanzania's later stance. Rather than reflecting continuity, the response to the Cabo Delgado insurgency marked a clear departure from established patterns of political and security cooperation. The weakening of bilateral alignment under Magufuli, combined with emerging economic and strategic divergences, helps explain why Tanzania did not respond in line with historical expectations of mutual support.

As the security situation deteriorated in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique initially sought support from Tanzania, due to geographical proximity and a historical pattern of cooperation. However, Tanzanian authorities consistently signalled a preference for a more limited engagement. Interviews with officials and regional analysts indicate that Dar es Salaam prioritised domestic stability, border control and a cautious approach centred on dialogue rather than direct military intervention. This position became evident as early as December 2017, when discussions between Presidents Nyusi and Magufuli revealed diverging threat perceptions and strategic priorities.

Rather than committing to joint military operations, Tanzania reinforced border security and encouraged Mozambique to manage the crisis independently. This limited response, corroborated by the absence of coordinated deployments and reflected in bilateral exchanges at the time, functioned as a critical constraint in Mozambique's decision-making process. In process-tracing terms, Tanzania's non-engagement constitutes a hoop test: had meaningful operational support been provided, Mozambique's subsequent turn to Rwanda would have been less likely.

According to Sérgio Gomes, a specialist in foreign policy and energy security, this outreach reflected a kind of strategic naivety, in which Mozambican decision makers believed that the terrorism threat was shared and that counterinsurgency costs could be divided (interview, Maputo, 2024).

Some reports argue that the forced expulsion of Tanzanian miners played a role in fuelling grievances that later contributed to the emergence of the insurgency. Although no direct evidence links this event to Tanzania's reluctance to intervene, it remains a critical factor in local and academic debates on the origins of the Cabo Delgado conflict (International Crisis Group 2021).

To avoid a spillover effect, Tanzania strengthened its border security and refrained from broader intervention. However, by January 2021, shifting regional dynamics and growing concerns over cross-border insurgent movements pushed Tanzania to reassess its stance.

Attacks in Mtwara province and intelligence reports suggesting insurgents were using Tanzania as a logistical base heightened security concern.

Additionally, pressure from regional actors and economic considerations, such as maintaining stability for ongoing gas projects, created incentives for Tanzania to engage more directly. This culminated in Nyusi's visit, during which the two countries signed counterterrorism and extradition treaties (Mozambique High Commission 2021).

Alternative explanations point to the fact that other Mozambican actors, including diplomats and security officials, initially explored both bilateral and regional options. However, these initiatives were gradually sidelined as President Nyusi centralised decision-making, culminating in the choice of Rwanda. The absence of sustained or effective cross-border military cooperation between 2017 and 2021 illustrates this narrowing of the decision-making circle.

In January 2018, Mozambique signed a security memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Tanzania focusing on joint efforts to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and other cross-border crimes in East Africa (Club of Mozambique 2018a). In May–June 2018, Nyusi undertook bilateral security visits to Uganda (Club of Mozambique 2018b) and Kenya (Club of Mozambique 2018c), and signed security agreements with the Democratic Republic of Congo to discuss the transnational nature of violent extremism and possibilities for intelligence sharing.

In November 2020, Mozambique signed an MoU with Malawi to develop a bilateral security agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malawi 2020).

Finally, in June 2021, Nyusi visited Zimbabwe and, together with President Mnangagwa, agreed to reactivate the Joint Permanent Commission (JPC) to strengthen security collaboration in response to the insurgency. Despite these efforts, most of these initiatives remained largely declarative, with no evidence of coordinated deployments or operational assistance resulting from them (Sunday News 2021).

Interviews with security officials suggest that by early 2021, President Nyusi and his close circle perceived these regional efforts as insufficient, especially considering Tanzania's preference for dialogue and enhanced border control rather than joint military action. This pattern of failed or limited regional cooperation contributed to Mozambique's eventual pivot to Rwanda as a more responsive and operational partner.

This lack of external support weakened Mozambique's position by reinforcing its isolation in dealing with the conflict, limiting opportunities for intelligence-sharing, cross-border coordination and burden-sharing in counterinsurgency efforts. With Tanzania effectively distancing itself, Mozambique was left without a key regional ally, further delaying an effective response to the escalating insurgency.

After Magufuli's death in March 2021, Samia Suluhu assumed the presidency, which led to improved relations. Unlike her predecessor, Suluhu placed greater emphasis on regional diplomacy and economic cooperation, shifting Tanzania's approach towards a more open and coordinated engagement (Kell, Masabo, and Feltes 2024).

For Sérgio Gomes, Tanzania's shift was not immediate but became more evident after the confirmation of key investment decisions in 2022, particularly those related to the development of natural gas infrastructure and cross-border trade (interview with Sérgio Gomes, Maputo, July 2024; Tanzania Invest 2022).

As highlighted in Chatham House's analysis, Suluhu's administration embraced an economic diplomacy strategy, emphasising regional trade, energy cooperation and

investment-driven foreign policy. This shift positioned Mozambique as a key partner, as stability in Cabo Delgado became increasingly tied to Tanzania's economic interests in shared gas reserves and regional trade corridors (Kell, Masabo, and Feltes 2024).

While Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu visited Mozambique several times in the aftermath of the Palma attacks (The Citizen 2022), these engagements did not immediately translate into joint military coordination. During the critical period leading up to Rwanda's deployment in July 2021, Tanzania prioritised diplomacy and border control rather than direct intervention.

Process tracing shows that this limited response reinforced Mozambique's sense of isolation and contributed to the decision to turn to Rwanda as a more responsive partner.

The transition in Tanzania's leadership was decisive. President John Magufuli died on 17 March 2021, and his successor, Samia Suluhu Hassan, was sworn in two days later, on 19 March. Just two days after her inauguration, the insurgents launched the Palma attack on 21 March, the most devastating incident of the Cabo Delgado conflict to that point.

While Suluhu moved to recalibrate Tanzania's foreign policy towards greater regional engagement, Mozambique was already under acute pressure to secure an immediate military response. This urgency contributed to President Nyusi's decision to engage Rwanda directly in April 2021, before regional mechanisms or Tanzania's new administration could consolidate their approach.

This turning point underscores how leadership transitions and external shocks intersected to shape Mozambique's security choices, reinforcing the preference for flexible bilateralism over slower regional frameworks.

Mozambique–South Africa: a complex security and economic relationship

Mozambique and South Africa share a complex history, especially due to the support that apartheid-era South Africa provided to the then rebel group Renamo, which fought against the FRELIMO government in Mozambique during the Cold War (South African History Online n.d.; Funada-Classen 2013).

Despite improved relations after apartheid, concerns about South Africa's involvement in Mozambique's security issues persist. This is partly because the security apparatus of South Africa did not fundamentally change after apartheid and still exhibits a hegemonic mentality (Mandrup Jørgensen 2007). This was evident in the construction of a border wall between the two countries (Martin 2024), without proper prior consultation, as reported by sources in Mozambique.

Several factors were significant in this regard, including concerns about sovereignty, economic interests, the architecture of military operations and South Africa's experience in combating terrorism. According to Gomes, however, the debate should centre not on defence and security per se, but rather on Mozambique's dependence and the potential economic losses it would incur by engaging too closely with South Africa (interview with Sérgio Gomes, Maputo, July 2024).

South Africa has made substantial investments in the natural gas sector and is keen to avoid the internal diversion of gas pipelines to other countries in the region. According to sources, South Africa would prefer a direct derivation of gas to the South African market, as this would maximise its economic benefits and reduce Mozambique's ability to negotiate prices or sell to other markets.

South Africa's substantial economic interest in Mozambique's natural gas sector further complicates the relationship. South African state-owned institutions, including the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the Industrial Development Corporation, have invested over $1.2 billion in Mozambique's LNG projects (Justiça Ambiental et al. 2024). These investments are not only economically significant but also crucial to South Africa's energy security.

South Africa views Mozambique's LNG reserves as essential for regional energy demands, making Cabo Delgado a focal point for Southern African economic integration.

A clear example of this can be seen in South Africa's behaviour as a regional power. Once it realised that Mozambique was securing a strategic partner from outside the region (Rwanda), South Africa responded by mobilising a comparable number of troops within the framework of the SADC.

In doing so, Pretoria aligned itself with the regional rules of intervention laid out in the 2001 Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security (SADC 2001) and the 2003 Mutual Defence Pact (SADC 2023) which provided the legal basis for collective action. South Africa also contributed the bulk of the funding for the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), deploying over 500 troops with an authorisation for up to 1495, a figure close to Rwanda's roughly 1000 troops at the time (Creamer Media Reporter 2022; Ministry of Defence of Rwanda 2021).

This behaviour illustrates how South Africa acted as a regional power, balancing domestic interests with regional pressures. Its response reflected a mix of geopolitical competition, economic stakes in Mozambique's LNG sector and the need to assert its leadership within the SADC.

This aligns with the logic of new regionalism, which recognises that regional powers navigate fluid alliances and strategic calculations rather than acting purely out of self-interest or within rigid state-centric frameworks. By engaging selectively in security matters, South Africa sought to maintain influence through institutional mechanisms like SADC, while avoiding the political costs of ad hoc bilateral interventions.

Instead of relying directly on South Africa, Mozambique opted for a multilateral approach through SADC to dilute Pretoria's dominance and balance regional influences. This strategy reflected not only historical distrust of South Africa's security role but also concerns about economic dependency. Mozambican decision makers calculated that engaging South Africa militarily could strengthen its leverage over Mozambique's LNG sector and undermine Maputo's ability to negotiate independent energy agreements. By turning to SADC collectively, the government sought to diversify partnerships and maintain greater control over its security and economic dynamics, even as this created visible discomfort among South African authorities.

Mozambique and SADC: delays, funding struggles and strategic divisions

As a founding member of the SADC, Mozambique has long been embedded in the region's collective security frameworks. Yet the very structures designed to ensure inclusivity and consensus have often slowed decision-making. The Politics, Defence and Security Organ (est. 1996), operating under a rotating troika system, embodies this dilemma: consensus among competing powers frequently delays responses to crises.

These institutional dynamics were evident in Cabo Delgado. Mozambique first raised the alarm formally in May 2020, followed by expressions of solidarity at the August Ordinary Summit in Maputo. An Extraordinary Troika meeting in November 2020 again urged a regional response but produced no concrete plan. By early 2021, as violence escalated, delays

were compounded by divergent national interests, including South Africa's economic exposure in Cabo Delgado's LNG sector and Tanzania's reluctance to intervene militarily.

SADC only authorised a fact-finding mission in April 2021, and a standby force on 23 June. Interviews confirm the sense of frustration: 'By the time SADC was still sending fact-finding teams, the situation demanded soldiers' (security analyst, Maputo, August 2024). A Mozambican diplomat likewise described the process as 'meetings upon meetings, with little urgency' (Anonymous Mozambican Diplomat 2024).

Funding further complicated the mission. SAMIM depended heavily on South Africa, with limited contributions from smaller states. The organisation relied primarily on ad hoc contributions from member states, with South Africa alone providing approximately $45 million annually, while external support remained limited and insufficient for sustained operations. A €15 million contribution from the European Peace Facility and roughly $2 million from the African Union failed to support large-scale or multidimensional engagement. These constraints resulted in a fragmented mission lacking both political cohesion and sustainable financing, with available resources largely prioritised for military operations (SADC 2024).

The simultaneity of events was striking. On 28 April 2021, President Nyusi travelled to Kigali, the same week SADC postponed a key troika meeting. By the time SADC approved its standby force on 23 June, Rwandan officers were already conducting assessments in Cabo Delgado. On 9 July, Rwandan forces deployed, weeks before SAMIM. As one civil society actor put it: 'The region talked; Rwanda acted' (interview, August 2024).

This sequence highlights a core finding: SADC's slow, consensus-based process created the opening for Mozambique to pursue a bilateral, faster-moving partnership. From a theoretical perspective, the episode functions as smoking gun evidence for H3: when institutional frameworks falter, small states prioritise flexible bilateral solutions.

This contrast goes beyond operational differences and has broader implications for regional security governance. Rwanda's rapid deployment reinforced perceptions of effectiveness associated with bilateral arrangements, while SADC's delays risked undermining confidence in multilateral responses. In turn, this dynamic may incentivise states facing acute security threats to prioritise flexible, faster-moving bilateral partnerships over consensus-based regional frameworks, thereby accelerating the shift towards more fragmented security architectures.

Rwanda: a new military partner beyond regional boundaries

Thirty years after the genocide, Rwanda has rebuilt itself as both a symbol of post-conflict recovery and a state with an assertive regional posture. Its leadership has consistently deployed the Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF) not only for domestic stability but also as a tool of foreign policy (Hintjens 1999; Levine and Nagar 2015; Donelli 2022).

Initially through multilateral peacekeeping, Rwanda became one of Africa's largest contributors to United Nations (UN) missions, particularly in Darfur and the Central African Republic. Over time, however, Kigali shifted towards bilateral arrangements, seeking both autonomy and visibility. As one regional analyst put it: 'Peacekeeping became Rwanda's business card, but bilateralism became its real strategy' (security expert, Kigali, July 2024; see also Beswick 2010; Donelli 2022; United Nations n.d.; International Crisis Group 2023).

This evolution became particularly visible in the Central African Republic in 2020, when Rwanda dispatched troops outside the UN framework to directly support the government during elections, while simultaneously maintaining its United Nations Multidimensional

Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) contingent. This hybrid approach, combining the legitimacy of multilateralism with the assertiveness of bilateral deployments, foreshadowed Rwanda's subsequent engagement in Mozambique (United Nations n.d.; Donelli 2022; International Crisis Group 2023).

Diplomatic outreach to Mozambique predated the Cabo Delgado crisis. In 2016, Paul Kagame travelled to Maputo seeking the extradition of Rwandan dissidents allegedly sheltering in Mozambique. Though unsuccessful, the episode revealed Rwanda's interest in cultivating bilateral ties. Kagame maintained contact with Mozambican counterparts, recognising both the country's vulnerabilities and its emerging importance as an LNG hub (Presidency of Rwanda 2016; CDD 2021; ACLED 2024; Beswick 2010).

By 2021, with insurgents threatening Palma and the LNG corridor, Rwanda identified an opportunity to position itself as a strategic partner in Southern Africa. President Nyusi's visit to Kigali on 28 April 2021 was decisive. According to a Mozambican defence official, Rwanda's reputation for discipline and effectiveness, together with its perceived neutrality in SADC rivalries, tipped the balance: 'They [RDF] were ready to move, they were trusted, and they had no baggage of South African dominance' (interview, Maputo, August 2024).

This moment can be interpreted as a smoking gun in Mozambique's shift from regional to bilateral military support. It occurred just as SADC postponed its intervention meeting, which coincided with President Nyusi's visit to Kigali on 28 April 2021 (Handy 2021; Himbara 2021).

The deployment provoked tension within SADC. Several leaders insisted that support should flow through SAMIM, but Kagame demanded operational independence. His position reflected both confidence in RDF capabilities and distrust of South Africa's regional dominance. As one Mozambican diplomat recalled: 'Kagame would not take orders from Pretoria. Either he came in independently, or he would not come' (interview, Maputo, July 2024). In practice, Rwanda deployed autonomously, while SAMIM was relegated to peripheral operations (Himbara 2021).

On the ground, the results were swift. Within weeks of arrival in July 2021, Rwandan troops helped retake Palma and Mocímboa da Praia, towns symbolically and strategically vital to LNG operations. Analysts such as Nhamirre (2021, 2022) highlighted the dual effect: military stabilisation and protection of extractive enclaves. The Tactical Institute for Security and Counterterrorism (2024) called it 'a turning point in counter-insurgency', while Penney (2023) described Rwanda's approach as a potential model for other African theatres. Civil society actors in Cabo Delgado also acknowledged the difference: 'People saw results within months, after years of government denial and delay' (Anonymous NGO worker, 2024).

Beyond its immediate military impact, Rwanda's engagement also appears to reflect broader strategic and economic positioning. While direct evidence remains limited, emerging patterns suggest that Rwanda's involvement may extend beyond security provision into sectors linked to logistics, private security and resource governance. The protection of strategic LNG infrastructure, in particular, creates indirect opportunities for longer-term economic engagement. These dynamics align with interpretations of Rwanda's external interventions as combining security provision with strategic economic positioning in fragile contexts.

Yet Rwanda's role was not without controversy. Critics argued that Rwanda's intervention was shaped by strategic self-interest, including ambitions to expand influence in Southern Africa and secure access to economic opportunities. Allegations that Rwandan companies benefitted from service contracts in LNG projects added weight to such claims (FurtherAfrica 2024).

Some reports point to the involvement of Rwandan-linked companies in service provision around LNG operations, although evidence remains uneven. At the same time, other analysts emphasise the effectiveness and speed of Rwanda's deployment, highlighting its contribution to stabilising key areas. This debate reflects a broader tension between normative concerns about external intervention and pragmatic assessments of security outcomes.

This dynamic resonates with a neopatrimonialist interpretation, in which military engagements are framed not only as security responses but also as vehicles for elite networks to capture economic rents. In this sense, Rwanda's role in Cabo Delgado illustrates how external interventions can simultaneously deliver short-term stabilisation and reinforce patterns of elite-driven accumulation. At the diplomatic level, South Africa expressed unease, fearing a precedent of extra-regional actors operating independently within SADC. Rivalry between Pretoria and Kigali, already tense over intelligence disputes, deepened further.

Beyond Africa, Rwanda leveraged the mission to consolidate partnerships. France, seeking to reassert its role in Mozambique after TotalEnergies suspended operations, positioned Rwanda's deployment as a vehicle for re-engagement (Cannon and Donelli 2022). The European Union allocated approximately $20 million in support, while other bilateral donors praised Kigali's rapid action (Council of the European Union 2024).

For Rwanda, the intervention served multiple purposes: enhancing legitimacy, reinforcing Kagame's domestic narrative of global relevance, securing new streams of financial and political capital and potentially opening avenues for longer-term economic and strategic engagement. For Mozambique, it provided immediate relief but also locked the state into a relationship defined more by dependency than mutuality.

In sum, Rwanda's intervention in Cabo Delgado illustrates how a small state can leverage military professionalism and diplomatic agility to shape regional security outcomes. Its effectiveness on the battlefield made it an attractive partner, but the broader consequences, regional rivalries, questions of sovereignty, and potential long-term dependence, underscore the ambivalence of bilateral security solutions in Africa.

Rwanda over SADC: the politics of Mozambique's security choices

Mozambique's decision to bypass SADC in favour of Rwanda was not simply reactive but reflected a calculated strategy shaped by elite interests, economic incentives and frustrations with regional inertia. Process-traced evidence from interviews, communiqués and diplomatic exchanges indicates that three logics converged: the need for speed (rational actor model), the attraction of flexible bilateralism (new regionalism) and the dominance of elite networks (neopatrimonialism).

Domestically, Nyusi faced mounting pressures: an escalating insurgency, divisions within FRELIMO, and growing civil society alarm over humanitarian consequences. Yet decision-making remained confined to a narrow circle. Neither the Council of State nor Parliament was substantively consulted, despite their constitutional roles. As one insider bluntly put it: 'Neither Parliament nor the Council of State was consulted; these were presidential decisions' (elite interview, July 2024). Civil society organisations (CSOs) issued recommendations, but their voices were excluded: 'We made our position clear, but we were never invited to the table' (CSO representative, Maputo, 2024). This exclusion reinforces the elite-driven logic anticipated by H1 (neopatrimonialism).

Leader-centred theories further illuminate the decision. Nyusi's political position was fragile, marked by intra-FRELIMO rivalries and scepticism from southern elites. His need to consolidate authority created incentives to choose an option promising rapid, visible results without prolonged debate. Rwanda met this need. As one FRELIMO cadre explained: 'With SADC, the decision would be collective; with Rwanda, the President kept control' (party insider, interview, 2024). This personalisation of decision-making underscores how neopatrimonial dynamics intertwined with strategic calculations.

Economic interests, particularly in the LNG sector, were central to this calculus. The Palma attack in March 2021 directly threatened multi-billion-dollar investments by TotalEnergies and other companies. Between the attack and Rwanda's July deployment, President Nyusi met Total executives first in Maputo (January 2021) and then in Paris (19 May 2021). These meetings, occurring in the narrow window between crisis and intervention, provided a smoking gun: security arrangements were closely aligned with investor concerns. As one civil society analyst put it: 'The decision was not only about fighting insurgents; it was about protecting gas' (interview, August 2024).

From a neopatrimonial perspective (H1), this alignment underscores how elite networks tied to the LNG sector shaped foreign policy outside institutional channels. From a rational actor model perspective (H2), it was a strategic calculation: without rapid stabilisation, investment flows would collapse. And in new regionalism terms (H3), the fact that Rwanda's mission was partly underwritten by external partners, including European states with direct economic stakes, shows how bilateral arrangements can be sustained through transnational financing rather than regional burden-sharing.

The partnership also reflected Rwanda's regional ambitions. Kagame insisted on operating independently of SAMIM, and Rwanda's autonomy generated unease within SADC. According to one SADC official: 'We told Nyusi: if Rwanda wants to help, it must come through the bloc. He refused' (regional interview, 2024). In practice, Rwanda led combat operations, while SAMIM remained peripheral.

On the ground, Rwanda's rapid reconquest of Palma and Mocímboa da Praia consolidated perceptions of effectiveness. Analysts such as Nhamirre (2021, 2022) and Penney (2023) highlighted both the military gains and the symbolic blow to SADC's credibility. Civil society actors also recognised the difference: 'The region talked; Rwanda acted' (NGO worker, Pemba, 2024). The episode undermined SADC's claim to primacy as Southern Africa's security guarantor and exposed divisions within the bloc, particularly between Rwanda and South Africa.

The choice also had long-term implications. By securing external funding from the European Union and France, Rwanda's deployment reduced Mozambique's immediate costs but deepened dependency on external backers. Critics warned of new vulnerabilities: 'Mozambique solved one crisis by creating another, dependence on Rwanda and its funders' (civil society analyst). This ambivalence reflects the broader dilemma of African security governance: pragmatic bilateral solutions deliver speed but risk eroding sovereignty and collective legitimacy.

From Mozambique's perspective, however, Rwanda's broader geopolitical ambitions mattered less than its ability to deliver quickly and at low political cost. As one government official concluded: 'We did not choose Rwanda for who they are; we chose them for what they could do immediately' (interview, 2024).

Mozambique can be considered both a weak state and a small state: weak because of persistent governance and security challenges, and small because of its limited economic

and diplomatic influence. Both conditions shape its dependence on external partnerships for stability and development (Efremov 2019; Reveron 2010). In this sense, the decision illustrates how small and weak states strategically navigate overlapping pressures by privileging pragmatic and elite-centred solutions over formal regional commitments.

Conclusion

Mozambique's choice to bypass SADC in favour of Rwanda illustrates a wider shift in African security governance. Confronted with asymmetric threats, states are privileging rapid bilateral solutions over slow multilateral frameworks.

In Cabo Delgado, domestic pressures, elite economic interests and SADC's inertia converged to produce a strategic turn towards Rwanda, whose RDF quickly stabilised key LNG zones. These gains, however, came at a cost: SADC's credibility was undermined, Mozambique's dependence deepened, and questions of sovereignty and accountability intensified.

The case highlights a core dilemma: as insurgencies and transnational threats multiply, will regional organisations adapt, or will bilateralism prevail? Rwanda's effectiveness strengthened its reputation but fuelled rivalries and anxieties over hidden agendas. Later developments, such as Tanzania's bilateral deployment after SAMIM's withdrawal in 2025, reinforce the trend towards ad hoc security arrangements.

Ultimately, Mozambique's trajectory shows that elite survival, economic interests and the pursuit of immediate results often outweigh regional solidarity. Whether this strengthens African agency or entrenches new dependencies remains an open question for the continent's security future.

Looking ahead, these findings suggest that regional organisations such as SADC may need to reassess their decision-making mechanisms if they are to remain credible responders to fast-moving security crises. At the same time, the growing reliance on bilateral security arrangements indicates that effectiveness and speed are increasingly shaping perceptions of legitimacy in African security governance. How these competing logics are balanced will be critical in determining whether collective frameworks can be revitalised or will be further sidelined in future interventions.

Ethical approval

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