

Introduction

China-Africa Relations: The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact on Africa

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Introduction

This special issue of the *African Studies Quarterly* is dedicated to China's Belt and Road Initiative and its impact on African countries. The contributions stem from a conference convened at the University of Florida and hosted by the Center for African Studies. It is the third issue focused on China-Africa relations. Previous issues focused on "Political, Economic and Media Strategies" and "Theoretical and Practical Perspectives on African "Migrants" in China."¹ There are six articles by contributors examining various aspects of the BRI and their impact on the continent. They range from studying the economic impact of China's infrastructure on the continent; the viability of the massive infrastructure and loan repayment; the impact of the BRI on Africa's regional relationships; understanding Africa's attraction and China's long term investment in Africa in line with the BRI; China's power and influence on African elite training; to evaluating Africa's agency and how the African continent is affirming itself and responding to China's Initiative.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's massive centerpiece development program aimed at connecting maritime and overland trade, and strengthening economic, political, and cultural interactions with initially sixty countries in 2013 to 138 participating countries by 2020. This multi-billion undertaking consists of a massive infrastructure for connectivity routes that stretch from Beijing to Western Europe and through the Horn of Africa. Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the initiative in 2013 with an initial budget of \$900 billion for its development, but by 2020 the project's funding was estimated at \$1.3 trillion dollars. The initiative has been referred to as the "New Silk Road," "One Belt One Road," and as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There are two primary components in the initiative. The first is the overland Silk Road Economic Belt that connects China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The second is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. The concept builds on China's ancient trade routes while reinforcing the existing ones with the objective of improving connectivity and expanding global markets.² Aside from the economic engagement, on the political side, if the initiative succeeds it would change global politics and insert China in the central strategic position. This has led some to describe the BRI

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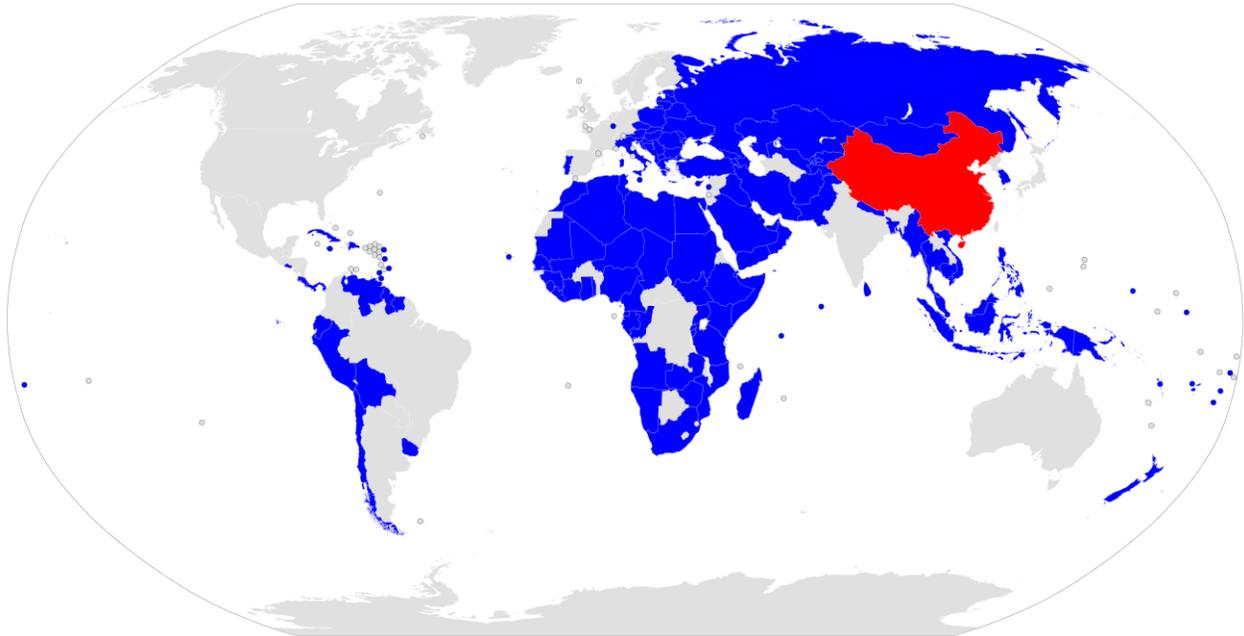
as “the most ambitious geo-economic vision in recent history, although it has also been described as the ‘best-known, least-understood’ foreign policy effort underway.”³

By March 2020, thirty-eight of the 138 countries (see map below) that had joined the BRI by signing a memorandum of understanding with China were African.⁴ Interestingly, China did not include Africa in the original BRI plan of 2013, and its 2015 comprehensive policy scarcely referenced the continent. Also, the 2015 BRI Action Plan did not significantly mention African mechanisms except to refer to it in passing in continental terms as in “Asia, Europe and Africa.”⁵ The final manifesto of the 2015 China-Africa Summit in Johannesburg mentioned the BRI although it still did not elaborate Africa’s involvement. Clearly Africa was lower on the BRI roadmap compared to Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. However, in 2016 China stated that Africa was a significant partner in the BRI. Some African countries including Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt, and Tunisia attended the first BRI summit in China in May 2017. China has since worked hard to engage Africa in the initiative.

The main objective of the BRI is to increase China’s economic and political status through the Chinese led investment program of infrastructure, including the roads, railways, telecommunications, energy pipelines, and port facilities that African countries desperately need. The initiative emphasizes five major priorities: (1) policy coordination; (2) infrastructure connectivity; (3) unimpeded trade; (4) financial integration; and (5) connecting people.⁶ This has both positive and negative critiques in Africa. On the one side the view is that it will bring about development, but on the other side the massive loans which recipient countries are accumulating render these countries at China’s mercy as they stand little chance of paying off the debts. The positive is clearly to improve transportation for people and goods, and thus stimulate development. This will also facilitate trade with other countries in the region, the Middle East, Europe, and China. The BRI, however, has also been referred to as “debt trap diplomacy.”⁷ This refers to failure of some countries to pay their debts and instead swap their debt for some of their resources such as economic, or strategic infrastructure like a port.

China’s 99-year lease of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port signed in 2017 is widely cited as a debt-equity swap.⁸ Contributors in this issue, Taylor, Tarrósy, and van Staden et al., acknowledge the Hambantota case and circumstances leading to China taking over the port and the implications for Africa. Taylor compares Kenya’s Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) to Hambantota and suggests that like the Hambantota port, the SGR was not an economically prudent choice. The Hambantota Port failed to produce sufficient income to pay the loans and Sri Lanka was compelled to loan it to China Merchants Port Holdings. Taylor notes that like Sri Lanka, there have been allegations of using the Mombasa port as collateral and the heavy debt also threatens Kenya’s economic future. Van Staden et al. note that the Sri Lanka situation has not yet been repeated in Africa but the rapidly growing debt in countries like Kenya and Djibouti is raising a national debate about the BRI’s long-term impact.

Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Owennson / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>); [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e5/Belt and Road Initiative participant map.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e5/Belt_and_Road_Initiative_participant_map.svg)

Aside from the economic agenda, China's strategy with the BRI includes an expanding military agenda and political influence leading to the possibility of reshaping the nature of global leadership. As China expands its global influence there are questions about Africa's relations with the rest of the world. At one time Africa was attractive to Western countries as a source of raw materials, but now it is being drawn into China's orbit. The BRI poses different but major implications for the continent. African governments have to assess what the BRI means for the continent and the future implications, for as they engage in these massive projects major questions arise such as the following. Are they borrowing the huge debts with a focus on their countries' priorities and much needed development? What are the financial entanglements and challenges for the loan repayment? Are African countries engaging in white elephant projects, with less profit compared to sums borrowed? To what extent are they entrenching their countries? What is the impact of the BRI on regional African relationships? How does China view its investments in relation to its long-term superpower projection? How does China exercise power and influence over African elites? What are the strengths of African countries, singularly and collectively, through regional and continental organizations? These are some of the questions that the contributors through their research pose and analyze in the context of the BRI.

The Articles

István Tarrósy examines Africa's new infrastructure projects undertakings in relation to the continent's economic status. His "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, Debt Risk and New Dependency: The Case of Ethiopia" interrogates the major questions related to loan repayments for massive construction projects, especially the huge loans and their impact on the economy of African countries. Although the article focuses on Ethiopia, it also provides an analysis of the Sub-Saharan countries' rising debt situation over the last two decades. Tarrósy compares China's current practice to that of Western countries and questions whether this current situation is leading to a new dependency on China. He suggests that such a dependency is beyond indebtedness, for it includes knowledge and technology, e.g., spare parts and maintenance in general, as part of the infrastructure projects. What are the loan options and alternatives for African governments? He analyzes Ethiopia's ability to repay the loans for its construction of large projects such as railways, highways, hydroelectric dams, and, more recently, the plan for the expansion of the capital city, known as the Addis Ababa Master Plan. Tarrósy also notes the major benefits that Ethiopia like other African countries could gain depending on the strength of the African agency.

One of the largest projects undertaken in Africa in the context of the BRI is the Standard Gauge Railways (SGR) in Kenya, which is the centerpiece for the BRI in East Africa. Ian Taylor examines the SGR in "Kenya's New Lunatic Express: The Standard Gauge Railway." The article provides a detailed historic analysis of the SGR and the benefits and major challenges posed by this massive infrastructure. Taylor provides an analysis of the cost of building the railway, its viability, economic, social, and environmental costs, and its potential impact. In terms of the BRI in Africa, Kenya is an integral part of both the Maritime Silk Road and the Belt given its geographical location. Its involvement in the BRI is largely focused around the SGR, which is one of the country's biggest investments since its independence. Kenya is the core country in facilitating the BRI's connection with Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan, some of the countries forming the Northern Corridor.⁹ Each country would be responsible for building the section of the railway within its borders. This would increase transportation across the four countries while lowering shipping and travel costs. China and Kenya see the SGR as one of the best forms of cooperation between the two countries, but Taylor reveals some of the major challenges faced by Kenya, including repayment, underutilization of the railway, and the significant challenges of operating the SGR. Taylor also notes the 2020 Covid-19 impact on the Kenyan economy, including mass cancellation of ships docking at the Mombasa Port and the suspension of the Madaraka SGR passenger services.

As envisaged, the massive infrastructure and connectivity of the BRI will cross numerous countries and regions and thus will significantly impact and influence inter-state relations. Oscar Meywa Otele notes that although this area of international relations has been less studied in the context of the BRI the new infrastructure is already impacting relations among some countries. In "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Intra-Regional Dynamics in Africa" Otele summarizes the theory of regionalism and examines the influence of the BRI on intra-regional dynamics taking East Africa as the case study. He provides a historical overview of the relationships of the East African countries, their partnerships, and their economic status and shows that the new infrastructure is altering traditional relations, including the wielding of

economic power, and thus is producing new alliances and new agency. An East African regional realignment, he finds, has produced gains and losses in the short term and is likely to alter the traditional balance of power in the long term. The implementation of BRI infrastructure has also made it possible for landlocked countries like Uganda and Rwanda to choose whether to align themselves with Kenya or Tanzania according to their national interests rather than remaining with the traditional alliances. As a result, some African countries are claiming new agency due to potential and actual new alliances.

Part of the reason for the major infrastructure in the BRI is to increase trade with African countries and to make it easier to transport resources which are attractive to China. Abdoukadre Ado discusses why the Chinese are now major investors on the continent and China's globalization strategies particularly within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) context. His "Africa Cooperation: FDI, Informal Institutions, BRI, and *Guanxi*" also discusses China's formal and informal institutions. To understand the Chinese risk-taking approach and success in Africa, Ado offers an alternative explanation based on informal institutions, China's long-term agenda, and the goals behind the BRI. He finds that the growth in Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is not necessarily aimed at increasing traditionally-considered short-term or medium-term financial gains but rather that China's interest is aimed at a long-term view to improve its relationship with Africans and achieve its BRI goals. The article concludes, in line with the BRI goals, that China's interest in Africa overrides any of the risks for the long-term project of being able to secure political superpower status with a significant influence on the world's governance and a global leadership role. The author also provides suggestions for African countries to empower themselves and redefine their partnerships with China.

In pursuit of its global power status, China also offers training to other countries in order to spread its influence. Lina Benabdallah interrogates the elements of power and influence in China's training of African elites and party cadres by examining party-to-party exchanges and professionalization trainings in China-Africa relations. Noting the role of power and influence in international relations, "Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Africa" analyzes how these elements are produced and disseminated in China-Africa interactions and the benefits of the training workshops for China and African countries. Benabdallah examines her topic from the perspective of what Chinese actors stand to gain from senior cadre workshops, and what their African counterparts stand to gain from participating in these training workshops and inviting Chinese delegations to visit their countries. The article provides a historical analysis and evolution of party-to-party exchanges in China-Africa relations dating from the recognition for the PRC as the official government of China and curbing the Soviet Union's influence in the Third World.

The volume wraps up with a discussion of African agency. Cobus van Staden, Chris Alden, and Yu-Shan Wu analyze Africa's power and ability to make its own decisions, advance its chosen development agenda, and to gain optimum deals from China summed up in the term "agency." Agency as they refer to Africa's relationship to the BRI denotes the extent to which Africa can drive a fair bargain with China, or conversely, the extent to which African ambitions are subjugated to China's. Their "Outlining African Agency Against the Background of the BRI" explores how African agency has been conceptualised in the past and compares those ideas of

agency as they examine African relationships with China and the BRI. They discuss the theory of agency, where it is located, who is included in the term “Africa,” and what actions constitute agency. The article portrays the manifestation of African agency from local activism to changing international norms and practices and the constraints on the activism. The authors analyze African agency in a historical context and they use the case of the BRI to examine African agency in relation to external actors. Due to the size, structure, and complexity of the BRI, they explore African agency on multilateral and bilateral relations.

Conclusion

The articles in this volume raise critical questions relating to the BRI and China-Africa relations but most importantly for the African continent. There are pertinent questions for Africa’s long-term development. The authors reveal that the BRI provides both benefits and economic challenges for the continent. While it offers some attractive opportunities for African development, including infrastructure financing and access to new markets, these come with significant risks. They also recognize the need to strengthen African agency at various levels for the African continent to critically examine its status and actively design and pursue its own development path. This is a complex situation in which the desperate need for infrastructure may obscure other areas. It is critical for African countries to analyze and prioritize their own development needs before they engage in massive projects. Indeed, they have much to learn from China and how it focuses steadfastly on its long-term projections.

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Notes

- 1 I have served as guest editor of two previous issues on China-Africa Relations: *African Studies Quarterly*: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives on African "Migrants" in China," <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/previous-issues/volume-17/issue-4/> (February 2018); and "China-Africa Relations: Political and Economic Engagement and Media Strategies," <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/previous-issues/volume-16/issue-3-4/> (December 2016).
- 2 Yu 2017.
- 3 Hillman 2018.
- 4 Green Belt and Road Initiative Center.
- 5 Shinn 2020.
- 6 Green Belt and Road Initiative Center.
- 7 Dahir and Kazeem 2018.
- 8 Schultz 2017.
- 9 There are six countries in the Northern Corridor including Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Northern Corridor is a key transport network in East and Central Africa consisting of modes of surface transport route linking the landlocked countries to the port of Mombasa. The Central Corridor is another network serving the landlocked Great lakes region through Tanzania.