

AFRICA'S INCLUSION IN CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A TRUE IMPLEMENTATION OF POSSIBILITIES? *

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is anticipated to establish a vast trade and investment corridor, positioning China as the focal point of this new form of multilateralism. Over the years, China has established a significant presence in most African countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers African countries a potentially significant opportunity because of its profitable economic investment package, adaptable political strategy, and targeted large-scale developmental projects. Nevertheless, the unilateral nature of the initiative, the absence of openness and responsibility towards African countries, and the dearth of projects that directly enhance the well-being of local communities have generated doubts and intensified local animosity. African governments are increasingly abandoning or delaying the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects due to growing concerns about mounting debt. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the feasibility and consequences of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, based on information gathered from researchers, scholars, and policymakers. The paper elucidates prevailing misconceptions, some of which are derived from prejudiced generalizations regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. The paper posits those African countries should consistently do impact assessments and adjust their relationship, if needed, in order to optimize the opportunities associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Trade Investment, Africa, China.

1. Introduction

Across a continent where nearly all countries experience inadequacies in transportation, communication, and power production infrastructure, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is widely embraced, with numerous governments eagerly anticipating its implementation. Nevertheless, numerous questions have emerged about China's strategic motives, its assertions of a peaceful global rise, and the objectives of its flagship global initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹ Some people also argued that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is simply a clandestine method for China to enhance its worldwide economic and political sway.² China's purpose with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is to facilitate unrestricted commerce and investment globally, while providing secondary support to the relevant regions. Furthermore, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is perceived by certain groups as a method to enhance China's economic, political, and security leverage in its strategically significant surrounding areas.³ Therefore, China's growing capabilities may heighten apprehensions in certain circles that China could potentially utilize the initiative to establish undesirable spheres of influence or exert overall dominance over its neighboring countries⁴. It remains uncertain how China will navigate the accompanying geopolitical competition and conflicts with other influential nations that possess coordinated spheres of influence. China may unintentionally provoke one side or another and have challenges in disengaging from the resulting conflicts.

Africa plays a pivotal role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), since it possesses ample natural resources and significant infrastructural deficiencies that make it an attractive destination for Chinese investment. This is further enhanced by the introduction of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA),⁵ in conjunction with the imperative to achieve the goals of the African Union Agenda 2063. The Belt and Road

*By **Esnath MUTERO, MSc**, School of Marxism, Shaanxi Normal University, China. Email: proseuche88@gmail.com ;

***Liu JIAN**, Associate Professor, School of Marxism, Shaanxi Normal University, China. Email: 66067926@qq.com;

***Bright Kwaku ANYOMI, PhD**, School of Life Science, Henan University, China. Email: bright.anyomi@henu.edu.cn ; and

***Palmer Prince DAGADU, PhD (Law)**, School of Law, Wuhan University, China. Email: palmerdagadu@outlook.com

¹ B. Buzan, 'The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy', (2014). *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 7, Issue 4, 381–420.

² M. Kaczmarek, 'Two ways of influence-building: The Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt, One Road Initiative' (2017). 69 (7) *Journal Europe-Asia Studies* 1027.

³ M. Swaine, 'Chinese views and commentary on the 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative' (2015) 47 *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 1.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ C. Ajibo., M. Nwankwo, & Ekhatior, E. 'Regional economic communities as the building blocs of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement' (2021) 18(4) *Transnational Dispute Management* 1–3

Initiative (BRI) and China's economic engagement in African markets are distinct, although there is a growing overlap between both. China has made substantial investments in several sectors in African countries, including agriculture, manufacturing, energy, transportation, telecommunications networks, urban infrastructure, resource extraction, development of trade zones, and the construction of Chinese business centers, among others. BRI is expected to quadruple or even quintuple the current state of trade and investment in Africa. Nevertheless, there are apprehensions regarding Africa's readiness to fully exploit the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for their own benefit, in order to facilitate significant development in the economic, social, and technological sectors. If African countries do not provide a practical plan of specific goals to be accomplished through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they will continue to be labelled as an exploited and uncommitted region, which has constantly been associated with them. The current economic connection between Africa and China, frequently handled through the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), has sparked significant discussion regarding the benefits and drawbacks for Africa. Africa must cease its practice of serving as a mere playing field for global powers seeking to exploit its resources, without receiving adequate compensation or benefits in return.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) consists of two components, the Silk Road Economic Belt, also known as 'One Belt', and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, also known as 'One Road'. The term 'One Belt' pertains to land-based infrastructure initiatives that are part of the 'silk road economic belt', whilst 'One Road' refers to maritime infrastructure projects as part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.⁶ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) symbolizes China's resurgence in the international commerce and investment arena, with a geopolitical aspect. A notable characteristic of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is its apparent exemption from the established regulations of the rules-based global economic system, as exemplified by the World Trade Organization (WTO). The BRI does not meet the criteria outlined for free trade agreements (FTAs), customs unions, common markets, or economic unions. However, it should be noted that BRI does not contravene WTO regulations either. Indeed, the parties appear to be unconcerned with the terminology used for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but rather focused on establishing a novel type of trade and investment link with countries in the southern hemisphere.⁷

The China's Belt and Road Initiative, often regarded as the most comprehensive initiative ever undertaken to shape and exert influence on economic discussions in the international system, is expected to enhance China's expanding global status and dominance.⁸ The growing trade links between China and Africa have been the subject of scholarly disputes, with proponents expressing optimism about the effects. China and its African commercial allies asserted that this association is a mutually beneficial collaboration but critics contended that China is using African countries to exploit natural resources, including those that are growing scarce in the global market. Examining the reasons and feasibility of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa will offer a more distinct comprehension of the relationship between China and Africa. According to the majority of academicians and policy analysts, particularly those from Western countries, the primary driving force behind the Belt and Road Initiative is to bolster China's global leadership reputation.⁹ The remarkable economic expansion in China over the past three decades has created the potential for a new dominant position in both the regional and global spheres, posing a danger to current powers, particularly the United States. The Chinese leadership in Beijing must recognize that in order to properly confront the United States as a global hegemony, they must abandon their isolated reputation. The Belt and Road Initiative in Africa can be likened to the Marshall Plan, which was funded by the United States to aid Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. China's efforts to establish itself as a beneficent power with the potential for international guardianship are going to be challenging.¹⁰

The Belt and Road Initiative diverges significantly from traditional and well-established western philosophical models and methods, as it does not rely on any specific models as its foundation. The suggestion here is that it lacks a well-defined structure, easily quantifiable objectives, clearly outlined procedures for execution, or a specific timeline. Instead, it is anticipated to undergo a progressive transformation and adjust to the shifting

⁶P. Davies., M. Green, & A. Westgate. 'Belt and Road forum positions China as leading proponent of global trade' (2017) Latham & Watkins LLP available at <https://www.latham.london/2017/05/belt-and-road-forum-positions-china-as-leading-proponent-of-global-trade/> (accessed on 10/12 /2023).

⁷C. Ajibo., et al, 'Africa-China investment partnership for development: The downside, the promises and the roadmap for the future' (2020) 15(1) *Asian Journal of WTO & Int'l Health Law & Policy* 292.

⁸R. ZiroMwatela & Z. Changfeng, 'Africa in China's'One Belt, One Road'Initiative: A Critical Analysis. (2016) n.d., 13.

⁹ A. Anwar, 'Belt and Road Initiative: What's in It for China?' *East-West Center*, (2019).

¹⁰ Z. Tiyambe. 'Dancing with the Dragon. Africa's Courtship with China'. (2008). *The Global South* 2, no. 2: 171-87.

dynamics of the global context. Hence, the Belt and Road Initiative effectively creates unparalleled strategic adaptability by pursuing comparative advantage for China. In stark contrast to Western ideas and historical experiences, the Chinese approach emphasizes the strategy of avoiding direct conflict when implementing the project. This aligns with traditional Chinese philosophy, which emphasizes the detection and exploitation of internal dynamics in the environment. Rather than setting goals or making plans, a Chinese generally adapts decisions to the natural course of events, aiming to manipulate conditions in their favor.¹¹ Consequently, it is highly probable that China aims to reshape the international environment by advocating for an alternative model of globalization through the Belt and Road Initiative. In light of the circumstances of the 21st century, the new world order will be adjusted to accommodate China, which will have a distinct moral advantage over its competitors. Furthermore, as stated by Chinese authorities, the primary objective of the Belt and Road Initiative is to establish a more equitable global order that upholds universally accepted principles and does not discriminate based on varying political and social systems.¹²

3. Africa's Progress under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative represents the ongoing commercial and political interactions between China and African countries, which have persisted for more than three decades. The inclusion of this doctrine is a defining feature of Chinese foreign policy since the conclusion of the cold war. China has been labelled as a renegade contributor by several media pundits, particularly those from liberal western countries.¹³ Some individuals, particularly those from developing nations, argued that China is actively assisting the developing world in creating and establishing a route to escape poverty. However, the majority of these arguments have occurred with a scarcity of concrete evidence. China's culture of secrecy, particularly over its aid packages, has hindered progress in this area. In essence, the proliferation of rumors and speculations has made it challenging to accurately assess the potential hazards and opportunities associated with China's increasing influence in Africa.¹⁴ China is an indispensable factor in understanding the present international political economy of Africa.¹⁵ The enhanced Gross Domestic Product and foreign exchange gains in Africa have been partially credited to the expanded trade and investment opportunities brought forth by Chinese firms. A prominent feature of Chinese loans and contracts in Africa is their emphasis on the advancement of infrastructure. An analysis of the sectoral distribution of bilateral development support and loan pledges to Africa by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations and China from 2005 to 2022. China has exhibited exceptional economic efficiency in financing and building infrastructure projects in Africa. Chinese corporations, in contrast to its European and American counterparts, are often more willing to take on risks and are less concerned about insurance costs when operating in African countries, despite the prevalent political and security threats. They also tend to have less stringent requirements regarding the provision of detailed information as prerequisites. The majority of Chinese enterprises, regardless of whether they are state-owned or private, have exhibited a strong inclination towards taking on significant levels of risk in the development of infrastructural projects, such as ports, roads, railways and pipelines. The Chinese investors' eagerness to undertake ventures in Africa has aligned with Beijing's aspiration to develop a robust strategic influence overseas, enabling them to actively participate in global geo-economics and geopolitics.¹⁶

Currently, numerous African officials and national leaders in Africa ardently advocate for the China-Africa partnership, particularly in the realm of infrastructural development. Although some analysts argued that the trade and cultural ties between China and Africa are motivated by the need for unity in Afro-Asian dialogue, there are indications that the primary motivation is national self-interest. China asserts its classification as a developing nation, aligning itself with African countries in their pursuit of progress and enhanced its adherence to a stringent policy of non-interference in domestic government. African leaders, who prioritized poverty eradication, find it encouraging that China has successfully emancipated more than 600 million Chinese individuals from poverty and has effectively deciphered the enigmas of swift progress. For numerous African

¹¹ Karpathiotaki et al., 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Contributions to Connectivity.' In *New Dimensions of Connectivity in the Asia-Pacific*, (2021). edited by Christopher Findlay and Somkiat Tangkitvanich, 1st ed., 41–90. ANU Press.

¹² Ibid

¹³ D. Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (2011). New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ A. Colom-Jaén & Ó. Mateos, 'China in Africa: Assessing the Consequences for the Continent's Agenda for Economic Regionalism,' (2022). *Politics and Governance* 10, no. 2: 61–70.

¹⁶ Ibid

nations, this is a promising model that numerous emerging countries throughout Africa can imitate.¹⁷ China has provided funding for a remarkable infrastructure development project spanning the entire continent. From 2000 to 2019, China provided 18 out of the 19 loan packages for infrastructure development in Nigeria. One of the main projects was the upgrading of the Lagos-Ibadan railway, as well as electricity and ICT projects, with a combined value of 6.8 billion USD.¹⁸ In Kenya, a sum of 6 billion USD in loans was allocated specifically for the purpose of financing the construction of the Mombasa Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway.¹⁹ The introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 was expected to support African countries in strengthening their economic progress resulting from Chinese-financed infrastructure projects around the continent.

China and the African Union (AU) signed a memorandum of agreement in January 2015 and the purpose of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was to create a dependable infrastructure network that would link all 54 African nations through the implementation of high-speed railways, ports, and roadways.²⁰ An example of such infrastructure projects is the Equatorial land bridge, which has the capacity to connect countries in East and West Africa over a land route. The planned itinerary commences in Kenya, traverses through Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Congo, and the Central African Republic, and concludes in Douala, Cameroon. In addition to typical development initiatives like infrastructure, the recent severe global crisis caused by the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic has demonstrated the significance of fostering international and regional public interaction through economic connections and health promotion collaborations²¹. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous African countries found themselves in perilous circumstances due to their inadequate medical and public health infrastructure.²² China provided vaccines and test kits to assist Africa in managing the pandemic. This was a commendable continuation of the Belt and Road Initiative, showcasing its optimal performance and fostering a mutually beneficial collaboration with tangible advantages.

China remains actively involved in assisting vulnerable African countries in efficiently managing the COVID-19 outbreak inside their communities. China and Africa have exhibited remarkable collaboration in combating the pandemic. This act of goodwill exemplifies sustainable development by fostering peace and improving living standards. The remarkable collaboration between Africa and China amid the COVID-19 pandemic serves as evidence for the future sustainability of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in fostering cooperation in public health. Collaboration of this nature is of utmost significance and will greatly contribute to managing public emergencies and ensuring the protection of public health.²³ Proponents of the Belt and Road Initiative argued that African countries have a significant chance to use their natural resources and marketable commodities by establishing sustainable regional and international connections. The ongoing infrastructure investments for roads, ports, and railways in Africa have resulted in reduced shipping durations and decreased trade expenses. The project has also provided a significant boost to African economies and enhanced the intensity of trade networks. The overall impact has heightened the capacity to draw in Foreign Direct Investment inflows into these economies, hence enhancing Africa's standing in Global Value Chains.²⁴

4. Challenges in Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa

¹⁷ Z. Tiyambe. 'Dancing with the Dragon. Africa's Courtship with China'. (2008). *The Global South* 2, no. 2 .171–87.

¹⁸A. Orji, I. Nwodo, & J. Ogbuabor, 'Where Do Real Output Shocks to Nigeria Mainly Emanate from? Empirical Analysis of Nigeria-China-India-USA Economic Interactions', (2022). *Studia Universitatis Vasile Goldiș, Arad – Seria Științe Economice* 32, no. 1: 58–77.

¹⁹ L. Mboya, 'Impact of the Standard Gauge Railway on the Kenyan Economy.' (2022). *International Journal of Latest Research in Science and Technology* Volume XI, Issue I. 1–7.

²⁰ S. Zhou, & L. Wang, 'An Adaptable Conceptual Model for Construction Technology Transfer: The BRI in Africa, the Case of Ethiopia.' (2021). *Sustainability* 13,337. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063376> (accessed 15-12-2023).

²¹ L. Johnston & J. Onjala 'Why an Early Belt and Road Initiative East Africa Hub? Economic, Demographic and Security Factors. (2022) | *Emerald Insight*.

²² D. Runde, C. Savoy, & S. McKeown, 'Post-Pandemic Governance in the Indo-Pacific: Adapting USAID's Strategy in the Face of Covid-19'. (2020). Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

²³ Wang et al., 'Analysis of the BRI and China's OFDI in Sub-Saharan Africa.' (2020). *The Singapore Economic Review*, 1–25.

²⁴ Karpathiotaki et al., 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Contributions to Connectivity.' In *New Dimensions of Connectivity in the Asia-Pacific*, (2021). edited by Christopher Findlay and Somkiat Tangkitvanich, 1st ed., 41–90. ANU Press

While numerous proponents of the Belt and Road Initiative related projects are optimistic about its potential, the initiative also entails inherent hazards that are worsened by inadequate risk-prevention and control systems.²⁵ Most economies in many African countries lack solid ideological roots. Weak legislative structures and enforcement procedures present significant uncertainties for sustainable Foreign Direct Investment, intellectual property protection, and labor rights protection, hence posing substantial challenges. In addition, several deficient legal systems lack the capacity to ensure the implementation of environmental regulations, taxation, and foreign exchange management. The proper implementation and sustainability of the Belt and Road Initiative projects in Africa may be hindered by political expedience, corruption, and intervention in the implementation of legal frameworks. In addition, the lack of dependability in achieving seamless and peaceful transitions of power poses a significant obstacle to the success of the Belt and Road Initiative projects. The potential for a shift in political power heightens the uncertainties surrounding the efficacy of current initiative.²⁶

Moreover, several academics have cautioned African governments against having high expectations, as the primary objective of the Belt and Road Initiative is to address China's existing industrial surplus by creating opportunities for new investments and employment. According to some observers, the project is intended to enhance China's wealth at the cost of African countries. China has the potential to impose the harmful practice of dumping on susceptible African countries.²⁷ Due to Africa's limited industrialization, there exist several prospects for investment and lending of excess money, establishment of new export markets, and acquisition of natural resources. The emphasis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on infrastructure projects is logical for China since it allows them to transfer their surplus production capacity to African countries, thus alleviating the excess supply within their own country. China's development of extensive infrastructure and industrial facilities generates employment opportunities and yields substantial financial gains. Conversely, it undermines the industrial motivation of vulnerable African governments. There is increasing apprehension about the ability of numerous African countries to ensure debt sustainability. Chinese financed projects are dependent on funding extended by Chinese commercial banks. Nonpayment of these loans could result in the forfeiture of vital national assets typically used as collateral during the loan procurement procedure.²⁸ If African countries are unable to fulfil their financial obligations, the Belt and Road Initiative projects could potentially have negative consequences rather than positive ones.

Furthermore, China's human rights record is hardly praiseworthy. The Chinese presence in Africa coincides with the political transformations occurring in many countries, as they shift from autocratic regimes to liberal democratic political systems. There is a potential for this transition to be hindered, while human rights concerns and environmental deterioration may be disregarded. The likelihood of China making a positive and helpful contribution towards facilitating the transition to liberal democracy in Africa's vulnerable governments seems highly unlikely. There is ample evidence to assert that the promotion of democracy in Africa does not fall within the purview of Chinese foreign policy. China's relativistic understanding of individual civil freedoms and human and political rights is fundamentally incompatible with the concept of liberal democracy. One of the reasons why Beijing strongly adheres to the concept of non-interference is because of this.²⁹ The act of defending sovereignty, often in favor of authoritarian regimes, has the capacity to weaken ongoing attempts for democratic liberalization. Advocating for autocratic governments under the pretense of non-interference can harm the liberties and progress of ordinary Africans.

Moreover, some scholars and policy analysts argued that without the establishment of effective and transparent government in African countries, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will only serve the interests of corrupt leadership, while local communities will bear the responsibility of repaying the loans.³⁰ Some researchers argued that in authoritarian regimes, the implementation of extensive infrastructure projects encourages corruption, which is a prevalent governance risk manifested in the misuse of public positions for personal benefits. While several researchers have expressed their concern about the feasibility of the Belt and Road initiative, it is premature to definitively predict the ultimate outcome of the BRI³¹. The potential political danger

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ M. Clarke, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?', (2017). *Asia Policy*, no. 24: 71–79.

²⁸ Karpathiotaki et al., 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Contributions to Connectivity.' In *New Dimensions of Connectivity in the Asia-Pacific*, (2021).

²⁹ M. Tull, 'China's Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance, and Consequences. (2006). *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 44, no. 3 .459–79.

³⁰ Ibid @28

³¹ A. Anwar, 'Belt and Road Initiative: What's in It for China?' *East-West Center*, (2019).

for the different African countries, whether it is fully or partially successful, is significant. The government's ability to maintain sustainable successes will mostly rely on its commitment to fiscal responsibility and adherence to democratic principles. It is necessary to thoroughly contemplate this matter in order to prevent a possible negative reaction.

5. Summary and Concluding Remarks

African countries should forge strategic connections at both the continental and regional levels to enhance their ability to negotiate effectively. Africa's existing fragmented approach undermines their ability to negotiate effectively with powerful economies like China. Enhancing African unity and cohesion in commercial interactions with China is a crucial factor in optimizing synergy and diplomatic influence. African political leaders must confront the problems posed by China's superior economic influence in comparison to many African countries. The imbalanced connection between China and African countries undermines Africa's ability to assert itself and negotiate confidently with Chinese officials. Therefore, due to the unavoidable disparity in technology between the two countries, authorities should prioritize the adoption of efficient trade policies that specifically focus on educational possibilities. African countries should utilize the expertise provided by Chinese professionals within an industrial framework that prioritizes manufacturing capacity and long-term viability. There is substantial evidence indicating a rise in trade volume between African countries and China following the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. While trade between countries may not excel in all aspects, it is undeniably linked to economic progress. Nevertheless, the imbalanced character of the Sino-Africa relationship may not significantly contribute to sustainable economic growth and development unless there is a focus on enhancing institutions. This will alleviate the probable occurrence of the resource curse phenomenon that is prevalent in many developing nations, despite their abundant natural resources, and has hindered their economic progress.

Although African economies have experienced some advantages from China, the majority of Chinese investments in Africa are not closely integrated into the local and national development initiatives. Enhancing the connections between Chinese foreign enterprises and the home economy is necessary. This will enhance the positive impact of foreign investment on economic growth. In the end, this could result in enhanced technological transfers to local companies. The potential consequences may involve a boost in productive capability, greater domestic investment, a rise in local employment, and the incorporation of African companies into the global economy.

In conclusion, the Belt and Road Initiative is a highly hopeful symbol of worldwide and national infrastructure advancement, particularly in underdeveloped countries. This platform serves as an optimal strategic avenue for African countries to tap into technology and talent development prospects, namely in the realm of the construction sector. Critics of the initiative highlighted corruption, restricted technological transfer, and the potential risk of debt-trapping diplomacy as significant obstacles. Hence, it is crucial for African governments to prioritize the development of efficient policies that are centered on tangible actions and ensure diligent execution. Several leaders perceive the initiative primarily as a collaborative agreement among states that are engaged in advancing crucial infrastructure and improving connectivity on a global scale. Although the Belt and Road Initiative lacks formalization and institutionalization, it is a meticulously organized and centralized strategy led by the China. Undoubtedly, this megaproject is unparalleled and groundbreaking in recent global history.