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(Review Article)

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its role in developing Africa's economies. Case study: Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), Kenya

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to study the potential economic benefits of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Africa's economies with case study of Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) project in Kenya. China has become an important factor in African development. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is reorganizing the geographical and political space in the Africa, first, by heavily investing in regional connectivity projects, and second, by promoting alternative ideas and concepts of development favourable to a Chinese-centric order in the region. The paper also argues that the BRI is actively shaping a new spatial order in Africa by influencing key stakeholders' perspectives and preferences. China's particular visions of global and regional development through the BRI are gaining traction in Africa, making it an indispensable actor with considerable political and economic influence – and thereby challenging the role of traditional development partners in the global south region. China's engagement with Kenya is a good example of how Beijing approaches economic diplomacy in Africa. Moreover, it's a revealing case study of how BRI works on the continent. Kenya needs better infrastructure to meet its development needs, and China has been willing to help. The project to upgrade the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) is China's flagship investment project in Kenya. The SGR connects Mombasa, the largest port city in Kenya, to its capital, Nairobi. The Export-Import Bank of China financed 90 percent of the SGR project, while the Kenyan Government contributed the other 10 percent. The China Road and Bridge Corporation led the SGR installation process. This was supposed to signal a contribution to Kenya's developmental goals and directly spur growth in the construction sector. The Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) is a mega project that the Kenyan Government has invested in after freedom from the colonial rule. The SGR created around 30,000 new jobs for locals and, in the first year, transported 5.4 million passengers and 1.3 million twenty-foot equivalent units (known as TEUs) of shipments across Kenya. If this performance had continued African exports would have increased significantly. The chief economist in the State Department of Infrastructure in the Kenyan Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure claimed that the SGR would increase trade and investment and further employment opportunities to enhance the people's livelihoods in the East African Community. The paper will analyze how the BRI through SGR has enhanced economy and trade for Africa with a case study of Kenya, how the SGR has reduced unemployment, how the SGR has enhanced both the social aspects and environmental conservation in Kenya. This paper will also reveal that the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) and BRI have massive economic value to Africa and beyond and are crucial to development. The study recommends the completion of the remaining SGR phases in Kenya in the projected time frame for the railway industry to play a positive role in national and continental development.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI);Maritime Silk Road; Standard gauge railway (SGR); Forum on China Africa cooperation (FOCAC); China; Africa; Expressway

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1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the brainchild of the People's Republic of China Premier, President Xi Jinping. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes referred to as the New Silk Road, is one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever conceived(Wo-lap Lam, W. (2016) .

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the vast collection of development and investment initiatives was originally devised to link East Asia and Europe through physical infrastructure. In the decade since, the project has expanded to Africa, Oceania, and Latin America, significantly broadening China's economic and political influence. President Xi announced the initiative during official visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013. The plan was two-pronged: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. The two were collectively referred to first as the One Belt, One Road initiative but eventually became the Belt and Road Initiative (Banerjee, A., Duflo, E., & Qian, N. (2020).

Xi's vision included creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Such a network would expand the international use of Chinese currency, the renminbi, and "break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity," according to Xi. (In 2018, the Asian Development Bank estimated that the continent faces a yearly infrastructure financing shortfall of over $900 billion).

In addition to physical infrastructure, China has funded hundreds of special economic zones, or industrial areas designed to create jobs, and encouraged countries to embrace its tech offerings, such as the 5G network powered by telecommunications giant Huawei. Xi subsequently announced plans for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road at the 2013 summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Indonesia. To accommodate expanding maritime trade traffic, China would invest in port development along the Indian Ocean, from Southeast Asia all the way to East Africa and parts of Europe (Varma, K. J. 2016).

China has made significant inroads into Africa under the BRI. At a bilateral level, it has invested in 52 out of the 54 African countries and is poised to enter the 53rd market in Sao Tome and Principe. According to China's official statistics, 49 of the 54 countries (i.e. over 90 percent) have already signed MoUs. Geographically, 22 of the 49 countries (nearly 50 percent) are located in West Africa, with East Africa (12 countries), North Africa (nine) and Southern Africa (six) comprising the other 50 percent. The African Union has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on BRI cooperation with China. While MoUs are not legally binding, they formalise Chinese investments in the country, with due acknowledgement from the local government. This smoothens the investment process for Chinese companies in those countries. Moreover, signed MoUs can pave the way for a legally binding agreement (Baum-Snow, N., Brandt, L., Henderson, V. J., Turner, M. A, & Zhang, Q. (2017).

In recent years, as China's presence in Africa has grown, nations have one after another, turned their backs on Taiwan. Eswatini is the only African country that has resisted China's push and continues to disallow Chinese investments. It continues to remain the only ally of Taiwan in Africa and has not attended recent FOCAC forums (Hillbom, E., & Green, E. (2019).

In Kenya, through the BRI, China has supported modern infrastructure projects such as railways, expansion of roads, construction of ports, dams, industries, digital connectivity and airports, all of which injected vitality into the country's economic and development growth. For instance, regarding rail projects, the Mombasa-Nairobi phase of the standard gauge railway (SGR), a flagship project of Kenya's Vision 2030, cost approximately $3.8 billion—90 percent of which was funded by the Export-Import Bank of China and the remainder by the Kenyan government. The railroad, which is 472 km long, is in line with the shared principle of building an ecological civilization that balances development and environmental protection, as 14 wildlife channels were built over the 120-km part of the line crossing through Kenya's Tsavo National Park (Kenya Vision 2030. (2023).

Its impact has been immense. The rail line has integrated a transportation network in East Africa, created approximately 46,000 jobs for local people, enhanced bilateral economic and trade development, and advanced cultural exchanges between China and Kenya. The Nairobi-Naivasha rail route, which totals 120 km and was built at a cost of $1.48 billion, according to Kenya's State Department of Transport and Infrastructure, will facilitate Africa's industrialization as well as the economic prosperity of areas along the railway (Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (MTI). 2023.

2. Theoretical Framework

The BRI is an ambitious plan to develop two new trade routes connecting China with the rest of the world. But the initiative is about far more than infrastructure. It is an effort to develop an expanded, interdependent market for China, grow China's economic and political power, and create the right conditions for China to build a high technology economy (The World Bank: Africa Transport Unit. (2013).

The original Silk Road arose during the westward expansion of China's Han Dynasty (206 BCE 220 CE), which forged trade networks throughout what are today the Central Asian countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as modern-day India and Pakistan to the south. Those routes extended more than four thousand miles to Europe. Central Asia was thus the epicenter of one of the first waves of globalization, connecting eastern and western markets, spurring immense wealth, and intermixing cultural and religious traditions. Valuable Chinese silk, spices, jade, and other goods moved west while China received gold and other precious metals, ivory, and glass products. Use of the route peaked during the first millennium, under the leadership of first the Roman and then Byzantine Empires, and the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) in (ChinaKelly, Ryan. 2017).

2.1. The Belt and Road Initiative in Africa and its opportunities created

The emergence of the Chinese BRI opened a new chapter in the history of relations between China and Africa. The BRI is designed to improve trade and infrastructure beyond China's borders in Asia and Europe. It also involves projects in Africa although as an afterthought. BRI is lauded as the best growth model for Africa. This is represented by land corridors that connect China to Europe and Africa, through the New Silk Road Economic Belt. Another strategic component of this connectivity infrastructure and its vast spatial geography are the sea corridors, or the 21st century Maritime Silk Road, which links the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea and the eastern coast of Africa (Cohan, W. (2017).

Africa could overcome some of its development challenges through building of synergies between Agenda 2063 and the BRI. China not only is Africa's largest trading partner but has also established a critical geopolitical presence across the continent. There is need to develop transport infrastructure to open up Africa for international and inter regional trade. The continent's transport infrastructure is poorly developed especially rail transport where colonial powers deliberately built railways of different gauges in their respective spheres of influence (Pigato, Miriam and Wenxia Tang. 2015).

The new Silk Road, a massive infrastructure initiative is not limited to Asia and Europe. The maritime extension connects Chinese ports with the coasts of Africa, and Chinese-sponsored new railways make the African hinterland more accessible too. However, many of Africa's exports to China comprise low value-added commodities, whereas African countries import relatively higher value-added and manufactured products from China, including capital and consumer goods Belt Road Initiative (BRI). (2019).

One of the countries in Africa that have benefited from Chinese engagement in Africa is Ethiopia. In fact, studies carried out so far indicate a positive relationship between an increasing Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Africa and improved Africa's economic growth. One specific example is Ethiopia. The end of the civil war in the East African country in 1990 ushered in the leadership of a charismatic nationalist and strategic genius in the name of Meles Zenawi. Like many African countries highly indebted with loans from Western capitals during the cold war, Ethiopia was in serious economic problems. Following the end of the cold war in 1990, Ethiopia applied for loans for development from the World Bank and IMF. Through the Structural Adjustment Programs, Ethiopia embarked on serious economic transformation. Progress was slow until 2010, when China began to fund Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plans. These plans were heavily reliant on loans from China committed to funding infrastructure projects (United Nations Economic and Social Council. (2009).

Consequently, Chinese loans have helped the Ethiopian government to quickly refurbish the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway totaling 759 km. This important project was completed in 2016 using a loan of 3 billion USD from the EXIM Bank of China. Construction was undertaken by the China Railway Group and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. Facilitated by this investment, the Ethiopian government immediately purchased ten cargo ships to enhance the international transport of goods from Djibouti ports. Further infrastructure developments supported by China in Ethiopia include the Addis Ababa Light Rail and the Addis Ababa-Adama Expressway (Kenya News. (2017, July 11).

These projects consist of constructing the railway, training, personnel training, and operational management. Currently, this China-Ethiopia railway project is the biggest in East Africa. Indeed, China has demonstrated an impressive reputation in railway technology, innovative development, and scientific and technological management. Furthermore, Chinese loans and technical assistance played a key role in the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project. Chinese engineering companies such as China Gezhouba Group, Voith Hydro Shanghai, and China's Sinohydro Corporation have been involved in the construction of the dam. When completed, this dam shall be the largest hydroelectric power plant on the African continent, with a capacity to generate 6,480 (MWBlumenfeld, M., Wemakor, W., Azzouz, L., & Roberts, C. (2019).

Elsewhere in Africa, other related and impressive infrastructure developments have been funded by China across the continent. In Nigeria, China has tremendously supported infrastructure development. Between the years 2000 and 2019, 18 out of the 19 loan packages to develop infrastructure in Nigeria were from China. Among the key projects was the modernization of the Lagos-Ibadan railway, power, and ICT projects, totaling 6.8 billion USD. In Kenya, loans for transport totaling 6 billion USD were used to fund the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway. The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 is projected to help African countries consolidate their economic achievements emanating from Chinese-funded infrastructure projects across the continent. Currently, 42 African countries are under the BRI agreement with more than US$33 billion (Waweru, M. N. (2016).

Furthermore, Kenya has tremendously benefited from the Belt and Road Initiative through the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR). Following the completion of the project, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by 1.5%.This was due to the fact that the after-effects of the SGR project spilled over to related sectors, thereby increasing investment, production, and marketing. The Standard Gauge Railway has promoted Kenya's economic growth by creating over 46,000 employment opportunities for local residents (Chen, L. (2017).

Through the accruing employment multipliers, employees on the Standard Gauge Railway project have utilized their increased incomes not only to support their families but also to save and invest in various local projects, thereby contributing to the economic growth of the country. Indeed there are empirical studies that confirm that Standard Gauge Railway transport infrastructure has strengthened the domestic economic environment and enhanced regional integration of the East African community.

The Standard Gauge Railway project has promoted economic, social and strategic unity among the East African countries and consequently played an important role in the integration process of regional constituent sectors. Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have tremendously benefited from the Standard Gauge Railway, given the fact that they rely on Mombasa port for most of their international trade (African Development Bank, 2018).

The BRI aims at establishing Kenya as the new hub in Africa. What is important for Sub-Saharan African countries is how to take advantage of the strong BRI project focus on infrastructure. Much of the investment in these projects will come from Chinese state-owned enterprises with which African countries have had considerable negotiating experience and operational interaction BRI offers opportunities that could support African Union's integration agenda or agenda 2063 Belt Road Initiative (BRI, 2019).

These opportunities could build on the Forum on China Africa cooperation (FOCAC) process, in addressing Africa's infrastructure gaps, which currently impede integration. Trough BRI railway transport infrastructure projects, Africa's participation in regional and global value chains could be enhanced by opening up potential avenues for industrial development. An important contribution that China can make to the diversification of economic activity in Africa is the outsourcing and relocation of its labor-intensive industries as well as low-skilled jobs to Sub-Saharan African countries (Business Daily. (2017, June 7).

This will assist with increasing their supply capacity and broadening their production bases while developing more capital-intensive, high-tech industries within China. China's increasing influence in Africa has been predicated on its being the primary consumer of African commodities and a major source of development finance and investment. Besides, China has challenged Western spheres of influence in Africa. The prevailing view within Africa is that the Sino-African partnership is a more equal one (symmetrical) than Africa's relationship with the West Africa's relationship with the West has been oft-tainted by a perception that the net flow of resources between the West and Africa remains largely in West's favour. This asymmetrical relationship is characterized by unequal terms of trade, debt servicing and economic policies which tend to promote the extraction of resources. Consequently, this has led to the marginalization of the vast majority of African people. This is why the Chinese leadership has been cautious not to project any form of ‘hegemonism’ towards Africa. China has tempered its commercial engagement with emphasis on notions of mutual respect, sincerity, friendship and solidarity (Belt and Road Initiative. (2019).

2.2. The Belt and Road Initiative in Kenya

The centerpiece of the Kenyan government’s participation in the initiative is a high-speed railway running between Mombasa and Nairobi, the first high-speed railway on the African continent. Built by the Chinese, the project has provided jobs and training for a local workforce to operate the railway – but also created serious questions about the country’s ability to service the Chinese loans which paid for the railway and Kenya’s broader debt obligations to China (CPCS. (2009).

Through the BRI, China has supported Kenya’s modern infrastructure projects such as railways, expansion of roads, construction of ports, dams, industries, digital connectivity and airports, all of which injected vitality into the country's economic and development growth. For instance, regarding rail projects, the Mombasa-Nairobi phase of the standard gauge railway, a flagship project of Kenya's Vision 2030, cost approximately $3.8 billion—90 percent of which was funded by the Export-Import Bank of China and the remainder by the Kenyan government. The railroad, which is 472 km long, is in line with the shared principle of building an ecological civilization that balances development and environmental protection, as 14 wildlife channels were built over the 120-km part of the line crossing through Kenya's Tsavo National Park (African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Infrastructure Consortium for Africa (ICA). (2017).

Its impact has been immense. The rail line has integrated a transportation network in East Africa, created approximately 46,000 jobs for local people, enhanced bilateral economic and trade development, and advanced cultural exchanges between China and Kenya.

The Nairobi-Naivasha rail route, which totals 120 km and was built at a cost of $1.48 billion, according to Kenya's State Department of Transport and Infrastructure, will facilitate Africa's industrialization as well as the economic prosperity of areas along the railway. In addition, the BRI has led to the construction of approximately 115 km of road bypasses in Nairobi, the 27.1-km Nairobi Expressway, the 453-km Lamu-Garissa Road and 300 km of informal settlement roads in Nairobi. These roads have effectively reduced traffic jams and boosted regional economic development through the convenient movement of goods and services across the country (Lapsset Corridor Development Authority (LCDA). (2017).

Regarding port projects, the Mombasa Port's berth and storage yard projects will improve traffic flow at the port, while the Kipevu Oil Terminal will improve the efficiency of oil transportation in Kenya. Furthermore, the Likoni Floating Bridge and the Makupa Bridge, which cost a total of $60 million to build, have improved pedestrian and motorcycle movement and ensured safety. In line with the BRI agreements, Kenya is committed to promoting a free trade regime in an open world economy while embracing the trends toward a multipolar world, economic globalization and cultural diversity.

Kenya and China, through the BRI, have agreed to continue to strengthen cooperation under the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Through the agreements, the two partners are committed to the ideals of globalization in a world increasingly resorting to anti-globalization tendencies such as protectionism and isolationism (Chen, Y. (2016).

3. Literature Review

3.1. BRI Project a road to Africa’s Economic Development

When talking about China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), few people connect it to Africa. Yet African countries are part of this too: as of September 2019, 40 of 55 African countries had signed some sort of memorandum of understanding or other agreement on the BRI. The BRI focuses on the development of large infrastructure projects, and many African countries hope to use this opportunity to fill their own infrastructure gap. But this comes with challenges. There are many examples of projects, even before the BRI, that have turned into ‘white elephants’ – too large, too expensive, not viable or simply not well planned, and out of proportion with their value or usefulness. Africa has a more positive view of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) than anywhere else outside China. In January 2021 Botswana became the 46th African nation to sign up to it (Nairobi: Author. Mitchell, Tom and Xinning Liu. 2018).

Despite the pandemic and heightened geopolitical tensions, BRI is still delivering infrastructure development across the continent, as well as helping to strengthen trade links between China and Africa. While Africa will certainly see more

BRI projects in 'traditional' sectors such as ports, roads and railways, China's shift towards sustainability has led to a growing emphasis on investments in other areas, such as renewable power schemes, digital infrastructure and the so called Health Silk Road. The number of African BRI participants interested in renewable energy projects has trebled, with even more aiming to invest in the grid and network infrastructure needed for reliable power provision (Chatzky, Andrew, and James McBride 2020).

As African governments continue to develop badly-needed infrastructure and seek to boost their economies after the pandemic, there are likely to be even more opportunities in BRI, for both Chinese and non-Chinese participants. One of the major constraints to economic development is not having good quality and the appropriate infrastructure. While roads and railways connecting production sites, power plants and industrial parks can make countries more attractive for investment, thus creating jobs and transforming their economies, this is not true of all infrastructures.

Take one example from Uganda. With support from the Chinese government, Uganda has built or is building many infrastructure projects that are crucial for its economy, including the Karuma and Isimba hydro-power stations and several industrial parks. But the project that is more often associated with the BRI in Uganda is the Kampala–Entebbe expressway that connects the capital city with the country’s main airport (Dezensky, Elaine 2020).

China has a lot to gain in Africa. The continent is rich in resources, has a young population, and contains some of the world’s fastest-growing economies. While China’s overseas direct investment is largely concentrated in Asia (mainly in Hong Kong), in 2012, Africa was the second-largest overseas market for Chinese infrastructure investment. In 2015, Africa had dropped to number three, behind Latin America, but Chinese companies were still dominant in infrastructure projects on the continent. Through trade, investment, and strategic diplomacy, China is re-shaping sub-Saharan Africa. Beijing has growing economic ties with Africa’s largest economies and Chinese firms dominate infrastructure construction projects. In 2020, nearly one-third of infrastructure projects in Africa worth at least $50 million were built by Chinese companies. In addition, China is, in many areas, replacing the United States and Europe as trade partners with Africa. Beijing has translated China’s growing economic footprint in Africa into geopolitical influence (Chatzky, Andrew2020).

Some Western commentators have observed China’s growing economic footprint in Africa-especially its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-with skepticism and concern. They argue that Chinese investments are debt traps that will eventually lead to neo-colonialism. Despite this criticism, China’s influence on the continent continues to rise. China, on the other hand, claims that its funding and BRI investments center on local necessities in a spirit of win-win cooperation. President Xi announced the initiative during official visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013. The plan was two-pronged: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. The two were collectively referred to first as the One Belt, One Road initiative but eventually became the Belt and Road Initiative (Colagrossi, M , 2019).

The Belt and Road Initiative is a continuation of existing commercial and political intercourse between China and African countries, which has been going on for over three decades. It is part of the ‘going global’ policy that has characterized Chinese foreign policy since the end of the cold war. Some media pundits, particularly from liberal western countries, have referred to China as a rogue donor. Others, especially from the developing world, claim that China is actually helping the developing world forge and pave a pathway out of poverty. Most of these debates, however, have taken place with very limited hard facts. This has not been helped by China’s tradition of secrecy, especially regarding its aid packages. Ultimately, this has fueled rumors and speculation, thereby rendering it quite difficult to establish the risks and opportunities provided by China’s growing influence in Africa (Hielscher, Lisa, et al).

The economic growth of a country or region is predominantly dependent upon existing infrastructure. Among the key infrastructure required is the transport sector. Not only is transport an essential component in the socioeconomic growth and development of a country, but it is also a good recipe for the sustainability of other service facilities. There can never be an efficient and effective movement of goods and people from one region or town to another without a robust and reliable transport infrastructure. An efficient transport system facilitates both regional and international trade.

Regional development initiatives are often determined by the reliability and efficiency of the transport infrastructure. Economic growth and poverty eradication of a nation or region cannot be possible without an advanced infrastructure. Experience has demonstrated that regions with efficient and vast road and rail networks encourage job creation among the population. Consequently, this leads to increased tax revenues, leading to industrialization courtesy of an efficient transport system. Given the foregoing discussion, the Belt and Road Initiative is good news to African countries with serious deficiencies in transport infrastructure (Githaiga, Nancy Muthoni, and Wang Bing 2019).

3.2. Standard Gauge Railway (Sgr) a BRI project to Kenya's Economic Development

China's relations with Kenya are a good case study in how the BRI can function in Africa and offer some answers to these thorny questions. Kenya, a gateway to East Africa and one of the continent's largest economies, is an excellent platform for China to broaden its reach into the rest of the continent. As one of the first major economic powers to invest significantly in Africa instead of just focusing on extracting resources, China has stolen a march on the rest of the world and gained advantages in Africa that will take patience, creativity, and political will to match (Kenya News. 2017).

The SGR idea was conceived in June 2013, when the first infrastructure Summit of the Presidents of Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda was held in Uganda. The summit put in place mechanisms for fast tracking the SGR development system that would link Rwanda and Uganda to the port of Mombasa to enable faster socio-economic transformation of the East and Central Africa Economies. The summit led to the signing of the Tripartite Agreement for the development and operation of the SGR between Mombasa-Kampala-Kigali with branch lines to Kisumu (Kenya) and Pakwach/Gul-Nimule (Uganda) between the Republics of Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda in August 2013. The Republic of South Sudan acceded to the agreement in May 2014 extending the line to Juba (Gorecki, Ian 2022).

The 3rd Joint Communiqué directed the Partner States to develop a SGR Protocol for the development and operations of the Standard Gauge Railways. The Protocol was signed by Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan and Rwanda in May 2014. The Northern Corridor Integration Projects (NCIP) 2018 spells out the overall objective of the SGR as to jointly develop and operate a modern, fast, reliable, efficient and high capacity railway transport system as a seamless single railway operation among the Parties with the specific objectives of:

Expediting economic growth and development of the Parties by reducing the cost of doing business and increase the region's competitiveness;

Enhancing spatial development along the SGR corridor;

Enhancing efficient and cost effective movement of freight and passengers in the region to accelerate trade and services; and sustaining development of other transport infrastructure and adopt new technologies to enhance economic development (Atieno, Milicent 2017).

The SGR was also motivated by the prospects of the ease of the cost of doing business by lowering transport costs and time, as well as trade facilitation and integration in the EAC, in 2014, the Government of Kenya and Uganda have made a comeback in the transformation of the railway sector by developing the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) project partnering with the Chinese Government. Tanzania on the other hand has decided to engage a Turkish contractor on construction of its second phase of the SGR (Gachanja, 2017). All efforts are ultimately geared towards a common goal of integrating the EAC.

The project revolves around the development of a modern high speed, high capacity standard gauge railway for passengers and freight within the Northern Corridor, with speeds of 80 Kilometers per hour (Kph) for Freight trains and 120 Kilometers per hour (Kph) for Passenger trains (Githaiga, Nancy Muthoni).

The SGR comes with promises of cost savings projected in the next three to five years when finally fully operational. It is also expected to be a major economic transformation that would come with huge price cuts for commodities. Due to the deterioration of the metre gauge railroad and loss of significant cargo to road transport, a need arose to improve the rail corridor between Nairobi and the port of Mombasa to make it efficient and competitive. In May 2014, during his visit to Kenya, Chinese Premier Liand Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta signed a US$ 3.8 billion contract to build the 472 km SGR linking the Port City of Mombasa with Nairobi, the Capital City of Kenya.

The project involved building a standard gauge railway that would meet ultra-modern standards with high speed and high capacity for both passenger and freight transport. With average speeds of between 80-120 km per hour (Kph) for freight trains and between 120-160 km per hour (kph) for passenger trains, the SGR has cut the round trip from Mombasa to Nairobi to about eight hours for freight and about four hours for passengers. The China Export-Import (Exim) Bank provided 90% of the US$ 3.8 billion in financing phase 1 of the SGR from Mombasa to Nairobi. China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) served as the contractor and built the railway line according to the Chinese railway design standards (Johnston, Lauren A).

3.3. Economic Impact of SGR to Kenya's economy

The Kenya standard gauge railway (SGR) is the largest transport infrastructure project in the country since independence. The facility is designed to enhance transport operations in the country and beyond in a bid to boost development and economic growth in line with the Kenya Vision 2030. Phase one of the projects extending from Mombasa-Nairobi was completed in May 2017 and is now fully operational with 14 freight and 4 passenger trains.

With 14 cargo trains, the Nairobi-Mombasa SGR has already hit its 2025 container transportation target as per its original design plan. This means it has achieved its eight-year target in one year – which is quite an impressive accomplishment. With such success, positive impact of the SGR on the Kenyan economy are likely to be felt soon and its objective to grow the country's GDP by 1.5% will be realized earlier than expected owing to the following after-effects (Hutchison, Alan):

3.3.1. Increased industrialization

Immense opportunities for construction related industries have arisen as demand for materials such as cement, steel, stone, aggregates and glass required for construction of the line and stations increases. With ease of transporting goods and increased markets due to a new network of trading routes, more manufacturing and processing plants in other sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining will naturally crop up (Irandu, E. M. (2018).

3.3.2. Urbanisation along its route

Just as the arrival of the lunatic express resulted in the mushrooming of urban centers, a major impact of the SGR on the Kenyan economy will be the emergence of trading centers at all its 33 stations as well as reinvigoration of economic activities in already existent towns. With Kenya's economy being market based, the emergence of these centers will boost growth in its key sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and financial services (Zhu, Keren, et al).

3.3.3. Job creation

Top on the list of positive effects of the SGR project to the economy is job creation. From individuals employed in the construction sector, to the 2,285 staff from diverse professional backgrounds working at the 33 stations and in the passenger and cargo rolling stock, the project has generated numerous job opportunities. Furthermore, there is indirect job creation through entrepreneurship opportunities posed by the need for goods and services by SGR employees and passengers including catering, and entertainment among many others. Spending by these employees is set to create 'income effects' on the economy.

3.3.4. Reduced cost of doing business

Currently, the costs of transport for imported and exported goods in East Africa accounts for 40% of total cargo charges. With the new railway line, transport costs have dropped significantly owing to economies of scale since a single train has the capacity to haul 216 20-foot containers in a single trip, which would otherwise require the engagement of 108 trucks. Besides, travel time has reduced while accidents and cargo pilferage common in road transport has been eliminated all which translate to lower cost of doing business (Hart, Joe).

3.3.5. Improved regional trade

Kenya neighbours three landlocked countries – Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi – and fast clearance at the Mombasa port, reduced transport cost, faster delivery of goods will make the country the preferred entry point and export route for these nations thus positively affecting the economy.

3.3.6. Reduction of road maintenance cost

The heavy weight of trucks has been a major contributor to the wear and tear of roads across the country especially considering that 95% of all cargo moves by road with over 1600 heavy load trucks plying the Mombasa-Malaba route. This means roads are in constant need of maintenance at exorbitant costs. With SGR set to take over, freight haul trucks will be phased out of the roads thus enhancing their longevity. Concisely, effects of the SGR on the economy during and after development are numerous and a gleaming symbol of progress towards achievement of vision 2030 goals (Mureithi, Carlos).

3.3.7. Improved tourism opportunities

Tourism is a major contributor to the country's GDP and the fruition of the SGR could not be more opportune, coming at a time when international arrivals have dwindled due to security concerns. The coast region is the most popular destination for local tourists but challenges associated with road travel have been a major hindrance to the realisation of full domestic tourism potential.

The entry of a low cost, comfortable, fast and safe mode of transport to Mombasa coupled with the breathtaking scenery along its route especially the stretch that traverses the Tsavo National Park, home to a wide variety of wild animals, has boosted the number of domestic and international tourists visiting the region (Kimutai, Carole).

4. Results and Discussions

China has made significant Inroads into Africa under the BRI. At a bilateral level, it has invested in 52 out of the 54 African countries and is poised to enter the 53 rd market in Sao Tome and Principe. According to China's official statistics, 49 of the 54 countries (i.e. over 90 percent) have already signed MoUs. Geographically, 22 of the 49 countries (nearly 50 percent) are located in West Africa, with East Africa (12 countries), North Africa (nine) and Southern Africa (six) comprising the other 50 percent. The African Union has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on BRI cooperation with China. While MoUs are not legally binding, they formalise Chinese investments in the country, with due acknowledgement from the local government. This smoothens the investment process for Chinese companies in those countries. Moreover, signed MoUs can pave the way for a legally binding agreement (Meidan, Micha).

There are only five African countries—Eritrea, Benin, Mali, Sao Tome, and Principe and Eswatini (Swaziland) that have neither signed an MoU nor expressed support. However, China continues to push its presence in these countries undeterred. Recently, it started investing in Eritrea's Koka gold mine. Benin's President has asked local firm Petrolin and French giant Bollore to "withdraw" from a major rail infrastructure project linking Benin to Niger, to make way for China. Further, China has signed agreements worth US$11 billion with Mali, to finance two cross-country railway projects intended to link the landlocked country to the coast. Meanwhile, Sao Tome and Principe switched allegiance in May 2017, going from recognizing Taiwan to accepting the "one-China policy." On 1 April 2019, it reached an agreement with China for fast-tracking the execution of projects to be funded by China, including direct support for the 2019 General Budget. It is expected that increased Chinese investments will gradually lead some of these countries to sign MoUs or express official support in the future (Campbell, Horace).

In recent years, as China's presence in Africa has grown, nations have one after another, turned their backs on Taiwan. Eswatini is the only African country that has resisted China's push and continues to disallow Chinese investments. It continues to remain the only ally of Taiwan in Africa and has not attended recent FOCAC forums. The modern-day BRI comprises an overland belt and a maritime road, with a specific focus on infrastructure. Furthermore, unlike the ancient Silk Road, the BRI involves countries and geographical regions far beyond the route from Asia to Europe, some as far away as Peru in South America and Papua New Guinea in the Pacific islands.

African states have in general been fairly receptive of the BRI; in 2018, 53 African states, and the chairperson of the African Union Commission, adopted the Beijing Declaration – toward an even stronger China-Africa Community with a shared future with China. As recently as January this year, China signed a memorandum of understanding for BRI cooperation with Botswana to help strengthen Botswana's infrastructure construction and national modernization process. This studyexamines some of the BRI projects which have made headlines especially inKenya, Uganda and many other African countries (Wissenbach, Uwe; Wang, Yuan).

Kenya, a country with longstanding diplomatic ties with China, is another African state in which prominent BRI projects have commenced. There was a particular focus on Kenya as a point of entry for the maritime silk road into Africa from Asia, and one of the flagship projects is the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, which is the country's biggest infrastructure investment since its independence in 1963. The project, which is meant to link the port city of Mombasa to the capital Nairobi and onward to other land-locked neighbouring countries, is largely financed by China's EXIM Bank.

Widely touted as a showcase BRI project, the project subsequently become the subject of public criticism for both the colossal debt it created for Kenya to China and the choice of CIETAC, a Chinese institution, as the designated arbitral institution in the dispute resolution clause of the contract (World Bank Group).

It further led to a high-profile litigation in the Kenyan Courts brought by activists and the Law Society of Kenya on the grounds that, among other things, the China Road and Bridge Corporation had won the public project without going through a public competition in breach of procurement procedure. The Kenyan appellate court held in June 2020 that the procurement of the construction of the project was not exempt from the provisions of the 2005 Public Procurement and Disposal Act and that, consequently, the Kenya Railways Corporation as procuring entity was in breach of the aforementioned Act as well as article 227(1) of the Kenyan Constitution (Wang, Jian-Ye).

5. Conclusion

It has been established that a huge infrastructure gap exists in Africa and that BRI investments can fill the gap. The Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya is one of the mega infrastructure projects financed by China in East Africa. The modern railroad has contributed to the socio-economic development of Kenya and in the long term, is likely to spur economic growth and promote regional trade within the East African Community (EAC). The LAPSSET Corridor will provide a vital link between East Africa and West Africa, thereby opening up a huge area for trade and investments.

As the BRI projects progress in various corners of the world especially in Africa and Kenya in particular, so do the ensuing disputes and stakeholders have already begun to react to these developments. For example, China has designated new international commercial courts in Shenzhen and Xi'an for dealing with maritime road and overland belt disputes respectively (CICC).Arbitration is, similarly, envisaged by both the Chinese government and participating stakeholders.

Arbitrary institutions have also focused their efforts on enhancing their capabilities in managing BRI disputes. The ICC, for example, has created a Belt and Road Commission comprising an international panel of specialists to drive the development of its existing procedures and infrastructure to support BRI disputes. The Hong Kong International Arbitration Centre has similarly set up its own BRI Advisory Committee.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted the BRI and its projects across the globe. Nevertheless, China continues to innovate with respect to development of its ambitious initiative, with a renewed focus on the "Health Silk Road", "Green Silk Road" and a "Digital Silk Road". The first of the three is particularly relevant for African states today as regards the distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations. It remains to be seen what degree of success these endeavors will see, and the inevitable cross-border disputes that may arise from these efforts.

6. Research methodology

Research methodology in this case relied on Secondary data that was sourced from publications by different authors who included government archives, scholarly journals, among other sources. Qualitative methods of data analysis and content analysis were used to draw conclusions from the study. The paper also used non-spatial data, which is printed on reports, journals, tables and other statistical figures available to show the impact on the economy of the country as a case study.

Recommendations

However, to maximize these benefits and to avoid pitfalls of dependency, it is recommended that African countries should take a common position that serves their interests. This is lacking at the moment. The funding mechanism should also be reviewed. There should be a shift from commercial funding of BRI projects to more concessionary funding at lower interest rates and longer repayment periods. This will enable African countries to borrow to finance BRI infrastructure projects at affordable costs. The funding of BRI infrastructure should also not be guaranteed through national assets such as ports or rail in case of default but should be guaranteed through Government to Government funding.

At the national level, Kenya should formulate policies that can enhance potential gains and limit negative effects from BRI projects. BRI projects appear lop-sided and may not necessarily serve national interests. This calls for proactive engagement from the Kenyan side to ensure win-win cooperation. All Chinese companies wishing to invest on any BRI project in Kenya should comply with national laws and regulations. The government should ensure adequate stakeholder engagement in the award of BRI contracts. Kenya should also diversify her trading partners so that any downturn in the growth of the Chinese economy may not impede economic growth of the country.

It is safe to state that the SGR, and in turn the relationship between Kenya and China, is a beneficial one. However, certain more measures can be put in place in order to ensure that Kenya is strategically positioned to make the most out of the SGR and its relationship with China, and to also have the input of the Kenyan populace taken into consideration. To begin with, Kenya should carry out an extensive investigation into the way the SGR was built and address the corruption claims that have surfaced. For the SGR to make sense, it has to start making profits in order to pay for itself as the government had promised. An in-depth and open look into the SGR would help stamp out the corruption that has been reported to plague the railway undertaking, and this would ensure that money is being saved instead of being stolen, something that will help with the payment of the loan taken to finance the project. Such an investigation would also allay the fears of Kenyans pertaining to the SGR and this would be beneficial to both the government and the public.

The Kenyan government should ultimately institute sweeping policies and legislation that will ensure that all agreements signed with the government of China are available to the general public.

The government of Kenya should show its commitment to ensuring maximum benefits from the infrastructure projects undertaken with the SGR being the main one. There is no denying that the deals that led to the granting of the loans used to finance the SGR are shady and obscure. The idea of infrastructure building is a great one and something that the government should seek to actualize in order to accelerate its development. Herein, the Kenyan government needs to negotiate better with the Chinese government to ensure that Kenya can gain more from the investment in infrastructure. More quotas should be allocated to Kenyan people in terms of jobs and the sourcing of building materials should favor Kenyan companies and people.

Kenya should protect its natural resources and environment. Kenya should not sign away its natural resources to China. It is common knowledge that China seeks to exploit natural resources from other parts of the world, and Kenya should avoid falling into anything that would put it in a tough spot. Kenya should do so by making sure that it remains in sole custody of its natural resources and assets and that the exploitation and use of such resources should be done in a manner that benefits Kenya. The building of the SGR saw the traversing of The Tsavo National Park as well as the Nairobi National Park. The government should make sure that the parks which are major tourist attractions and foreign revenue earners are taken care of with policies put in place to protect them.

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