Commentary

The Belt and Road Initiative in Africa

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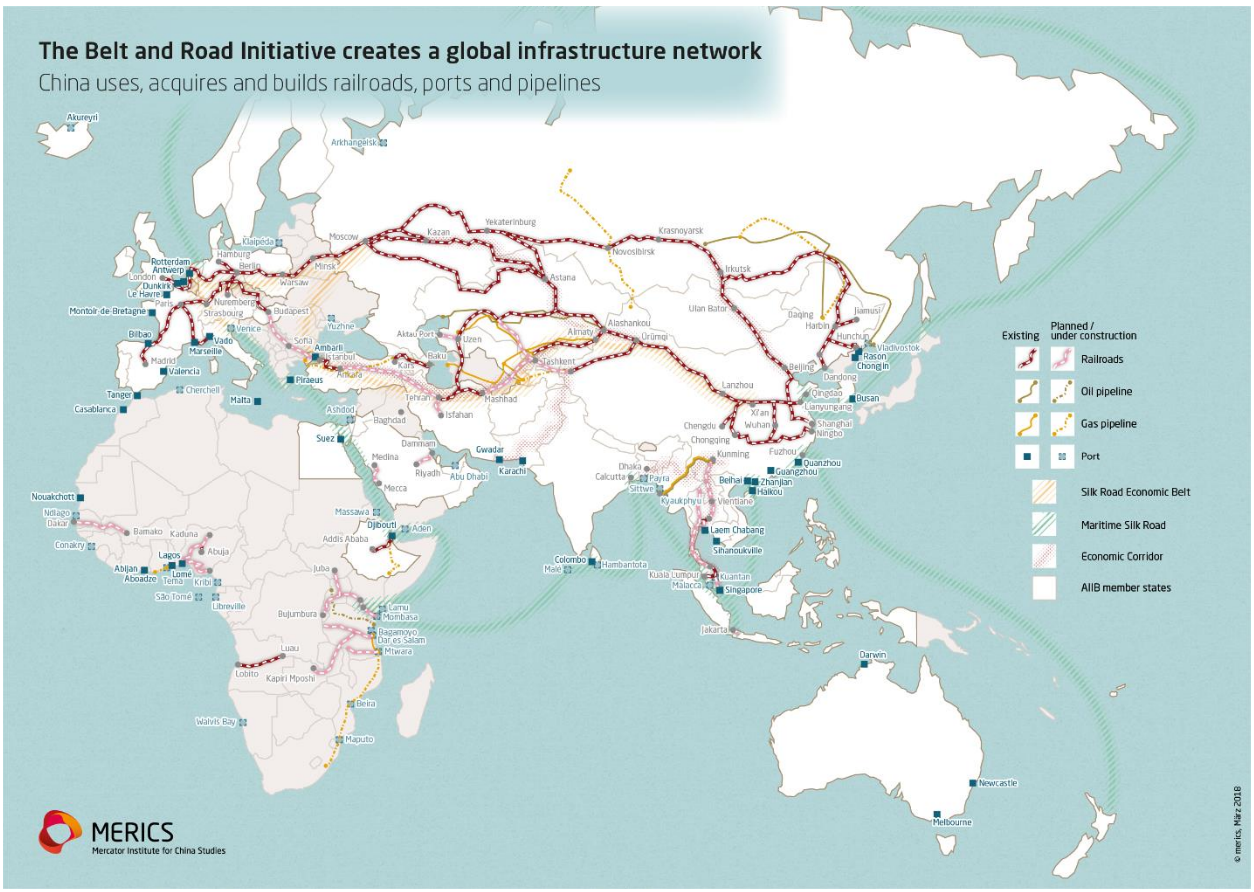


Figure 1: Belt and Road Initiatives Source: metrics.org

In the international economic landscape, the United States, China, India, Germany, and Japan are the five largest economies in the world, making up about half of the world's entire Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Yet, China launched the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative back in 2013 also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This massive project is meant to grow and link the Chinese influence and economic resources with Europe, Asia, Oceanic countries, Africa, and South America. With this expansion the Chinese military is also expanding along with the BRI to almost every continent on Earth.[1] The completion of BRI would allow China to match and potentially outmatch the economy and global military reach of the United States.

The expansion projects vary between physical infrastructure, technology, and communications. One of the largest projects so far has been the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which cost $62 billion and opens an economic corridor for China in the west other than their port in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS).[2] Ultimately the goals of BRI have been stated as advancing the global economy, and boosting the economies of BRI states and in the benefit of China giving the Chinese government additional geo-political leverage over BRI states as well. For the United States, the BRI initiative is a serious economic and military concern that will challenge the economic ties and freedom of movement for the U.S. military over the next few decades. Some analysts assess that at the end of the BRI initiative China will have spent $8 trillion dollars and begs the question, can the United States match this type of global investment?[3] Although the other piece of concern is in Africa. What this paper aims to discuss is how the BRI initiative impacts Africa and what does this impact means to the global outlook.

What is the Belt and Road Initiative?

First, the BRI has two components like the name implies one road and a belt. The “Belt” is the Silk Road Economic Belt that creates six land corridors that connects China with Central Asia and Europe.[4] The “Road” is the Maritime Silk Road that establishes sea ports that connect to Africa and to South America.[5] At this time, 65 countries have signed onto pieces of the overall BRI program, which includes 1,700 infrastructure projects from 50 state-owned Chinese companies.[6] The key word here is that all of these projects to include pipelines, roads, buildings, railroads, naval ports and more are run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) owned businesses.

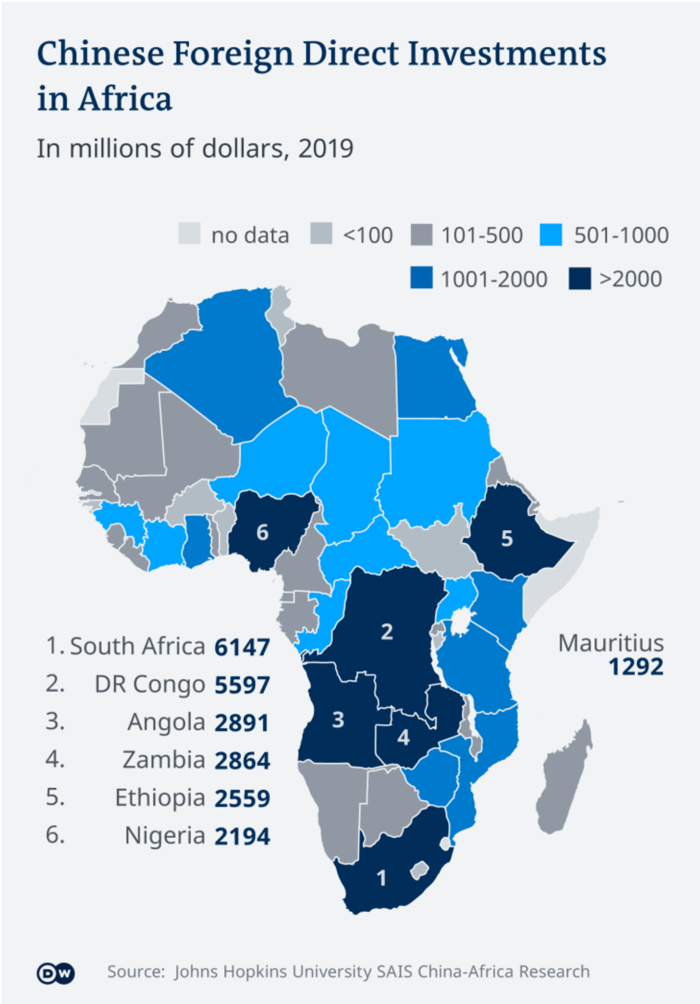
How this relates to Africa, is that since these projects are sanctioned by the CCP and the African nations government, these Chinese companies claim that they are building up the infrastructure, but at the same time they are making these African nations increasingly dependent on the Chinese economy and the CCP itself. The billions of dollars that China is pushing into African nations such as Djibouti and Kenya, for example, in fact do support their infrastructure, but since these African nations cannot pay back the investment have no other choice than allowing Chinese companies to stay and work in their nations. Although China claims that these businesses will provide additional jobs for African workers, it really creates jobs for Chinese workers in Africa.

The immediate result of Chinese companies being in Africa lies in security. It is very well known that Africa has a serious security issue with terrorism, crime, and political corruption. For example, in Djibouti, their government is known for controlling social media within the country, violently squashing protests and maintaining political control in the government through shady means.[7] Due to this corruption China states that there is a security risk and they must protect their strategic national economic interests, so then China creates infrastructure to support their military to have a consistent presence in these East African nations. The prime example of this is Djibouti and Kenya since China has developed military naval ports in both countries to support the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

Figure 2: China's Military interests in Djibouti Source: tesfanews.net

Djibouti has had a PLAN naval port in its country since 2016. This naval port originally was built to provide economic access to the Red Sea for the Chinese but has gradually become more of a military interest than before. The PLAN uses this port to protect their economic interests of the coast of East African in the Indian Ocean but with this security brings opportunities for growth. The U.S. has its own naval port within 15 km of the Chinese port, so this has direct impacts to U.S. Navy operations and international relations between the United States and Djibouti. Thus, speaking of advancements some of these include allowing Chinese aircraft carriers to dock. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) reports that the port in Djibouti has expanded past its original capabilities and can now permit PLAN Type-075 amphibious warships and Type-002 aircraft carriers to dock within the Red Sea area of operation. [8] This expansion for larger types of naval vessels allows the PLAN to power project their navy, like the United States does, which impacts the U.S. freedom of movement in the western side of the Indian Ocean.

Another case study for how the BRI interacts with African nations is Kenya, and the flagship project in Kenya is the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR). This railway connects the capital of Kenya, Nairobi, with the country's largest port city, Mombasa.[9] It is also critical to note that China is building a naval base close to Mombasa, much like the PLAN base in Djibouti.[10] Which even though the SGR is designed to support the Kenyan economy, it would serve a dual purpose of supporting Chinese navy activity in East Africa as well. To be fair, SGR did create 30,000 new jobs and transported 5.4 million people, and 1.3 million shipments across Kenya.[11] But even though SGR came at a success at first, the cost was the biggest issue. The Export-Import Bank of China funded 90% of the SGR project while 10% was funded by the Kenyan government, but then after the project was completed China called for the payment of the loan by the Kenyan government.[12] The debt that Kenya owed to China quickly became 55.5% of their Gross Domestic Product (GPD), and with the SGR jobs being low-paying jobs many workers did not stay with the project, thus making it impossible for the Kenyan government to sustain the railway. This is a prime example for how China used an African nation that they considered "susceptible to possible debt default" so that they can then economically control the nation they invested in, then use it to build naval ports,



infrastructure, military bases, and whatever China wants since Kenya owes them so much money.[13]

Belt and Road Initiative Impacts

One of the positive impacts that BRI brings to Africa is an influx of jobs, even though they will be jobs working for Chinese companies. The number of available jobs is critical for Africa in the upcoming years based on the projected population growth on the continent. By 2050 the United Nations projects that the population of Earth is expected to increase to 9.7 billion, and Africa will make up 1.3 billion of this (17%).[14] Currently, Africa has the highest rate of population growth globally, with most of this growth being youths. Each year about 10-12 million youths enter the labor market in Africa while only 3 million jobs are created, and this disparity has dire side-effects.[15] With 7 million youths unable to find work their options are slim, being agricultural work, joining a military, or joining a militant/terrorist group to name some of the primary jobs for youths. BRI provides additional jobs that will keep youths in Africa from joining a violent cause, thus increasing the overall threat in Africa as well. Although these youths are not working for African businesses, it is still a positive measure to bring jobs into Africa from Chinese companies to build up the infrastructure in multiple nations.

This positive outlook on job creation is echoed through the media as well. From the State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, they state that “China is not here to exploit Africa as the western world perceives, because looking at the African infrastructure development side, the BRI is helping Africa to transform itself. China comes with the help Africans need”.[16] Even though this is what the Chinese government publishes this may not be correct since it is also known that many BRI companies produce jobs, and are funded by the Chinese government, they usually come with a price tag that allows these Chinese companies to remain in Africa indefinitely without compensating the African nations government. This tactic does provide jobs and support infrastructure development, like Frederick Golooba Mutebi, a Ugandan researcher presents, but what is not published by the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), is that they maintain these businesses and use them to economically control and influence African nations as well.

On the other side of the coin, one of the most significant negative impacts that comes with BRI is the over-dependence on the Chinese economy. If a country, like any of the African nations that coordinate economically with China, become over dependent on Chinese foreign trade, this opens each of them up to a critical economic weakness. This weakness is their own economy is susceptible to global economic impacts, or more specifically, any “speed bumps” that negatively impact the Chinese economy.[17] With the global economy becoming more interconnected with China and the United States at the forefront of this, any negative impacts to either country can also then impact any African nation that relies on either country as well.

What needs to happen instead of this dependency on foreign governments and economies to build up the African nations is investment into industry and a strong security posture. For example, instead of Chinese or American countries building infrastructure and businesses of their own in Africa, investors should support indigenous African companies that can thrive with the international support. One of these companies is Jumia, an ecommerce company based out of Nigeria.[18] Jumia supports the internet connection of other large and small companies in 10 nations to include, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Tunisia, Senegal, Morocco, Kenya, Egypt, Algeria, and the Ivory Coast.[19] Investing in businesses like Jumia where they are African-based, African-run companies, will grow each nation's economy and will keep these nations from being susceptible to global economic trends. The BRI does not support this idea, instead it pushes more dependence on the Chinese economy.

Impacts to the Indo-Pacific Region

The BRI program is an economically aggressive policy that the United States and the Indo-Pacific leaders need to be worried about. Ultimately, BRI has many examples of Chinese economic influence in East Africa which is the first domino to fall, which will eventually lead to military presence in the area as well. Two of the most important naval economic corridors are in the Indo-Pacific, the Red Sea off Djibouti, and the South China Sea. Presently, the PLAN is a brown water navy, which means that they mainly operate in their territorial waters and off their coast, but with the assistance of BRI more naval ports in East Africa provide an extended military reach for the PLAN. This also supports the eventual goal of the PLAN to be a blue water navy, meaning that they can globally operate in any international waters and present themselves across all oceans. These developments with the PLAN alongside the economic control that China obtains through BRI when African nations default on debt is a critical action that goes against the United States strategic goals in the area.

Additionally, since the United States is greatly invested in East Africa, economically combatting the Chinese influence in the area is key. Some of the U.S. goals in East Africa are counterterrorism, supporting good governance, and ensuring economic freedom in the Indo-Pacific. Without diplomatic, economic, and military action enacted by the United States, then BRI and the Chinese government will de facto control the economy in East Africa and the international waters in the areas as well, thus threatening the security of U.S., Indian and Indo-Pacific partners trade that flows through the area. Therefore, a suggestion for the U.S. economically, would be to support indigenous East African businesses that can grow without most of the investment from the U.S., unlike the situation in Kenya. If the U.S. and our partners can economically support East African companies and allow them to grow on their own, job creation can be sustained, and the nation's economy will boom instead of drop due to debt concerns. In terms of diplomatic suggestions, the U.S. and other Indo-Pacific partners should increase diplomatic ties, economic alliances, and diplomatic alliances to ensure East African security from terrorist groups, and violent extremist actors. Finally, the U.S. military should continue their counter-terrorism mission in East Africa, while increasing their naval presences off the coast of East Africa to ensure the safety of all Indo-Pacific and African partners trade assets.

With the execution of these suggestions, and the support of informing the public, businesses, and partners through the media, it is likely that East African nations, and Indo-Pacific partners can counter BRI. As mentioned, BRI is one of the most ambitious economic, diplomatic, and military plans that China has undertaken, and because of this, countering this action by the United States is critical in order to stay relevant in East Africa. Without intervention, the PRC will continue to force East African countries to default and permit Chinese companies to use African resources, port access, and their population. All of this then increasing the geo-strategic resources available to China and allow the PLAN to grow towards their goal of matching the capabilities of the U.S. Navy within the next few decades.

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