

China's Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa

Finding Success in Failure?

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In recent years, few initiatives by any nation, great or small, have received more attention than the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of the People's Republic of China. The BRI has been described by the Chinese government as “an initiative promoting economic prosperity and regional economic cooperation, principles of mutual consultation, joint construction and sharing, policy coordination, and mutually beneficial development.”¹ Attention to this series of plans, objectives, projects, and aspirations has been mingled with both admiration and apprehension. Some observers see a sedulous, focused, and purposeful attempt by the communist Chinese government to extend its political and economic influence throughout Eurasia, and even beyond Eurasia to Africa and Latin America. These observers tend to see the purported spread of Chinese influence as dangerous to global peace and security, and certainly dangerous to American objectives in those regions. Other observers see a disjointed, episodic, and even incoherent collection of initiatives that add up to very little once stripped of the hype generated by both the Chinese government and its critics.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has significant global objectives in mind, and the BRI projects can contribute to those objectives whether these projects achieve their stated goals. Put differently, the Chinese are attempting to change the international system through the BRI. Its individual components' success is only a fringe benefit.

Theoretical Background

Some previous studies have focused on how the BRI has an impact on regional diplomatic dynamics. Since

the end of the Cold War, regional political and economic dynamics, as defined by Oscar Otele, have become more salient.² Ian Taylor writes about southern Africa and China, using case studies. Sara van Hoeymissen examines China's role in the regional economic communities in Africa, while Francis Ikome explores interactions between China and the African Union.³ Mukwaya and Mold use the Global Trade Analysis Project to assert that only the larger countries in East Africa will benefit from BRI projects.⁴ Adam Saud and Shabir Ahmad Khan see China's efforts to influence regional integration as “more or less in line with the dictates of Neo-Functionalism and the theory of Complex Interdependence.”⁵

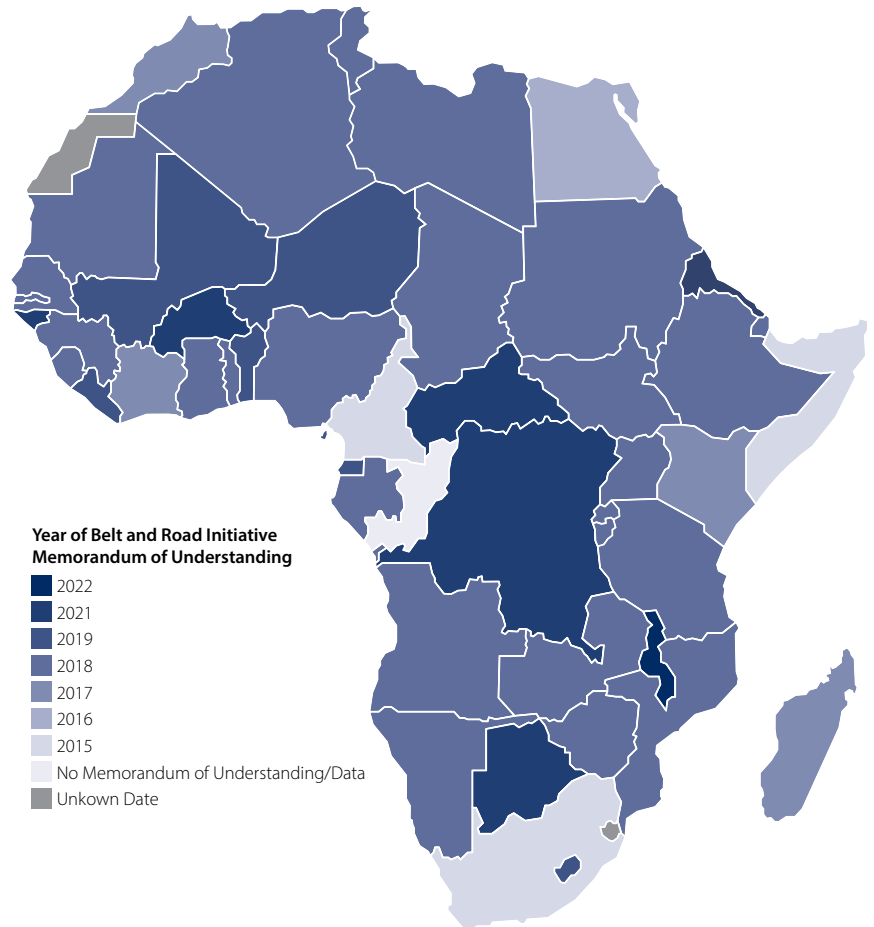
Yet there is also considerable theoretical work that emphasizes the ability of smaller and weaker states to withstand even significant pressure from great powers and pursue their own objectives, parallel to or even at odds with the objectives of those great powers. Sasha Davis, Lexi A. Munger, and Hannah J. Legacy, writing about island nations in the Pacific, argue that island states have the ability to pursue their own interests and “not allow themselves to be squeezed into great power competition.”⁶

Of greater interest for my purposes, however, are the theories about the overall direction of Chinese foreign policy, particularly under Xi and his predecessor Hu Jintao. Evan Feigenbaum, for example, wrote as early as 2008, “In the years since Beijing's 1996 missile exercise in the Taiwan Strait, Chinese leaders have begun to articulate a decidedly alternative vision of the underlying principles of international relations. This

clarification has emerged gradually, in an ad hoc fashion, and has yet to cohere into a neatly bundled grand strategic vision.⁷⁷ Feigenbaum goes on to urge U.S. officials to “note just how much Chinese and U.S. views have diverged on the most fundamental organizing principles of international politics.”⁷⁸

The disagreement of the greatest consequence is over the definition and extent of national sovereignty. Chinese officials point to Western-led interventions in Panama, Haiti, and Kosovo as a tacit acknowledgment by the West that national sovereignty is no longer inviolable. In response, the Chinese have championed sovereignty, at least as far as its sovereignty over Taiwan is concerned. At the same time, China has come to view international alliances, especially mutual defense alliances, “as a threat to peace and intrinsically aggressive in nature.”⁷⁹ China has also demanded deference by nation-states to the United Nations Security Council since sovereignty is more likely to be threatened by a coalition of strong states than by all states working through the world body. The same author acknowledges that the promotion of the UN Security Council by the usually fiercely independent Chinese “contains no small degree of irony.”¹⁰

Along the same lines, Yong Deng and Thomas G. Moore point to what Chinese officials call their “new security concept [that] advocates an economic and political order in which mutual trust, benefit, equality, and cooperation characterize bilateral relations and multilateral institutions to reduce insecurity and safeguard global strategic equilibrium and stability.”¹¹ Boiled down, such rhetoric is directed at undermining U.S. alliances and ultimately making those alliance structures irrelevant. Deng and Moore cite China’s sponsorship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 as an example of



(Map adapted from Xuewu Gu et al., *China's Engagement in Africa*; graphic courtesy of www.freepik.com)

African Member States of the Belt and Road Initiative

China’s efforts to marginalize U.S. influence in central Asia. Two years later, Beijing signed a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with members of the U.S.-led Association of Southeast Asian Nations.¹²

Some of the projects included in the BRI are not economically significant but can serve to increase goodwill and good feelings about China. An example is China’s donation of office equipment to the Tanzania Paralympic Committee.¹³ Thus, it is also useful to consider China’s efforts in Africa in relation to theories of soft power. Joseph Nye’s work is foundational here, and Garrison Daly et al. add a description of soft power based on his research in East Africa: “A noncoercive strategy in which culture, political ideology, economic strength, and foreign policy are used to persuade other nation-states to adopt aligning values.”¹⁴



What these theories have in common is the possibility that seemingly unrelated and even disparate policy initiatives can indicate a larger and more comprehensive policy direction on the part of a great power whose foreign policy is marked by sophistication, subtlety, long-term vision, and an impressive use of multiple tools to achieve both short-term and long-term goals. In this regard, both the successes and failures of the BRI merit examination. China's BRI initiatives in East Africa include multiple examples of both success and failure.

Background: China and East Africa Before the BRI

According to recent (and disputed) scholarship, Chinese trade with East Africa flourished in the fifteenth century, when Chinese "treasure ships" purportedly sailed all over the world, carrying out diplomatic and economic missions like today's BRI.¹⁵ But with the death of the Chinese emperor who sponsored these expeditions, China turned inward again. Its trade and economic contacts with Africa became marginal, distant, and usually conducted through non-Chinese and non-African middlemen. China

China's Communist Party took American democracy to task, sharply criticizing a global democracy summit to be hosted by President Joe Biden the following week and extolling the virtues of its governing system. (Photo by Mark Schiefelbein, Associated Press)

would not attempt to become a major maritime power again until the late twentieth century.¹⁶

Soon after sub-Saharan African nations achieved their independence in the early 1960s, China appeared on the continent with offers of economic and diplomatic assistance. China presented itself as similar to the ex-colonies in that China also suffered at the hands of colonizers. In addition, China epitomized the sort of government-led development programs fashionable among many African independence leaders. China's leaders saw themselves as the leaders of the nonaligned nations and in that role, sought to increase their visibility and influence in the developing world, including Africa.

One of the more famous projects from this era was the Tanzania-Zambia railway, built in the 1970s with Chinese financial backing. It soon became a symbol of the drive for South-South trade (trade among developing countries) in the waning days of the Cold



War.¹⁷ The World Bank had rejected the project as unworthy of funding, but Mao Zedong's government came up with \$500 million and recruited thousands of Chinese laborers who were then brought to East Africa at China's expense. Five years later, the railbed was complete, rolling stock had been procured, and stations had been built.¹⁸ More recently, the discovery of oil in Uganda prompted Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni to push for his country's entry into the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) corridor, a multinational infrastructure project begun in the early 2010s that serves as a precursor to the BRI.¹⁹

The BRI Takes Shape

When Xi took over the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, it soon became clear that he was more ambitious and less tolerant of opposition than his predecessor. Starting with the publication of the first official China-Africa White Paper in 2006, which was followed by Chinese-sponsored projects in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, U.S. officials were warning of what they called China's "String of Pearls" strategy, which consisted of Chinese-funded infrastructure and trade

The Tanzania-Zambia Railway crossing a bridge near the Zambian-Zimbabwean border on 25 November 2009. (Photo by Richard Stupart via Wikimedia Commons)

projects along the Indian Ocean littoral. At the time, Chinese sources denied that these projects were part of a larger strategy. Nevertheless, China's success in avoiding the worst of the 2008 global financial crisis prompted Chinese officials to refer to a "peacefully rising Middle Kingdom" for the twenty-first century.²⁰

But in a series of speeches starting in 2013 (most notably in Kazakhstan and Indonesia), Xi openly spoke of a connected and purposeful strategy.²¹ Although the exact title varied before the Chinese settled on Belt and Road Initiative, Xi made it clear that China aimed to massively extend its diplomatic, economic, and political reach, and that this reach was not going to be limited to neighboring East and South Asian nations. Xi made repeated references to the ancient Silk Road, a series of trade avenues across Central Asia that provided tenuous and temporary links between Europe and China. Rebuilding the Silk Road soon became a priority for the Xi regime.

Eventually, Xi and other Chinese officials talked about a twenty-first-century “Maritime Silk Road” as a supplement to the overland new Silk Road, and even talked about a Polar Silk Road, referring to the possibilities that a less ice-bound Arctic Ocean might provide.²² In 2018, China established the China International Development Cooperation Agency and housed supervision of the BRI in this new agency.²³ China hopes to forge links with sixty nations in Asia, Africa, and

Spirit of China-Africa Friendship and Cooperation with Joint Action on the Global Development Initiative,” a two-day meeting that featured an address by China’s vice foreign minister. This meeting was the last in a series of ten conferences held in China, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Senegal.²⁸ China reserved a pavilion at the Dar es Salaam International Trade Fair in July 2022 that was visited by hundreds of attendees. The pavilion was sponsored by the East Africa

“Most of Africa suffers from inadequate roads, railroads, ports, energy pipelines, power grids, and water projects, to say nothing of the challenges of connectivity and internet access.”

Europe, all of which will acquire an interest in continued good relations with the People’s Republic.²⁴

For East African nations, the BRI represents an opportunity to acquire financing and material support for infrastructure projects that have been on the drawing board for years. Most of Africa suffers from inadequate roads, railroads, ports, energy pipelines, power grids, and water projects, to say nothing of the challenges of connectivity and internet access. Other items on East African wish lists included industrial parks, shipping facilities, and exhibition halls for trade fairs and tourist attractions. Some experts compared the seemingly glittering possibilities of the BRI to the nineteenth-century Cape-to-Cairo railroad dreams of Cecil Rhodes.²⁵

Xi’s Kazakhstan and Indonesia speeches were followed by a long series of meetings, conferences, and summits, all of which provided opportunities for Xi and other Chinese officials to promote the program, flesh out its details, solicit participation by potential partners, and in stages, reveal BRI’s ambitious scope. For example, the Silk Road Archipelagos conference took place in Fuzhou, China, in November 2019. More than a dozen Chinese government, academic, and foreign ministry agencies were listed as cosponsors.²⁶ In August 2022, twenty-nine diplomats from fifteen African nations attended the “In-Depth China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Program” in China’s Hunan Province.²⁷

Journalists and business representatives from six African nations were invited to the “Promoting the

Commercial and Logistics Center, one of many business concerns that straddle the line between public and private ownership. The center provided for fifty-two Chinese firms to share the large pavilion.²⁹

With the onset of COVID-19, some of the meetings went virtual, such as the “Growing Economic Diplomacy and Opportunities Available in Northern Africa, Middle East, and Asia” conference.³⁰ As panic over COVID receded, senior Chinese officials made dozens of trips to Africa to resolve disputes and strengthen relations.³¹ China has appointed a special envoy to East Africa, Xue Bing, who visited with delegations from six African nations in Addis Ababa in June 2022. Xue asserted that China was best positioned to “restore stability” to the Horn of Africa region.³²

Goals and Objectives

China’s BRI has some reasonably clear goals, among them a diversity of trade relationships and an increase in the country’s soft power reach, and like the colonial powers of old, new markets for Chinese goods. At the same time, China is also continuing its effort to supplant and replace U.S. influence in the areas included in the BRI. This effort began soon after the United States established a larger military and diplomatic presence in Central Asia in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan.

In the early 2000s, when American attention shifted almost exclusively to Central and west Asia, China



began to invest more heavily in Africa. Chinese manufacturing had been growing, resulting in a need for markets and an outlet for investment capital. China was able to offer African governments a ready source of investment free of the sometimes contentious focus on human rights violations that often marked dealings with American officials.³³ For example, China's lack of concern over human rights opened a path to better relations with Kenya when Uhuru Kenyatta was elected in 2013. The International Criminal Court had named Kenyatta as a suspect in the violence that occurred after the 2008 Kenyan election. Kenyatta was invited to visit China soon after his election, prompting one Kenyan newspaper to contrast the welcome in China with the "abandonment by the West."³⁴

By 2019, forty of Africa's fifty-five independent nations had taken out Chinese loans for infrastructure projects.³⁵ By 2021, China had surpassed not only the United States in the value of its African investments but also such longstanding partners as France, Germany, and India.³⁶

China has also taken advantage of the U.S. preoccupation with Russia's invasion of Ukraine to cultivate partnerships with African nations, especially those the Americans were pressuring to impose economic

Xue Bing, China's special envoy to the Horn of Africa, speaks during the first Horn of Africa peace conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 20 June 2022. (Photo by Amanuel Sileshi, Agence France-Press)

sanctions on Russia. Soon after the invasion, Russia's foreign minister toured the continent, making stops in Egypt, Uganda, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. China, for its part, has promoted its centralized and authoritarian governing model as well, reviving an effort at political evangelization that started under Mao. China's International Liaison Department, a powerful branch of the Chinese Communist Party, opened the Julius Nyerere Center in Tanzania and immediately welcomed future leaders from six African one-party states.³⁷ Maneuvering to take advantage of the belated American response to China's inroads, and hoping to gain international recognition as an independent nation, Somaliland offered the Americans military use of a seaport and airfield in exchange for such recognition.³⁸

Complex Relations within the BRI

The large number of projects and initiatives that China is launching as part of the BRI allows African nations considerable breathing room to co-opt

participation in BRI for their own purposes. With so many footholds in the continent, it is barely possible for China's foreign ministry to control all of them or to ensure that Chinese investment and economic activity is serving Chinese foreign policy priorities. Some analysts have focused their work on the numerous ways in which recipient nations in Africa, along with private business owners on the continent, have been able to "adapt the BRI vision in an attempt to steer their way into Chinese investment streams and benefit from infrastructural, transport and strategic synergies."³⁹ Kenya, for its part, deliberately tries to pit China and the United States against each other to negotiate more favorable deals.⁴⁰ Even smaller nations like Uganda and Rwanda have used the opportunities presented by the BRI to maneuver between Kenya

and Tanzania.

East African nations also see the BRI as a catalyst for reviving the East African Community. Such a revival fits with the Chinese government's promotion of regional organizations that exclude the United States. As early as 2004, nations that later established the East African Community directed a design for a Railway Master Plan, eventually developing into more concrete plans for a Standard Gauge Railway that would connect Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan.

Double-Edged Debt Trap

African participants in the BRI have been the recipients of huge

loans from the Chinese government and semiofficial Chinese enterprises. As the Americans found during the Latin American debt crises of the 1980s, at a certain amount, debts cease to be a source of leverage for lenders and become a source of leverage for debtors. An announcement by a large debtor that repayment may not be possible can threaten the institution or government that holds the debt. China accounts for 17 percent of Ethiopia's foreign debt, 33 percent of Kenya's, and 70 percent of Djibouti's.⁴¹ At the same time, China has found a reluctance to accept debts in renminbi, forcing the country to expand its dollar-dominated debt to acquire the hard currency African nations insist on.⁴²

China, for its part, has been reluctant to write off debts, except for relatively small amounts and under very specific circumstances. Like U.S. banks and government lending agencies forty years ago, the Chinese prefer to refinance loans, hoping to maintain the financial upper hand. In 2018, for example, Ethiopia was able to get \$3.3 billion deferred. The year before, Sudan saw just \$160 million written off, which was only 2.5 percent of its total debt to China.⁴³ Yet China continues to expand its exposure in Africa. It is currently the largest single creditor nation.⁴⁴ Again imitating colonialists of the nineteenth century, China has sometimes demanded resource concessions in return for extended repayment concessions. China usually has foreign policy goals in mind during debt negotiations. It recently forgave \$78 million of Cameroon's debt, perceiving Cameroon to be a gateway to the central African region.⁴⁵

Results of the BRI

Some results of the Belt and Road Initiative will be hard to read. China will almost certainly increase its total annual trade with Africa, but since that trade only amounted to \$150 billion as late as 2021, up from \$10.6 billion in 2000, it will be difficult to attribute any increase to the BRI. At the same time, China certainly recognizes Africa's vast untapped mineral wealth, its potential as an oil and gas exporter, and its potential as a source for strategic metals.⁴⁶ Similarly, although boosters of the BRI note that ten thousand Chinese-owned firms are operating in Africa, that number pales in comparison to American- and European-owned enterprises.⁴⁷

On the other hand, Africa assuredly serves as a stepping-stone to another vital Chinese interest. China's inroads with Horn of Africa nations, especially

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Djibouti, provide a conduit for goods headed for the BRI port of Gwadar, Pakistan. Chinese concerns are working to build a railway from Gwadar to Xinjiang. When completed, the project will not only shorten travel time from forty-five days using the existing maritime route to ten days overland but also provide energy and other resources to China without going through the Malacca Strait, which can be closed by a hostile

that addresses the many national and transnational fault lines that are putting such enormous stress on the region.”⁵¹ Equally grandiose promises of jobs to be created also fell short or turned out to be only casual or temporary employment.

The Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway, once the poster child for the BRI in Africa, became a conduit for cheap Chinese imports to Kenya, severely hurt-

“ At least a quarter of the Belt and Road Initiative projects began with great fanfare, only to fall into disrepair due to inadequate follow-up. ”

navy. Overcoming the “Malacca Dilemma” may be a central goal of the BRI.⁴⁸

For the African nations participating in the BRI, benefits can also be in the eye of the beholder. Tanzania recently used its BRI participation to become one of only twelve nations that may export soybeans to China. Of more obvious advantage to Tanzania, the Chinese are building two new ports in the country, Lamu and Bagamoyo. One expert contends that the ports’ depth and development as major trans-shipment points could undercut competitors like Mombasa. With China providing most of the estimated \$10 billion in construction costs, Tanzania has been promised that the new port could, by 2045, handle twenty-five times the cargo that currently goes through Dar es Salaam.⁴⁹

The BRI also provides the bandwidth and other assets necessary to expand e-commerce from Africa to China. In April and May 2022, businesses from twenty-three African countries were invited to take part in the African Products Shopping Festival. Using livestreaming and e-commerce platforms provided by the Chinese, consumers in China could easily order Ethiopian coffee, Kenyan black tea, and South African wine, among other goods.⁵⁰

However, these benefits, some of which are conjectural, have not brought universal support for the BRI, neither in China nor in Africa. At least a quarter of the BRI projects began with great fanfare, only to fall into disrepair due to inadequate follow-up. An expert at the Atlantic Council predicted that BRI projects would include “an impressive photo-op but no concrete plan

ing the Kenyan manufacturing sector.⁵² Similarly, the Tanzania-Zambia Railway failed to attract local or regional investment and served only to increase Zambia’s dependence on Tanzania.⁵³ Early in 2022, then Tanzania president John Magufuli called the \$10 billion Bagamoyo port project “exploitive” and suspended its construction. Chinese financiers set “tough conditions that can only be accepted by mad people,” he said.⁵⁴

Such failures have brought a rapid increase in Sinophobia to East Africa. For example, to Kenyans interviewed by one expert, the Chinese are all but indistinguishable from nineteenth-century European colonialists or twentieth-century purveyors of debt dependence.⁵⁵ China’s almost unvarying policy of transporting Chinese workers to Africa to build BRI infrastructure projects has left Africans bereft of new jobs and created a growing perception among young people, at least in Ethiopia, “that there is already a sufficient cohort of Chinese individuals living and working in Ethiopia.”⁵⁶

Even where outright resentment has not appeared, language barriers, a lack of cultural sensitivity, and overpromising have created ill will that seriously undercuts China’s soft power potential and even its more hard power foreign policy objectives. Some African participants complained that loans and grants were forced on them, even if the specific type of aid offered was not needed. In other cases, the Chinese failed to adhere to local policies and procedures and made little to no effort to consult with local officials before finalizing aid or loan arrangements. In Tanzania and Malawi,



the Chinese did surveys to improve their image, but used Chinese researchers exclusively, skewing the results.⁵⁷ The Asia Society Policy Institute said in July 2022 that many BRI projects ignore factors related to land rights, community health and safety, gender equity, and labor standards.⁵⁸

On occasion, Chinese officials acknowledged the problems with the BRI projects in Africa but insisted that they had to act as they did. One Chinese official, asked by a U.S. reporter why his country mostly bought raw materials from Africa and not goods with more value added, replied, “We have determined that the biggest threat to any regime is internal unrest, not external factors. War we can handle ... the biggest cause of internal unrest is unemployment. That is why we try to get raw materials and not products that have had value added to them. The more value that has been added to the products means less employment for our people.”⁵⁹

BRI has also generated opposition in China, with one expert insisting that the project has never been popular among Chinese officials, in part because they see it as “too generous” to recipient countries. Scholars and banking officials who have examined the various elements of the BRI expected to find “clear and coherent financial planning. What [they] found was the exact opposite.”⁶⁰ Outside observers also noted the near impossibility of tracing or even knowing the

China’s military base in Djibouti houses some two thousand troops along with armored vehicles and gunboats, with a pier constructed to allow aircraft carriers to dock (top left) along with helipads and a runway (center). (Photo courtesy of Google Earth)

full extent of Chinese lending, since “much of China’s external lending is shrouded in secrecy.”⁶¹ The BRI began and survives, according to these experts, because it has the unwavering backing of Xi, backed up with sanctions for those Chinese officials who express skepticism.⁶²

Compounding the stated difficulties in analyzing Chinese lending connected to the BRI is the confusing mingling of public and private economic activity in China and in China’s economic and financial dealings with its partners. Semiprivate and quasi-private enterprises have proliferated in China in the twenty-first century, often headed by relatives of ranking government or Communist Party officials, known locally as “the Princlings.” Officially private, but almost certainly acting with the acquiescence of the Chinese government, these enterprises act in almost total secrecy and make even simple calculations, like the total amount of Chinese lending to Africa, all but impossible. “Nongovernment” Chinese intrusion, however, is just as likely to spark opposition and Sinophobia in Africa as anything the official Chinese government does.

Evidence from Djibouti and Ethiopia

The experiences of these two Horn of Africa nations serve as useful illustrations of the progress and the challenges of the BRI. Chinese concerns have funded a number of infrastructure projects there such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, financed by the Ethiopian government and a large loan from the Chinese import-export bank. The Chinese government

Command recently told Congress that China is seeking basing rights in the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Equatorial Guinea in west Africa.⁶⁶ For Djibouti, the opportunity to entice two superpowers to invest in projects important to Djibouti is obvious. "If someone comes and brings investment, we'll roll out the red carpet," said the president of the Djibouti Chamber of Commerce.⁶⁷ At the same time, Djibouti officials must

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sees Djibouti as a likely entry point to the Middle East, given the small state's membership in the League of Arab States and its close ties with Saudi Arabia.

Possibly the apotheosis of extended Chinese influence because of the BRI is China's first-ever overseas naval base in Djibouti, which opened in August 2017 on the ninetieth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. The base, only a few miles from a U.S. military base, commands one of the most important maritime choke points on the planet. The Red Sea, the Bab al Mandab, and the entry to the Indian Ocean from oil-rich Saudi Arabia all meet off the shores of Djibouti. U.S. officials say the Chinese base is large enough to accommodate an aircraft carrier and nuclear submarines.⁶³ It could also house up to ten thousand troops. Besides the immediate power projection potential and the potential excuses to project such power, ostensibly to protect Chinese nationals working on BRI projects, a permanent military presence in the region adds credibility to China's offers to mediate regional disputes, combat local piracy, and to assist after natural disasters.⁶⁴ In June 2022, China's special envoy to the Horn of Africa, Xue Bing, sponsored the first meeting of the Horn of Africa peace conference. High-level visits from Chinese leaders have become quite common in both Djibouti and Ethiopia. In June 2018, a Chinese antipiracy task force visited Ghana, Cameroon, and Gabon.⁶⁵

It is not clear that China will be satisfied with a single African base. The head of the U.S. Africa

be concerned about the example of Sri Lanka, which had to cede control of its largest port to a Chinese concern after defaulting on its debt.

In Ethiopia, the Chinese presence is strong, going well beyond the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway. Another rail project aims to connect Ethiopia with South Sudan. China is also heavily involved in a massive plan to expand Addis, known as the Addis Ababa Master Plan. China's Export-Import Bank provided financing and labor for the continent's first light rail system (serving Addis Ababa). In the end, 85 percent of the cost came from a loan from this Chinese bank. Like many BRI projects, the light rail system began with great fanfare but failed in its primary mission, which was to address the overburdened traffic system in the capital.⁶⁸ The project succeeded in saddling Ethiopia with huge debts to China. Ethiopia currently has the second largest foreign debt in sub-Saharan Africa, owing the Chinese more than \$13 billion.⁶⁹

Here again, it is hard to see a significant increase in China's political influence in Ethiopia. China's Horn of Africa Special Envoy offered to mediate the internal strife causing humanitarian nightmares in Ethiopia, but with no visible success. Ethiopian officials did not even provide him with a date for starting the proposed talks.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The impact of the BRI was hard to measure even before the reaction to the COVID-19 virus caused

so much disruption to the global economy. (Some BRI projects shut down for over two years.) For China, the global slowdown meant that its debtors were even less likely to repay their loans and even more likely to request (or demand) massive forgiveness or rescheduling. One expert concluded that China is “stuck.” Forgiveness and long-term restructuring will anger Chinese citizens who will not be repaid. On the other hand, strict demands for repayment will alienate the very developing countries China hopes to entice. The most likely outcome is China’s leadership trying to split the difference, which could alienate both Chinese and Africans.⁷¹ At the same time, grandiose promises to commit money and resources to help African nations deal with COVID have largely gone unfulfilled.

Enthusiasts of the BRI, inside and outside China, often point to the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway as a success story, but the very repetition of that example is evidence of how few successes have come from the BRI.⁷² Other supporters of the initiative speculate about proposed BRI projects, such as the new ports in Tanzania, which may or may not ever get built. Fanfare, high hopes, and grandiose predictions have been a much larger part of the BRI than actual measurable successes. In a global recession, such successes are likely to become even rarer.

The Djibouti base not only represents a departure from China’s past foreign policy but also a change in its traditional stance on noninterference. It also demonstrates that China is renegeing on its promise that its global economic expansion would not be accompanied by a global expansion of its military. China long criticized overseas military bases as neocolonialist and specifically condemned U.S. bases as “instruments of hegemony.”⁷³ Now, Chinese officials wrote in the Vision for Maritime Cooperation white paper that China



(Map adapted from Deutsche Welle; graphic courtesy of www.freepik.com)

China’s Investment into African Ports

reserves for itself the right to a role in “non-traditional security issues such as crimes on the sea, search and rescue and marine disaster prevention and mitigation.”⁷⁴ China also reserves the traditional role of “effectively protect[ing] the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions.”⁷⁵

Sri Lanka’s surrender of the Hambantota port also could prove to be a negative for China’s foreign policy. With rumors of threats to partially take control of Mombasa from Kenya if the Kenya Railways Corporation does not repay, China seems even more like a traditional colonial power rather than an innovative twenty-first-century rising power. Even in areas of considerable Chinese BRI investment like Ethiopia, China’s attempts to extend its diplomatic influence have met with little success, as evidenced by Ethiopia’s abrupt refusal of China’s mediation offer.

However, Xi's goals for the BRI are more likely to be found in the long term. China does not need a long string of economic or diplomatic advances in the short term for the BRI to be deemed a success. To a considerable degree, China has supplanted U.S. influence in East Africa, as it has in Central Asia. By presenting itself as a willing (and nonjudgmental) source of aid and loans, China has strengthened the hand of East African nations in their dealings with U.S. aid and banking officials. Even if Chinese loans are not paid back, or payments are extended into the not-so-near future, Xi can still perceive a gain in China's global status due to the decline in America's influence.

As noted, Chinese foreign policy is marked by sophistication, subtlety, long-term vision, and an impressive use of multiple tools to achieve both short-term and long-term goals. China does not need a large number of working railroads, busy ports, or successful mediations to regard the BRI as successful. They do need raw materials, assured access to global maritime choke points, and a growing perception that the country is the paramount rising power of the twenty-first century. If the initiative is sustained over the next ten years or so, China will have more global visibility and prestige than it has now. The question of the BRI's longevity is inseparable from the question of the longevity of the current Chinese regime. ■

Notes

1. Adam Grydehøj et al., "Silk Road Archipelagos: Islands in the Belt and Road Initiative," *Island Studies Journal* 15, no. 2 (2020): 4, accessed 2 February 2023, <https://islandstudiesjournal.org/files/ISJGrydehojSilkRoadArchipelagos.pdf>.
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