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China's Belt and Road Initiative in the East African Community

Shaping a China-Centric Regional Order

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China has become an important actor in African development. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is reorganising the geographical and political space in the East African Community (EAC), 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. This paper argues that the BRI is actively shaping a new spatial order in the EAC by influencing key stakeholders' perspectives and preferences. China's particular visions of global and regional development through the BRI are gaining traction in the EAC, making it an indispensable actor with considerable political and economic influence – and thereby challenging the role of traditional development partners in the region.

Geopolitics has taken centre stage in Africa amidst the competing interests and values of external actors. In particular, China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has effected significant geopolitical changes in the East African Community (EAC) both in terms of its hard and soft infrastructure engagements. Today, Beijing has become the dominant player when it comes to connectivity initiatives that are critical to the EAC's regional integration and economic development.

Given that the Western states have had minimal involvement in the realm of infrastructure up until now, EAC member states have adopted a "Look East" policy that favours China and its development initiatives.¹ Chinese interests and values are negotiated within geographical and social spaces that local stakeholders shape according to their national, regional and international aspirations. The EAC states (individually and collectively) no longer need to rely on Western donors like the European Union (EU) or the United States, and Beijing is increasingly replacing them in many sectors.²

Most recently, China announced its new Global Development Initiative (GDI) in a rallying call for the world to "work together to address the immediate challenges threatening the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while promoting more balanced and inclusive multilateral collaboration."³ Analysts see this as an attempt by China to project its

¹ Wilson-Andoh, Phebe. 2022. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Kenya." Foreign Policy Research Institute. 18 May 2022.

² The EAC member states are Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan.

³ Lemoine, Joseph and Gaafar, Yomna. 2022. "There's more to China's new Global Development Initiative than meets the eye". Atlantic Council. 18 August 2022.

soft power. It advocates for multipolar global governance while granting smaller countries a more influential voice. This narrative resonates with developing countries including those constituting the EAC, thus reinforcing Beijing's influence via the BRI and its ability to lead the conversation.

Strategic Relevance of the EAC for the BRI

The BRI is an ambitious geopolitical project intended to place China at the centre of a global network of land, maritime and digital connectivity, an endeavour that is widely understood to be conducive to a China-centric global economic and political order.⁴ In this way, Beijing seeks to influence strategic global supply chains, redirecting the flow of international trade via critical sea lanes and seaports.

Here, the EAC has become a strategic entry point for China into the African continent. Positioned alongside the Indian Ocean region, the EAC lies in direct vicinity to a maritime route that is vital for global trade and security. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), the sea route element of the BRI that connects China with Africa, is critical for China's geopolitical ambitions. Having access to seaports, railway lines, power stations and inter-regional highways in the EAC increases China's strategic economic and political reach.

China's close ties with the EAC are also of symbolic value: East Africa plays a particularly significant role in the BRI as it symbolises a revival of the ancient Silk Road that once linked China with Africa. It represents the most convenient and accessible way to move between the two poles of East Asia and Europe. Moreover, China accredited its envoy to the EAC to accelerate cooperation between the EAC and China.⁵

Aiming to strengthen China's geopolitical foothold, the BRI is projected as an alternative to western-led globalisation. The "Beijing consensus" places emphasis on huge investments in physical infrastructure which in turn spur quick economic development and foster cooperation, mutual development, and improved global governance. "[D]evelopment is seen to come not from the imposition of governance structures such as those associated with liberal democracies, but through transnational relationships that are more inclusive, creating 'win-win' exchange scenarios."⁶ The "Beijing consensus" distinguishes itself from Western-inspired governance ("Washington consensus") that emphasises social aspects like democracy and human rights – an approach that some African leaders find condescending and domineering.⁷

At the same time, BRI financing requires Chinese companies to implement projects that facilitate their domination within the EAC infrastructure sector. In one instance, Uganda's president Museveni directed his minister of labour to award the Kampala-Jinja expressway contract to a Chinese contractor without due process.⁸ In support of such actions, Kenya's former transport minister stated that the Chinese "are fast in terms of making decisions and implementation of projects, for instance the Nairobi Expressway was launched in October

⁴ Nantulya, Paul. 2019. "Implications for Africa from China's One Belt One Road Strategy." Africa Center for Strategic Studies. 2 March 2019.

⁵ Ngwenya, Samu, and Abdou Rahim Lema. n.d. "China's Role in Regional Integration in Africa: The Case of East African Community." *Stanford International Policy Review*.

⁶ Carmody, Pádraig R., and James T. Murphy. 2022. "Chinese Neoglobalization in East Africa: Logics, Couplings and Impacts." *Space and Polity* 26, no. 1. 20–43.

⁷ The Consilience Project. 2021. "China's Risky Soft-Power Push in East Africa." *The Consilience Project*. 28 February 2021.

⁸ The East African. 2017. "Discontent over Chinese Contractors' Domination Rocks Uganda's Roads Sector." 18 May 2017; Monitor. 2020. "Museveni's Letter That Gave Chinese Road Deal." *Monitor*, 14 September 2020.

2019 and it is 80 percent complete yet a European consortium to dual the Rironi-Mau summit that started negotiations in September 2016 has not finalised negotiations.”⁹

How the BRI Shapes the Regional Political and Spatial Order

The EAC is arguably the most dynamic sub-regional integration project in Africa, not least due to its pursuit of economic, political and cultural integration through a customs union, common market and monetary union.¹⁰ Therefore, expanding physical connectivity and cohesion through regional infrastructure projects is a key priority to the bloc alongside improving inter-regional market access for products, enabling the mobility of people and goods, and coordinating and facilitating relevant policies.

The EAC's development strategy prioritises the expansion of road and railway networks, sea and lake ports, and air transportation. Similarly, it aims to rejuvenate the regional railway industry as a way of enabling the efficient transportation of freight across long-distances to landlocked partners in the hinterland from partner states that have access to the sea.¹¹

Cooperation with external partners is crucial in achieving these goals. Accordingly, the main pillars of EAC-China relations consist of infrastructure financing and development as well as trade and investment frameworks.¹² For instance, in November 2011, the EAC signed a framework agreement with Beijing focusing on the promotion of investment in the region.¹³ For some, [t]he focus on these sectors reflects the vision and inspiration from China that “if you want to prosper, first build roads”.¹⁴

The BRI is reinforcing certain spatial forms that contribute or are favourable to the EAC's agenda. These include the consolidation of regional trading blocs and regional infrastructure connectivity projects. This alignment of interests makes the BRI particularly attractive as a catalyst for the EAC's economic and political integration. Projects (see Table 1) are negotiated nationally and implemented bilaterally between China and EAC member states. However, they are regional in nature and are often conceived as regional projects that can affect economic activities and livelihoods in more than one country.¹⁵ Within the region there is a clear re-orientation towards harmonising national and regional economic master plans, including in the realm of infrastructure.

Approximately 50 percent of BRI connectivity projects are located in Kenya. Traditionally considered the gateway to the EAC and the largest economy in the region, Kenya hosted the flagship regional project connecting its Mombasa port to landlocked countries in the EAC including Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan.¹⁶

Apart from those in Kenya, a large portion of projects fall under the Lamu Port South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor Project, a major regional development initiative meant to connect Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan and the wider Eastern African region.

⁹ Guguyu, Otiato. 2022. “Handful Chinese Firms Snap \$8.8 Billion Contracts.” *The East African*. 5 January, 2022.

¹⁰ East African Community. n.d. “Pillars of EAC Regional Integration.” EAC.

¹¹ Ngwenya and Lema. n.d.

¹² Chiyemura, Frangton, Elisa Gambino, and Tim Zajontz. 2022. “Infrastructure and the Politics of African State Agency: Shaping the Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa.”

¹³ East Africa Community. n.d. “Trade.”

¹⁴ Edinger Hannah, and Labuschagne Jean-Pierre. n.d. “If you want to prosper, consider building roads China's role in African infrastructure and capital projects.” Deloitte Insights.

¹⁵ Calabrese, Linda. 2022. “Making the Belt and Road Initiative work for Africa.” ODI.

¹⁶ Northern Corridor transit and transport coordination authority. 2023. “Transforming the Northern corridor into economic development corridor.”

Table: BRI Infrastructure Projects Enhancing Trade and Physical Connectivity in the EACSource: Author's own compilation.¹⁷

<i>Country</i>	<i>Project</i>	<i>Cost (in USD billion)</i>	<i>Status</i>
Kenya	Mombasa-Nairobi SGR	2.7	Completed
	Nairobi-Naivasha SGR	1.2	Completed
	Naivasha-Malaba SGR	3.5	Planned
	Lamu Port Project	3.0	Completed
	Lamu-Lokichar Crude Oil Pipeline (LLCOP)	3.0	Planned
	Kipevu Oil Terminal	0.353	Completed
	Nairobi Express Way	0.75	Completed
	Likoni and Makupa bridges	0.0573	Completed
	Uganda	Kampala-Entebbe Express Highway	0.476
Karuma Hydropower Project		1.7	Completed
Isimba Hydropower Project		0.568	Completed
Entebbe International Airport		0.2	Completed
Tanzania		Bagamoyo Port Phase 5: Mwanza-Isaka SGR Section	11 1.32
	Rwanda	Bugesera International Airport Expressway	0.054 Completed
Burundi	Ruzibazi Hydropower Project	0.08	Completed
DRC	Busanga Hydropower Plant	0.66	Ongoing
South Sudan	Juba International Airport	0.158	Completed
	Jur River Bridge	0.012	Ongoing

¹⁷ Munene Dennis. 2022. "BRI has transformed Kenya's infrastructure development." *China Daily*. 28 July 2022; Mwalagho Edwin, M. 2020. "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Infrastructural Relations in East Africa Region: Case Studies of Kenya and Uganda." University of Nairobi Research Archive; Nyabiage Jevans. 2022. "Tanzania's Hassan makes state visit to China with projects on her mind." *South China Morning Post*. 1 November 2022; Ngwenya and Lema. n.d.; Agencies. 2022. "Chinese-financed road helps ease traffic flow, movement of goods in Rwanda." *Global Times*. 19 September 2022; Chinese Embassy in South Sudan. 2022. "Charge d'Affaires MA Wenjun Publishes Article Titled 'Salute the 11 Years of China-South Sudan Relations' in South Sudanese Media." 8 July 2022; Kamau Macharia. 2022. "Expressway of pain: Kenyans pay the price for Nairobi's new swanky road." *Standardmedia*. 3 May 2022; *The East African*. 2022. "Bridge restores Mombasa to island status." 1 July 2022; Ngabonziza Dan. 2018. "New \$54m Bugesera airport highway due next year." *KT Express*. 17 July 2018; Omondi Jerry. 2019. "Chinese-funded hydro-power project expected to light up Burundi." *CGTN Africa*. 5 November 2019. Nyabiage Jevans. 2021. "China's DR Congo hydropower projects: a win-win deal or short circuit?" *South China Morning Post*. 12 June, 2021.

Regional projects such as this demonstrate a shift towards trade-enabling infrastructure that aims to spur intra-African economic integration. Such regional projects allow African economies – particularly smaller ones – to participate in collective bargaining with China and other external actors, making it easier for them to secure funding for infrastructure projects.

Beyond infrastructure, China has now become the largest external provider of consumer goods, capital and finance to the region. It is the largest bilateral loan provider to East Africa, second only to the World Bank. Between 2015 and 2020, EU institutions (not including bilateral EU member states' commitments) committed \$256.7 million to East Africa, representing only 4% of China's bilateral loans to East Africa in the same period.¹⁸ Unlike in the 1990s when American and European firms were unrivalled on the continent, today, western firms are struggling to win business in fast-growing African markets.¹⁹ The decision by Tanzania to opt out of the joint EAC-EU Economic partnership agreement in 2016 can be seen as an indicator of the extent to which the EU has lost its strategic influence in the EAC as a result of the alternatives afforded by China.²⁰

Key EAC Stakeholders Largely View the BRI Favourably

A wholehearted embracement of China and its BRI is by no means uncontested in the region. Observers and citizens have shown concerns over rising debt burdens, opaque contracts and huge trade imbalances between China and EAC members.²¹ Still, despite such reservations, heads of state and government officials have eagerly reinforced cooperation with China.

Local stakeholders, particularly political leaders and policy makers believe they have found a reliable ally in China, thus allowing them to push their regional integration and development agenda. They are inspired by China's rapid development and are convinced that Beijing can offer important lessons and an alternative development model that suits Africa's regional and continental priorities. According to an official in the Konza Technopolis Development Authority, the Chinese development model is one that Kenya strives to emulate: "Kenya is taking an increasing interest in Chinese investments in new export processing zones (EPZ), viewing China as a role model for how to kick-start industrialisation."²²

Statements by key policy makers also reveal that the BRI's connectivity projects are positively influencing EAC leaders' perspectives in favour of China's long-term geopolitical objectives. For example, Secretary General of the EAC Dr. Peter Mathuki argues:

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a longstanding friend of East Africa. The PRC is one of the most progressive countries that has tried to partner in so many sectors with countries in East Africa. [...] look at the infrastructure programs in Tanzania, in Uganda, in Kenya, in Kigali (Rwanda); largely, they are supported by China, either China has supported by a grant or by some financing mechanism or by technical assistance. [...] Therefore, what we want to see is more of this partnership strengthened to ensure that we work and we really benefit from a win-win-situation. [...] China has been a very reliable partner, a reliable strategic partner when it comes to the programs of the EAC. So we are happy to say that this Initiative aims to ensure

¹⁸ Owino, Easton. 2022. "Chinese Lending to East Africa: What the Numbers Tell Us." *Development Initiatives*, 1 September 2022, p. 4.

¹⁹ *The Economist*. 2022. "How Chinese Firms Have Dominated African Infrastructure." 19 February 2022.

²⁰ Otondi, Sekou Toure. 2022. "Tanzania's Refusal to Sign EU Trade Pact Gives East Africa Time to Rethink." *The Conversation*. 21 July 2016

²¹ Eickhoff Karoline. 2022. "Chinese Mega Projects in Kenya: Public Controversies around Infrastructure and Debt in East Africa's Regional Hub." *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 04*. 20 May 2022.

²² Carmody and Murphy. 2022.

that as you develop infrastructure, you are also increasing trade and securing trade routes in a more advanced way, and of course make countries interdependent. We welcome this initiative in East Africa because that way it is not only improving the infrastructure levels in East Africa but is likely to increase the volumes of trade and how we do business between East Africa and China.²³

Mathuki's statement reflects a relatively common view among policy makers and the political class in the EAC, representing what some critics refer to as "elite capture" by China's economic engagements in Africa.²⁴ Kenya's former President Uhuru Kenyatta (2013-2022), too, vehemently defended China's infrastructure projects: "Our partnership with China is one that is mutually beneficial; that is based on win-win and we are very grateful to the Chinese government and the Chinese people for the support they continue to render not only to our country but to the rest of Africa."²⁵

China's engagement within the EAC and beyond is commonly perceived as being based on equality – in stark contrast to traditional development partners who many argue push Africa to the periphery of global politics and development. This view manifests itself in statements such as those of Rwandan president Paul Kagame, who said, "China relates to Africa as an equal. We see ourselves as a people on the road to prosperity. China's actions demonstrate that you see us in the same way. This is a revolutionary posture in world affairs, and it is more precious than money."²⁶ Kagame also described China's aid and investment strategy as "deeply transformational and respectful of Africa's global position."²⁷ Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni also remarked that China's non-interference in others' domestic affairs was "much better", just as he also urged investors from Japan and Western nations to "put on their spectacles" to "see the business opportunities Chinese are seeing here."²⁸

Policy makers and influential stakeholders in the region view the EAC as a potential common market and political unit that can effectively bargain with China and other external actors on the economic and political fronts. According to Adan Mohamed, Kenya's former minister for the EAC, "China with all its competitiveness today stands to be the biggest beneficiary of negotiating trade deals with any country." He noted this in discussions about a free trade agreement between China and the EAC.²⁹ While the EAC's priority is to promote intra-regional trade, member states still intend to secure better trade deals and to reduce huge trade imbalances between the EAC and external actors. For example, only South Sudan trades at a surplus with China because of its oil exports.³⁰ China has signalled that it is ready to negotiate a trade deal with the EAC that addresses the huge trade imbalance. Nonetheless, the onus is on EAC member states to harmonise their policies and priorities to achieve a common position in the realm of external trade and investments.

²³ Globalink. 2022. "East African Community Calls for Strengthened Cooperation with China." 24 May 2022.

²⁴ Scott Caitlin Dearing. 2021. "Does China's involvement in African elections and politics hurt democracy?" *Democracy in Africa*. 27 September 2021.

²⁵ Yusuf, Mohammed. 2021. "Kenyan President Defends Reliance on China for Big Projects." *VOA. Voice of America (VOA News)*. 26 December 2021.

²⁶ Alfa Shaban, Abdur Rahman. 2018. "China Relates to Africa as an Equal - Paul Kagame." *Africanews*. 23 July 2018.

²⁷ Mugisha, Ivan R. 2018. "Rwanda's Kagame endorses Chinese investment in Africa." *The East African*. 4 September 2018.

²⁸ Tavsan, Sinan. 2022. "Uganda Leader Says China-Style Diplomacy 'Better than' the West's." *Nikkei Asia*. 17 March 2022.

²⁹ Miriri Duncan. 2019. "China ready for trade talks with East Africa bloc: ambassador to Kenya." *Reuters*. 10 June 2019.

³⁰ Ihirwe, Jeanne Paula, Godwin Norense, Osarumwense Asemota and Samuel Bimenyimana. 2018. "Bilateral Trade Analyses Between China and East African Community Countries." *Journal of Marketing and Consumer Research*. Vol. 46.

Conclusion and recommendations

China's BRI has entrenched the state-led infrastructure development model in the EAC as spatial planning is used to emulate China's rapid economic and political development. Political leaders embrace the prioritisation of physical infrastructural and trade connectivity over socio-political progress. Modernity and modern society is increasingly being perceived from the Chinese perspective of regional-mega infrastructure projects.³¹

The EAC now considers China as one of its most important development partners. The region is becoming increasingly assertive and its leaders employ anti-western rhetoric at a greater rate, with some even describing the western-led order as unjust and restrictive. Regional integration has received new impetus. China, now an increasingly influential financier, contractor and trade partner who invests in industrialisation programs such as special economic zones and connective infrastructure, has helped the EAC reduce internal weaknesses and overcome challenges to regional integration. Most importantly, for some, "the ideological coherence between [China's] BRI and Pan-African continental connectivity has promoted the idea of African regionalism."³²

Accordingly, the BRI and the concentration of connectivity projects in the EAC is essentially re-ordering a geopolitical space in a newly forming regional and global order. New spatial arrangements are emerging to keep pace with economic and political realities shaped by China's ever-growing role in both regional and global affairs. It is characterised by Chinese spatial concepts such as "connectivity" and "infrastructure-led development".³³

At the same time, the concept of south-south relations that is advocated by China not only propagates geographical distinctions from the developed global north, but also imposes behavioural expectations on countries in the global south. It advocates south-south cooperation and solidarity, and it shifts focus from the developed north to regional arrangements that centre China within political and economic interactions. Under Chinese leadership, south-south relations are mutually beneficial, respectful and responsive to the wishes and priorities of developing countries, or so the story goes.

From a geopolitical perspective, the BRI is influencing new spatial patterns in the EAC that challenge roles, norms and values long shaped by western actors. These include ideas of development, autonomy and global justice which derive social meanings from the BRI that cohere with the economic and political interests of the EAC and its member states. As an arena for strategic competition among foreign actors, East Africa is seeing China gradually displace the West as the dominant and preferred partner in the EAC. Thus the balance of regional geopolitical power is shifting in China's favour.

Local stakeholders' perspectives, particularly those of the elite, remain key to sustaining the regional ordering of the EAC. While the full implications of the BRI are yet to be felt, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Western and other foreign actors have some catching up to do if they intend to have a say over the structural, political, economic and social transformations taking place in East Africa. Therefore, they should consider the following:

³¹ Chiyemura, Frangton, Elisa Gambino and Tim Zajontz. 2022. "Infrastructure and the Politics of African State Agency."

³² Otele Oscar M. 2020. "China, region-centric infrastructure drives and regionalism in Africa." *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 27:4, 511-532, DOI: 10.1080/10220461.2020.1856179.

³³ Chiyemura, Frangton, Elisa Gambino and Tim Zajontz. 2022. "Infrastructure and the Politics of African State Agency."

1. Chinese engagement in the region through the BRI is carefully aligned with the EAC's strategic goals, making it very attractive to policy makers and certain key stakeholders. The EAC is still experiencing a significant infrastructure deficit and has a genuine desire for greater internal and external connectivity. The reluctance of other actors to take risks and fund such infrastructure projects makes China a critical strategic partner; even to such an extent that concerns over rising debts, trade imbalances and questionable project quality still don't override the desire for connectivity.
2. The EAC's political and geographic space has been progressively influenced by Chinese ideas on development. As the EU wants to be appreciated for its democratic values such as openness, transparency, human rights and sustainability, these values must not be imposed as pre-conditions for support but rather promoted in ways that are considered just and respectful by key local stakeholders.
3. The BRI's prominent role in regional connectivity has set China apart from other actors and their similar initiatives. It has showcased China's global leadership potential and soft power capabilities in the EAC. The EU's similar attempts to be seen as a reliable and trusted partner in the EAC must be backed by active engagement and investment that produces results that are perceived as concrete and tangible.
4. China's non-interference in internal politics, its investments in line with local actors' priorities and its affirmation of local ideology have all elicited a sense of sovereignty, mutual respect and equality within the EAC, bolstering a positive perception of a Chinese centred international system. Western policy makers would do well to consider local stakeholder perspectives through dialogue and active engagement. It is only when local stakeholders, including political leaders and policy makers, feel respected and valued that they will support counter initiatives of the BRI.
5. China has successfully established an alternative and competent vision of a new order that has been embraced by the EAC. Rather than merely criticising it, other external actors should establish their own visions and alternatives, and then make them competitive in relation to national and regional interests in the EAC. That means that the EU's Global Gateway initiative for example, must compete on its own merit and demonstrate that it can effectively meet the needs and priorities of the EAC and foster a sense of inclusion and local ownership.

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