

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE POLICY IN AFRICA

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Introduction

In May 2013, on its 50th anniversary, the African Union (AU, formerly the Organization of African Unity) issued a declaration reaffirming its commitment to a “Pan African vision of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena” (Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want 2015, 2). Then, the Commission of the Union and other development agencies were tasked with translating this Vision into a policy. The process led to the drafting of an ambitious document titled “*Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*” in 2015. The document outlines seven “aspirations” (see below) and a fifty-year timeframe in several domains, including peace and security, economic growth and development, and democracy and human rights. To achieve these aspirations, the document promotes a continental approach based on the ideas of unity and “strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics” (*Ibid*). In this perspective, integrating and interconnecting African countries, as well as harmonizing their system of governance, is seen as key.

About the same period, in September 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced two new projects, namely the resuscitation of the ancient Silk Road in the form of a new *Silk Road Economic Belt*; and the building of a new *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*. These two projects merged to become the *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR), and later the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). Interestingly, the BRI became an official policy in 2015, the same year the

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AU released the Agenda 2063. In addition, the BRI and the Agenda 2063 intersect, given that the former is oriented toward “policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties” (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other international organizations in Switzerland n.d.).

Since their inception, the Agenda 2063 and the BRI have evolved to include several other aspects and new initiatives, such as the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the Digital Silk Road, respectively. Moreover, well before they became the main official policies in both contexts, other seemingly compatible initiatives existed in Africa and in China, as for example the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD 2001) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC 2000). Both initiatives put a strong emphasis on cooperation, integration and infrastructures (a source might be useful). Two questions come out of what precedes: is the simultaneity of these initiatives random or coordinated? Given the centrality of infrastructures in Africa’s continental development plans promoted by the African Development Agency (formerly, NEPAD), the Agenda 2063, and the Africa Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), to what extent has the BRI, whose main focus is infrastructure connectivity, inspired (or been inspired by) them?

My hypotheses here are that in many respects, especially regarding infrastructure, the BRI and Africa’s continental initiatives on infrastructure are the product of a co-constructed learning process between Africa and China throughout their interactions since the early 2000s. Furthermore, as a projection of China’s initiatives in Africa on a global scale, the BRI is consistent with Africa’s continental development policies and even probably inspired by them given the anteriority of the latter. In contrast to what most authors think (Gaye 2006; Taylor 2006), this argument stresses Africa’s agency, which changes China as much as China changes Africa (Kuo 2018; Ayers 2013).

To defend this argument, the paper examines the congruence between the BRI and Africa’s infrastructure policies by cross-tracing the ideational process in the two contexts. This is carried out by looking for cross-references in Africa’s main documents (namely the NEPAD, the FOCAC, and the Agenda 2063), on the one hand, and the BRI, on the other. The paper then illustrates this by briefly examining some of the BRI and AU bilateral projects.

Africa's integration through infrastructures policies and the BRI: tracing the ideational process

Africa faces tremendous challenges in terms of infrastructure (under) development. With the highest population growth rate, its population of 1.1 billion is expected to double by 2050 (Muggah and Kilcullen 2016; Shepard 2019). By 2025, more than 100 cities in Africa will contain over one million people (Shepard 2019). Yet, mainly due to the lack of adequate infrastructure and weak intra-regional trade, Africa is still the less electrified continent and one whose cross-continental trade is still fragmented. Indeed, as the World Bank demonstrates, “closing the infrastructure quantity and quality gap relative to the best performers in the world could increase growth of GDP per capita by 2.6% per year” (The World Bank 2017). The chief executive officer of NEPAD, Dr. Ibrahim Mayaki, concluded that this situation “cut(s) business productivity by as much as 40%, making Africa – in spite of its enormous mineral and other natural resources – the region with the lowest productivity levels in the world” (Mayaki n.d.).

This infrastructure gap is not new. By the end of the nineties, new approaches to development emerged on the continent, namely the Millennium Africa Recovery Plan, promoted by the former South African President Thabo Mbeki (Mbeki 2001), and the Omega Plan for Africa proposed by his Senegalese counterpart of the day, former President Abdoulaye Wade (Wade 2008). These initiatives, which aimed at laying the foundations for an “African renaissance”, merged to give birth first to the New African Initiative (NIA) and, in October 2001, to the NEPAD. This process took place about the same time that the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) was being transformed into the African Union, whose Constitutive Act was adopted in July 2000 in Lomé, Togo. The Union then endorsed NEPAD – later transformed into the African Union Development Agency- as the new framework guiding African development priorities (Amaizo 2001).

The Initiative included an ideological element, stemming in particular from the Mbeki proposal, that paved the way for the motto of “African solutions to African problems”. Essentially, it is the insistence on the responsibility of the Africans regarding both the causes and solutions to the African crises. For sure, this plan points out to slavery, colonization, neo-colonialism, and the role of multinationals as some of the structural causes of Africa's miseries. But the responsibility of the African elites is also laid bare. It urges Africans to produce a new discourse and to rethink their place in the world. The Initiative also included an economic priority, mainly

driven by the Omega proposal (of President Wade), in particular regarding the financing of the sectors identified as crucial, among which infrastructure development. NEPAD, “envisaged as a long-term vision of an African-owned and African-led development programme”, has several goals, mainly “to achieve and sustain an average gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of over 7 percent per annum for the next 15 years” (NEPAD 2001, 14). To achieve these goals, “Africa needs to fill an annual resource gap of 12 percent of its GDP, or US \$64 billion. This will require increased domestic savings, as well as improvements in the public revenue collection systems. However, the bulk of the needed resources will have to be obtained from outside the continent” (NEPAD 2001, 37).

From NEPAD to FOCAC

Of the six sectoral priorities identified in the NEPAD initiative², “bridging the infrastructure gap” in terms of “roads, highways, airports, seaports, railways, waterways, and telecommunications facilities” comes first. Two points made in the document are of crucial importance for our investigation. First, the promoters of the plan regret the fact that “in many African countries, the colonial powers built the infrastructure to facilitate the exportation of raw materials from Africa and the importation of industrial goods into Africa”. As exposed in the table below, they then “recognised that, if infrastructure is to improve in Africa, private foreign finance is essential to complement the two major funding methods, namely credit and aid” (NEPAD 2001, 22).

NEPAD: Filling the Infrastructure Gap

Current Situation	Ambition
Africa: 30% of the world’s mineral resources, but in an energy crisis.	NEPAD ambitions to bring production and consumption areas closer together through a pipeline project.
The electrification rate in Africa is 30% (two times less than the world average). Hydroelectric potential is used only at 6% of its capacity.	NEPAD is setting up two major projects aimed at the rehabilitation of the Inga dam (DRC) and the strengthening of high voltage lines.

² The five others are: human resource development initiative including reversing the brain drain, agriculture, environment, culture, science and technology.

Current Situation	Ambition
It is more expensive to import a product from an African country than from Asia.	NEPAD plans to develop a road network, rehabilitate existing railways and build an 8,000 km trans-African rail in order to facilitate trade between countries and within countries.
95% of African foreign trade is carried out by sea or rivers	NEPAD ambitions to increase and modernize ports and services

Source: Elaborated by the author.

NEPAD issued in 2006 an infrastructure Medium to Long Term Strategic Framework (MLTSF). This framework, along with the AU Infrastructure Master Plan initiatives, was later replaced by the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), to “develop a vision and strategic framework for the development of regional and continental infrastructure (Energy, Transport, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Trans-boundary Water Resources) (African Development Bank n.d)”. The African Development Bank, in coordination with the African Union Commission (AUC) and the NEPAD (now African Union Development Agency) Secretariat, is tasked with the execution of the PIDA initiative (*Ibid*).

While conceiving NEPAD, African countries began to be involved in another collective endeavor by attending the first forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing in October 2000. Since then, FOCAC has become an institutionalized meeting that is held triennially, alternately in China and in an African country. Each summit comes out with a declaration and an Action Plan for the three years ahead and provides the opportunity to assess what has been done since the previous meeting³. Since 2002, FOCAC has had a monitoring mechanism based on meetings between the Chinese Follow-up Committee and African officials (Gazibo and Mbabia 2012).

Most of the objectives pursued by the NEPAD and the Agenda 2063 were progressively taken into account in the FOCAC Action Plans over the years. The 2015 Johannesburg summit, the first to be held since the inception of the Agenda 2063, affirms, in the preamble of its Action Plan (2016-2018), that “The Chinese side appreciates the positive role of the African Union Commission since it became a member of the FOCAC, and will also continue to strengthen cooperation with and support for the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD)... The two sides agree to actively implement the Memorandum of Understanding on the Promotion of China-Africa Cooperation

³ See the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Website: <http://www.focac.org/eng/>.

in the Fields of Railway, Highway, Regional Aviation Networks and Industrialization...” (Johannesburg Action Plan 2016-2018, points 2.4.4 and 2.4.5).

The reference to the call made in the NEPAD initiative for “outside investment” in infrastructure seemed clearly echoed in the Action Plan. Indeed, the Johannesburg Action Plan further stated that:

The two sides agree that underdeveloped infrastructure is one of the bottlenecks hindering independent and sustainable development of Africa. The two sides will take concrete measures and give priority to encourage Chinese businesses and financial institutions to expand investment through various means, such as Public-Private Partnership (PPP) and Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT), to support African countries and the African flagship projects, in particular the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) and the Presidential Infrastructure Championing Initiative, in their efforts to build railroad, highway, regional aviation, ports, electricity, water supply, information and communication and other infrastructure projects, support African countries in establishing 5 transportation universities and facilitate infrastructure connectivity and economic integration in Africa (Johannesburg Action Plan 2016-2018, 3.3.1).

The document refers only briefly to “the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” and the willingness of the two parties to “promote mutually beneficial cooperation in the blue economy” (Johannesburg Action Plan 2016-2018, 3.5.1).

The BRI as the new framework for FOCAC and the Agenda 2063

In 2018, following the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI (then called the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road) by many African countries, FOCAC was held in Beijing, which seemed to have been organized to give more visibility to the BRI. For instance, while the Johannesburg Action Plan (2016-2018) made only marginal reference to the BRI, the Beijing Action plan (2019-2021) placed it at the cornerstone of China’s engagement in Africa. The preamble of the declaration insists that:

“the two sides ... decide to... jointly advance Belt and Road cooperation... [They] will take the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity to strengthen multi-dimensional, wide-ranging and in-depth cooperation for mutual benefits and common development...Africa is an important partner in Belt and Road cooperation, and [the two sides] pledge to leverage the strengths of the Forum and support China and Africa in jointly building the Belt and Road” (Beijing Action Plan 2019-2021, 1.3; 1.4 and 1.5).

The junction between the BRI philosophy and Africa's integration through infrastructure development elaborated in the PIDA appears clearly in the Beijing 2019-2021 Action Plan. The later states that:

“The two sides will, in view of the cross-border and trans-regional infrastructure development plans of Africa, and by taking into consideration the real needs of African countries and economic and social returns of relevant projects, explore and advance cooperation on projects promoting continental, regional and sub-regional connectivity” (Beijing Action Plan 2019-2021, 3.3.2).

In addition, the joint declaration issued after the summit stated that African leaders “expressed support and appreciation for the Belt and Road Initiative, believing that the joint building of the Belt and Road by Africa and China will speed up African regional integration” (Beijing Declaration 2018). Considering the spirit of the seven Aspirations of the Agenda 2063, one can easily notice its congruence with the BRI framework. Ehizuelen and Abdi (2017, 294) contend that “the BRI could be positive and synchronized with the goals of the Agenda, but it demands commitment, community consultations, respect for peaceful protest, openness to projects repudiation, among others”.

Agenda 2063: the Seven Aspirations

Aspiration 1: A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Aspiration 2: An integrated continent; politically united and based on the ideals of PanAfricanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance.

Aspiration 3: An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law.

Aspiration 4: A peaceful and secure Africa.

Aspiration 5: An Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics.

Aspiration 6: An Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.

Aspiration 7: Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner

Source: AGENDA 2063, First ten-year implementation plan 2013-2023.

Infrastructure and connectivity since the inception of the Agenda 2063

Africa has been back on the development agenda since 2000, the same year the first FOCAC was organized in Beijing. In 2018, its GDP achieved a 3.5% growth. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was expected to grow by 4.1% in 2020, making the African growth more robust than that of most of other regions (African Economic Outlook 2019, v)⁴. Of course, the pandemic hit African economies hard (IMF 2021)⁵. In the context of the pre-pandemic good economic record, and inspired by China and other emerging countries' experiences, Africa and African states have engaged in ambitious development plans, whether at the national or continental levels. Among other initiatives, the African Union has transformed the former New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) into a development agency in charge of carrying out projects such as the program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). Moreover, the Union has put forward a more comprehensive, yet targeted vision encapsulated in the Agenda 2063. Africa seeks to develop through infrastructure building and free trade on one hand. On the other hand, the Belt and Road Initiative is oriented toward policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and unimpeded trade. The question here is to what extent the BRI fosters African ambitions in terms of continental approaches to development, especially on infrastructure and commercial development. To answer this question, we explore the issue of infrastructure development where China and Africa seem to share the same vision.

Infrastructure development is crucial if Africa is to develop and China's BRI is of particular importance here, because, well before the BRI was announced, Beijing has been a driving force behind the infrastructure initiatives in Africa, as the Tazara Railway proves (Snow 1988). Today, around 90% of African exports are through ports (Devermont 2019). Improving ports facilities is a priority when it comes to infrastructure investments. Some

4 A closer look indicates that East Africa's growth is the fastest one – 5.9% in 2019 and 6.1% is expected in 2020. Between 2010 and 2018 the region grew by 6% and Djibouti, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Tanzania achieved growth above average. Central Africa is recovering after years of instability (African Development Bank 2019).

5 According to the IMF, "sub-Saharan Africa will be the world's slowest growing region in 2021. Estimates now suggest that sub-Saharan Africa contracted by -1.9 percent in 2020. This is better than anticipated last October (-3.0 percent) but is still the worst result on record. Looking ahead, the region will grow by 3.4 percent in 2021, up from 3.1 percent projected in October (...) However, per capita output is not expected to return to 2019 levels until after 2022". (IMF 2021).

studies indicate that to move a single container (or any other unit of volume) is 1.5 to 3.5 times more expensive from Africa than for high-volume trade routes over a comparable distance (PwC 2019). Investment in infrastructure means more access to African goods in the foreign market, more revenues, and better economic performances. Regarding this, Africa's Agenda 2063 embodies most of the objectives outlined earlier in the NEPAD document as explained above.

The Agenda's goal is to define key programmes and initiatives that will accelerate Africa's economic growth and development in the next 50 years. Infrastructure development is on the driver seat in the Agenda, namely "the African Integrated High Speed Network", which "aims at connecting all African capitals and commercial centres through the Africa High Speed Train to facilitate movement of goods, factor services and people and also relieve transport congestion of existing and future systems" (Agenda 2063, 11); "the African Passport and Free Movement of People" to "ensure free movement of all African citizens in all African countries"; and "the Implementation of the Grand Inga Dam Project" to "ensure access of all Africans to clean and affordable electricity" (Agenda 2063, 12). Finally, the Agenda 2063 seeks to implement a "Single African Air Transport Market" "to facilitate air transportation in Africa" (Agenda 2063, 13).

As stated above, the African Development agency and the African Development Bank are responsible for implementing the infrastructure program in coordination with the AU commission. The vision presented is perfectly congruent with the "connectivity" leitmotiv of the BRI. According to PIDA (n.d.) documents, for example:

NEPAD identified infrastructure as one of the main drivers of economic growth and poverty reduction in Africa and understood that the present state of infrastructure, as well as the gap between Africa and most other regions of the world, constituted a serious handicap to the improvement of African economies' productivity and competitiveness. (AU-PIDA, n.d.).

To close Africa's infrastructure gap, PIDA plays a crucial role in the achievement of AU's objectives set by the Agenda 2063 concerning integration and transcontinental facilities. PIDA set a Priority Action Plans (PAP), that establishes specific actions in short and medium term. According to a PIDA report, there are 51 cross-border programmes embodied (AU-PIDA-n.d.). The BRI is involved in some of them as exposed below:

Some of the ongoing projects from NEPAD/PIDA:

Project	Funding from BRI?				
Implementation study for modernization of the trans-Maghreb rail (TRANSPORT)	no				
Rutizi IV (ENERGY)	no				
ECREEE/Ecowas Feasibility study -Women in a changing energy value chain in west Africa (ENERGY)	no				
North-South Corridor Roads Rehabilitation (TRANSPORT)	no				
330KV Nigeria-Benin Interconnector Reinforcement Project (ENERGY)	no				
Construction Of The Ubangi River Bridge	no				
The Implementation Of The Missing Links In The Bangui-Kisangani-Bujumbura And Kisangani-Kampala Road Corridors And For Facilitation Of Transport, Trade And Transit Along Both Corridors (TRANSPORT)	no				
Route Multinationale KRIBI-CAMPO-BATA (TRANSPORT)	no				
Central Africa Fibre Optic Backbone Project CAB Gabon (ICT)	no				
Appui CEEAC Mise en Œuvre du PACOB-PPI (WATER)	no				
INGA-3 (ENERGY)	no but has China money (75%)				
Multinational Orange Sango River Basin (WATER)	no				
Feasibility Study Of The Construction And Concession Of Buba Mineral And Commercial Deep Sea Port In Guinea-Bissau (TRANSPORT)	not clear but has bids from China				
Kampala-Juba-Addis Djibouti Road Corridor (TRANSPORT)	no				
Multinational Uganda and Tanzania Roads project (TRANSPORT)	no				
THE REHABILITATION OF SELECTED ROAD SECTION PHASE II: Detailed Architectural and Engineering Design of Manyovu/Mugina One -Stop Border Post (OSBP) & Preparation of Tender Documents (TRANSPORT)	no				
Rehabilitation of Selected Road Sections of the Central Corridor in Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi (TRANSPORT)	no				
Lamu Port development: Transaction advisory services and technical assistance – Phase 1 (TRANSPORT)	no (this phase) because the LAPSET/Lamu port corridor has been under BRI				
Lake Tanganyika Transport Corridor (TRANSPORT)	no				
Kolwezi-Solwezi Power Interconnection (ENERGY)	no				
Feasibility Study Of The Construction Of A Deep Sea Port In The North-West Region Of The Republic Of Guinea (TRANSPORT)	no (but it's possible that this port is going to be build under BRI)				
Public Private Partnership (PPP) Advisory Services for the SONGWE River Basin Development Programme (SRBDP) (WATER)	no				
Mozambique-Zambia 400KV Power Interconnection Project (ENERGY)	no				
Angololo Water Resources Development Project – Feasibility Studies, Detailed Design, Preparation Of Tender Documents, Esia And Rap (WATER)	no				

Source: Compiled by the author.

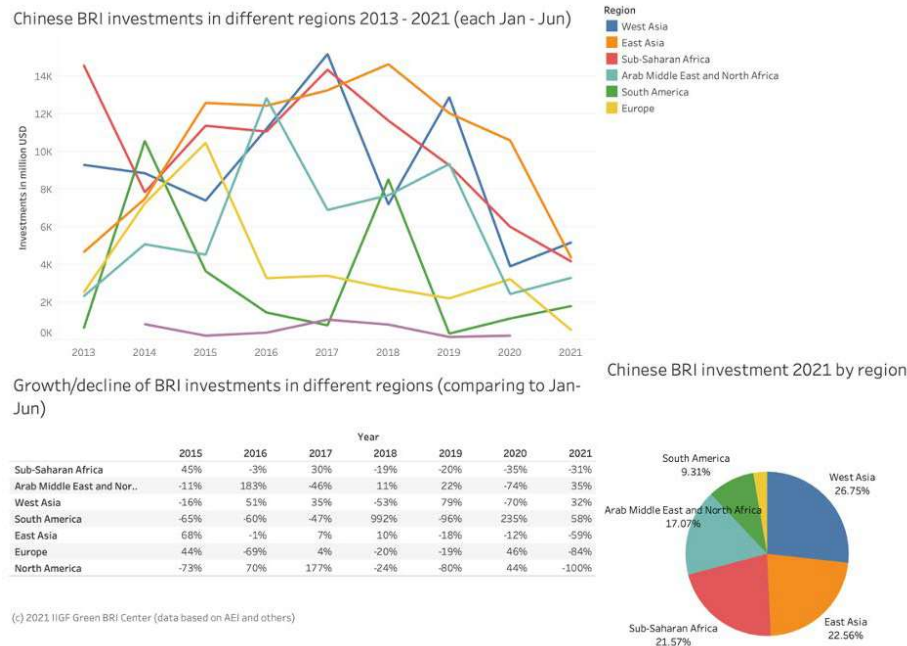
The BRI in motion in Africa since 2018

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is huge. As of 23 June 2021, according to Wikipedia, 206 cooperation documents have been signed with 140 countries and 32 international organizations. The BRI aims to build ports, railways, roads and logistics chains in a space that englobes Asia, Africa and Europe (Chiele et al. 2017). The ambitions of the project are impressive: connect 4.4 billion people (65% world's habitants); one third of worldwide GDP, 29% of global economy and almost a quarter of the entire products and services transported in the world (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2017). Worldwide, China has 3116 projects under the BRI (DW 2019).

In Africa, China's presence is fast changing the face of the continent, especially in terms of infrastructure development projects, as shown by the figure below. Daan Roggeveen, a specialist in African urbanization, told Forbes that right now any building above three floors or any road longer than 3km is most likely to be built and/or financed by China (Shepard 2019). That says a lot about how China is helping African countries. Shepard (2019) cites McKinsley data according to which "around 10.000 Chinese owned firms are operating in the continent and the Chinese government announced that

US\$ 1 billion will be destined to BRI-Africa infrastructure and another US\$ 60 billion will be destined to an African aid package”.

In 2018, the FOCAC Summit was marked by the establishment of the African Union Representative Mission in Beijing, representing a step forward in the China-Africa relations (Serpa and Jung 2019; Beijing Declaration 2018). It is interesting to note that China has signed Memoranda of Understanding with the African Union on cross-continental infrastructures (railways, highways and aviation, as well as on the high-speed train networks, which are also all flagship projects for Africa’s Agenda 2063). Also, they have MoU in power generation under NEPAD’s guidance (Breuer 2017; Johnston 2016).



Source: Nedopil Wang (2021).

The 2018 FOCAC Action Plan (2019-2021) witnessed the inclusion of the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) in the two parties’ cooperation and the reinforcement of the partnerships between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Agenda 2063, with an investment of US\$ 60 billion (Serpa and Jung 2019). The Beijing Declaration, for example, affirms that:

‘Africa appreciates the support that China has rendered to its railway development, particularly the related goals set forth by the AU Agenda 2063 and welcomes China as a strategic partner in its railway development. Africa welcomes more investment from China in its tourism industry and looks to further expand China-Africa aviation cooperation [...]’ (Beijing Declaration, point 13.3)

The 2018 FOCAC Summit also welcomed three more countries (Republic of Gambia, Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe and Burkina Faso). By 2021, 46 African countries have already signed MoUs with China to be part of the BRI. In North Africa, for example, a region with an important role connecting Asia, Africa and Europe, China has now a Memorandum of Understanding with all of the Maghreb countries (Ghafar and Jacobs 2019). The figure below shows countries that have signed the MoU on BRI with China.

BRI countries in Africa *

The Belt and Road Initiative Has Gone Global

Official BRI participants by year of joining



* **In addition:** Burkina Faso (in progress), Rep. of Congo, Gambia, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Togo.

Many African countries have begun the implementation of the projects signed under the BRI framework (Herbing and Li 2019).

Some main BRI projects in Africa

Djibouti	Investment in Djibouti Port (military base); Addis-Ababa-Djibouti Railway and Ethiopia-Djibouti water pipeline.
Egypt	Electric train system for its new capital ; 6,000 megawatt coal-fired electricity-generating plant in Hamra-wein (postponed).
Ethiopia	the Addis-Ababa-Djibouti Railway and Ethiopia-Djibouti water pipeline.
Kenya	Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (partly stopped).
Nigeria	Abuja-Kaduna railway line.
Sierra Leone	Mamamah airport (cancelled).
Uganda	Karuma Hydropower Project and Isimba Hydroelectric Power Station.

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources.

Africa is an important buyer of China's industrial overcapacities – coal, cement, steel, glass, etc – that are used in BRI projects (Nantulya 2019). In this sense, Africa is an ideal partner for Chinese needs and a host of the Chinese industries overseas (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2017). As stated by Lin Songtian (2015), director of the Department of African Affairs at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Africa-China cooperation is a relationship that is blessed with shared needs, benefits and opportunities, which will make the African continent a significant foothold for the OBOR initiative" (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2017, 295).

Infrastructure projects under the BRI have three components: transport infrastructure, energy infrastructure, and information and communication technology infrastructure. In addition to the transport and energy policies, China has also devised a Digital Silk Road initiative in 2015. For now, the exact number of countries this initiative targets is not clear (Tugendhat and Voo 2021, 4), even though in Africa countries like Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania are part of it. Also, "A 37,000-km-long and 180 TBPS sub-sea cable named '2Africa' connecting Europe and Middle East with 16 African countries has been undertaken by China Mobile International, MTN Global Connect and Vodafone [...]. It is also assisting the African Union in formulating Digital Transformation Strategy with its 'Agenda-2063'" (Roy Chaudhury 2021).

In addition, this digital initiative may easily complement some aspects of the transport component like ports are one of the most important of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa (Pautasso 2016). It is obvious that some regions do not just have a commercial attraction, but also a strategic importance, like Djibouti, “a BRI hub” that hosts a Chinese military base (Chen 2018, 2). Djibouti and Walvis Bay in Namibia have seen the deployment of the People’s Liberation Army navy and the strengthening of military agreements, thus turning financial investments into strategic returns (Nantulya 2019). According to a CSIS study (Devermont et al. 2019), 41 ports in Africa have Chinese involvement, be it financial, construction or operational and at least 10 ports could have a strategic potential. However, some observers note that China is rebranding the BRI by favoring “green belt and road development [...and] giving importance to green infrastructure, green energy and green finance”(The Hindu Business Line 2021).

One of the main criticisms regarding China-Africa relations and the infrastructure policy is that China is playing debt diplomacy (or a debt trap). But there are some arguments against this idea. First, China needs Africa’s 54 votes in the international arena and their commercial partnership and has no interest in crushing them into debts (DW 2019). Second, as a China Africa Research Initiative’s research shows, China is not the major owner of African countries’ debt (EOM et al. 2018). CARI analyzed 17 countries with debt distress risk. In eight (Burundi, Gambia, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, São Tomé and Príncipe, South Sudan, Chad and Mauritania), the Chinese loans are relatively small, with few constructions surpassing one billion dollars, and have not contributed much to debt problems. Six other countries that have larger loans also have other loans even bigger than those from China. Only three countries, namely Djibouti, Zambia and Republic of Congo, have loans from China that can contribute to a debt distress (Eom et al. 2018).

It might be too early to fully evaluate the BRI impact on Africa’s infrastructure ambitions. However, according to some observers, the result in terms of facilitating and increasing commercial flux is positive. In a 2020 study, Chris Devonshire-Ellis (2021)⁶ found that “in the recent period 2016 to 2019, Belt and Road member states increased, on average their exports by 28.8%”. He acknowledged that “This isn’t just down to the BRI, it is also part to do with an on-going recovery from the Global Financial Crisis that hit in 2007-08”. But “Accusations or concerns that countries would see their

⁶ Founder of Dezan Shira & Associates and Chairman of the firms International Board of Equity Partners & Directors.

economies swamped by cheap Chinese imports and destroy their domestic exporters have proven to be unfounded. [...] Although it will be true that Covid will dampen figures for 2020, the fundamental drivers are in place” (*Ibid*).

Belt and Road countries export trade development

Country	2016	2019	Change %	Country	2016	2019	Change %
Algeria	33.40	38.37	+14.88	Libya	6.85	33.76	+393
Angola	28.44	41.39	+45.53	Madagascar	3.45	3.73	+8.11
Benin	3.26	4.26	+30.67	Mali	3.29	4.03	+22.49
Burundi	0.196	0.275	+40.30	Mauritania	2.04	3.18	+55.88
Cabo Verde	0.735	1.01	+36.19	Morocco	36.52	46.47	+27.24
Cameroon	6.28	7.47	+18.95	Mozambique	4.00	5.68	+42.00
Chad	2.66	4.16	+56.39	Namibia	3.75	4.43	+18.13
Comoros	0.108	0.156	+44.45	Niger	1.23	1.52	+23.57
Congo, Rep.	8.90	15.17	+70.45	Nigeria	37.30	61.70	+65.42
Côte d'Ivoire	11.80	13.82	+17.12	Rwanda	1.36	1.93	+41.91
Djibouti	2.62	5.13	+95.80	Senegal	4.11	5.37	+30.65
Egypt	34.44	47.45	+37.78	Seychelles	1.15	1.17	+1.73
Equatorial Guinea	5.78	6.08	+5.19	Sierra Leone	0.915	0.713	-22.07
Ethiopia	5.80	7.61	+31.20	South Africa	90.63	104.92	+15.76
Gabon	6.18	8.56	+38.51	Sudan	5.09	2.39	-53.04
Gambia	0.241	0.376	+56.02	Tanzania	8.14	8.07	-0.85
Ghana	17.54	24.10	+37.40	Togo	1.58	1.62	+2.53

Country	2016	2019	Change %	Country	2016	2019	Change %
Guinea	2.51	5.75	+130	Tunisia	16.99	19.33	+13.77
Kenya	9.910	11.49	+15.94	Uganda	3.63	6.66	+83.47
Lesotho	0.967	1.07	+10.65	Zambia	7.40	8.08	+9.2
Liberia	0.702	0.882	+25.61	Zimbabwe	4.10	4.62	+12.68

Source: Devonshire-Ellis (2021).

As a region, Africa's exports saw an average 40.61% growth in the same period. If this trend is to be maintained, the Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to help achieve the objectives of the recent (established in 2018 and in force since January 2021) African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). One of the main objectives of this initiative is to "create a single market for goods, services, facilitated by movement of persons in order to deepen the economic integration of the African continent and in accordance with the Pan African Vision of "An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa" enshrined in Agenda 2063" (AfCFTA 2018, article 3.a).

Not all countries and observers praise China's mega initiative. They suspect that, through BRI, China intends to internationalize Renminbi and build a new financial architecture (Pautasso 2016; Beijing Declaration 2018; Ghafar and Jacobs 2019). Therefore, the West is trying to counter Beijing with similar initiatives, such as the Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership launched by the G7 under the leadership of US President Joe Biden (The White House 2021); and the European Union "A Globally Connected Europe" initiative (Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada 2021). It is too early to grasp the scope, constraints, and opportunities these rival policies will have with regard to Africa's infrastructure development. But Africa certainly needs more than only BRI investments if the continent is to fill the huge infrastructure gap which hinders its development prospects.

Conclusion

The rise of China as one of the major international players is a challenge and an alternative to the western order in general. In Africa, China is now one of the main economic partners. From 2000 to 2013, China's

engagement in Africa was mainly in the commercial and mining sectors. But since the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the initial emphasis on transport infrastructures has diversified as China rebranded the BRI to include energy, infrastructure, and information and communication technology infrastructure. Interestingly, the BRI and Africa's Agenda 2063 were conceptualized the same year (2013) and came into force the same year (2015). If the Agenda encompasses more aspects than the BRI, the two emphasize the crucial idea of connectivity or infrastructure development.

Infrastructure development is, on one hand, an old area of cooperation between China and Africa, as the Tanzara railway and other sport and government buildings demonstrate (Snow 1988). On the other hand, infrastructure projects, seen as regional integration tools aiming at boosting trade and connection between countries, go back to at least Africa's 2001 NEPAD. I argued in the previous pages that the BRI penetration on the African continent is not coincidental, but the result of a mutual inspiration process. This congruence explains the enthusiasm with which 42 African states and the African Union have signed a memorandum of understanding to be part of the BRI.

Although the purpose of this article is not to evaluate the successes or failures of BRI projects, the initial lessons seem positive and there is no doubt that infrastructure projects are improving on the continent in the context of the implementation of the African Free Trade Zone. It is important to continue monitoring if BRI will bring a sustainable and healthy growth for Africa.

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ABSTRACT

According to the Chinese government, the Belt and Road Initiative is oriented towards "policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties". This global and multibillion initiative was launched in 2013, in a decade characterized by the renewal of the continental integration efforts in Africa through ambitious continental trade and development policies. The drafting of the African Union Agenda 2063 and the linking of Agenda 2063 to the global Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the transformation of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) into an African Union Development Agency; and the signing of an African Continental Free Trade Agreement demonstrate this new trend in the continental integration policies. Interestingly, like the BRI, these policies aim at connecting African countries in terms of infrastructure, trade and people. This paper examines the congruence (and co-learning) between the BRI and Africa's infrastructure policies by cross-tracing the ideational process in the two contexts before elaborating on some preliminary reflections on the BRI impacts in Africa.

KEYWORDS

BRI. Infrastructures. NEPAD. FOCAC. China. Africa. PIDA. Agenda 2063. African Union.

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