BRICS and Resistance in Africa

Contention, Assimilation and Co-optation

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The Belt and Road Initiative and Eastern Africa

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This chapter deals with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the ambitious vision of China to increase its connectivity with the African continent, across which it has managed wide-scale engagements since the launch of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summitry in 2000. This complex geopolitical tool for enhancing China's position has been substantially gaining ground in Africa. However, this has not been without adverse outcomes. Via infrastructure development projects, African states arguably enter dynamics that reproduce dependency – this time, on China (Taylor, 2014). While Africans also need to engage in meaningful trade, strategies for cooperation on the African side seem to be weak or missing. This is evident when we look at recent Chinese infrastructure developments and the responses and perceptions to these projects by locals in Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Rwanda. Attention will be directed towards China's strategy of offering attractive loans that indebt African governments over the long term. Case studies will include railway projects in Kenya and Ethiopia, airport extensions in Kenya and Tanzania, and building projects in Rwanda. The chapter will argue that among the multiple local views towards increasing Chinese presence, there is growing resistance in some localities, such as from the Kenyan group called 'Save Lamu', which attempted to stop a China-backed coal-fired power plant (see French, 2015, for a detailed discussion of local views). While the 'charm offensive' (Kurlantzick, 2007) is still part of China's pragmatic foreign policy, execution of the BRI has made inadequate provisions for the management of local resistance and fears. Backed by field trips and interviews in all the four countries, as well as based upon media coverage/news analysis, this contribution will cover both the Chinese and the African angles and shed light on these struggles.

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China going global along one belt and many routes

By the end of the 1990s, China appeared assertively on the international stage by fostering its ‘Going Global’ strategy, which later offered a foundation for launching its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese government explicitly urged both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private firms to penetrate markets globally, taking advantage of a dynamic new phase of world trade and the hunger of developing regions for investments in infrastructure. President Xi Jinping’s leadership has been pushing the new initiative – formally called the ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR), 一带一路 in Mandarin, built on the ancient first Silk Road network from the Han dynasty – also with the aim to improve and strengthen its geopolitical position in its immediate neighbourhood, as well as in a larger regional, global context. Two routes exist: one by land stretching across the ancient Silk Road network (and well beyond) and a maritime route (see Figure 9.1). The two are connected, resulting in ‘one belt’, and the BRI is a well-planned smart power strategy, which aims to wrap the entire world, not only Eurasia and Africa, and which has become the leitmotif of China’s foreign policy (Brînză, 2018).

A report published by the research and strategic advisory think tank China Policy in April 2017 clearly shows the systematic and

Figure 9.1 – The Belt and Road Initiative Maritime Route

strategic development of China's global expansion. After bidding farewell to the Mao-era mind-set of self-reliance, the new strategy frames China's ambitions for global leadership and cooperation (China Policy, 2017:3). Following its joining of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and having experienced (and survived with confidence) the global financial crisis in 2008–2010, China's BRI focuses on building up infrastructure, trade, investment, and human linkages across Eurasia (China Policy, 2017:7), connecting almost all regions of the world to a 'peacefully rising' Middle Kingdom of the 21st century. Africa is one of the target continents, where Chinese engagement has a long history.

The official Chinese communication dates Sino-African relations back to Han times (206 BC to AD 220) when the Chinese reached Egypt by overland routes (Jalata and Mathews, 2017:73). One of the leading symbols of today's Chinese Africa policy is Admiral Zheng He, who in the early 15th century – more than 70 years earlier than the first European (the Portuguese Vasco da Gama) reached the Swahili shores – realised influential voyages across the Western Ocean and, thereby, China–Africa relations were brought to a new historic level (Li, 2017: 253). Admiral Zheng He is frequently referred to in both the political and public discourses of historically long friendly ties, and at the same time has been used as an 'item' to confirm Chinese 'aspirations of centrality' (Taylor, 2006:2). Since 2000, when the first FOCAC was held in Beijing, the real pragmatic face of China has been dominating Sino-African relations, which also signals a new era in Africa's interaction with the outside world (Alden, 2007:2). Chinese political and business actors, together with entrepreneurs have regarded Africa as a continent of economic potential populated by consumers, as well as a place for Chinese companies to gain experience, and establish and expand business ventures into the global arena (Alden, Large, and Oliveira, 2008:7). As Africa welcomes any competition that shakes up the Western, Lebanese, and Indian business monopolies (Michel and Beuret, 2009:7), with its highly enhanced, complex, and, at the same time, focused engagements, China is welcomed by most African governments. With China's accelerated involvement in African development; more and more Africans say that China has won the 'new scramble' for Africa. This engagement, however, has stirred mixed reactions. African leadership sees this relationship as a golden opportunity. However, Africa's people have yet to see if they (or just their leaders) would benefit in the long run (Chidaushe, 2007:107). Despite these misgivings, it must be noted that China has recently built the sorely needed infrastructure that can enhance Africa's connectivity across global networks. Local Africans certainly praise this input. At the same time, the deals that finance such projects raise several questions, of which the same local population is hardly aware. Their governments need to start to repay the 'soft loans' provided by China, but in a growing number of cases, their budgets are unable to cover them. Such scenarios may, therefore, reproduce more dependency. The rise of new dependencies has already been discussed by scholars such as Taylor, (2014), and as a 'sub-imperialist logic' of behaviour, by Bond (2015) and Van der Merwe (2016). Another direct consequence of China's Africa policy needs further attention: the rapid rise of Chinese migrants in Africa and the consequences of their presence in different African localities. There has been a marked rise in the number of Chinese people on African soil since the launch of FOCAC, precipitating multiple local views and perceptions. In the following section, we will look into who these Chinese nationals are and what challenges they present both for the Africans and the Chinese government in the long run.

More Chinese migrants, more questions for Africa

Many authors, including Mohan and Tan-Mullins (2009), Park (2013), and Li (2017), mention that data about Chinese presence in Africa is somewhat speculative. Figures are elastic and estimates of the number of Chinese migrants range from one to two million. There are several factors to consider in this regard. First, the term 'Overseas Chinese in Africa' can mean various things, with broad and narrow definitions, including distinctions between earlier and more recent migrants, and between those from mainland China as opposed to those from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau (Li, 2017:275). Apart from the numerous Mandarin terms (such as Huaqiao 华侨, Huayi 华裔, Haiwai Huaren 海外华人), 'the Chinese' are a diverse group both culturally and linguistically (Mohan and Tan-Mullins, 2009:591). During the last few decades the presence of Chinese nationals in Africa has demonstrated a changing pattern: as opposed to the flow of contracted workers of large state-owned companies driven by the central will of the Chinese government, recently, migration has moved to being largely independent of state action (Mohan and Tan-Mullins, 2009:592). So far, much less attention has been paid to these people and gaining a better understanding of their intentions and activities. French also confirms that while large-scale projects completed by big, government-owned companies dominate the headlines about the advancing Chinese agenda in Africa, the reality is more meaningfully shaped by the deeds of countless smaller actors (2015:5). They also contribute to an expanding circle of perceptions, which accommodate many views and reactions to the Chinese, which vary from country to country and within countries (Park, 2013:131). In an interview, Denise A.O. Kodhe, director general of the Institute for Development and Leadership in Africa (IDEA), based in Nairobi, Kenya, presented the increasingly vocalised view that China's entry into Africa is based on a strategy to

> tie African governments down with massive loans so that the Chinese get what they want. These loans in Kenya are running into billions of Schillings, and as Kenyans, we are really worried when this money will be paid back and if not paid, what will happen.[2]

As for interactions between Chinese and Africans on the ground, Kodhe thinks that in some cases

> Chinese investors bribe their way through and are not interested in establishing long-term social relationships to bring themselves closer to the people of Africa. In short, it is a marriage of convenience, which is likely to explode at some point.

It is not only the Africans that do not know the extent and nature of Chinese migration to Africa. Chinese authorities also do not have a complete picture of the growing Overseas Chinese population in Africa. From the African perspective, Hannah Postel (2016) articulates a valid point when she says that better understanding the Chinese communities on the continent is necessary for African countries to make this growing trend as productive and sustainable as possible – for the sake of Africa's planned long-term development.

2 Recorded by the author on 6 May 2018.

Chinese infrastructure projects linked to BRI: financial challenges, tensions, and emerging sentiments across East Africa

Kenya

The issue of knowledge and technology transfer has been prominent in the discourse of Sino-African relations for a long time. Africa needs to learn how to run and maintain the projects that had been put together by Chinese actors. In the case of infrastructure projects, *who* operates a light rail or railway, in the long run, does affect local perceptions. In an exclusive report in *The Standard*, Wafula (2018) reveals the enormous challenges of the working conditions at the 385-km-long Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) of Kenya. This railway line, which is very much a BRI project, connects Nairobi with Mombasa on the coast and is the largest single infrastructure development project in the country at present. Those who were trained two years ago in anticipation have remained assistant shunting drivers, since the launch of Madaraka express, and only sit and watch as the Chinese drivers drive to the coast and back. 'We just sit at the back and watch. There is no actual transfer of skills that is happening here', an assistant locomotive driver who has been with the SGR for over a year now told *The Standard* (Wafula 2018). In addition to the lower wages for the same jobs, together with the more menial tasks allocated to them, local Kenyan workers do not see the path of development for themselves and their country under such circumstances.

As for the environment, there are further negative consequences, which have alarmed wildlife activists: more and more animals are being run over by the train, and there are no safety or protective measures. Already at the end of 2015 Nelson summarised some of the most critical local opinions in the *Kenya Monitor*: both Nairobi residents and the Conservation Alliance of Kenya (CAK) opposed the routing of the SGR. Their biggest concern was that the railway would affect the national park it runs through and cause unacceptable social impact by displacing thousands of people from their homes, including ancestral homes, causing a loss of open spaces, affecting air quality, increasing pollution, affecting health negatively, and reducing recreational space. These detrimental effects are in addition to causing irreparable ecological damage through habitat degradation, especially through the loss of rare indigenous forests and wildlife, and the reduction of the rich biological diversity of the city (Nelson, 2015). Their voices were not heard.

The other crucial question also connected with this railway project concerns its finances and financial sustainability. In a Sunday article, referring to data from the Kenyan Treasury, the *Business Daily* (2018) emphasised that loan repayments to China's ExIm Bank – which lent US$3.233 billion to build the railway – will more than triple from July 2019 as the five-year grace period that Beijing extended to Kenya in March 2014 for the project funds comes to an end.

Another more recent instance of local experience with a China-funded project seems to be the country's first coal-fired power plant in the historic port town of Lamu. *The New York Times* reports that while Kenyan officials say that the plant will help meet the country's fast-growing demand for electricity and draw investment, critics worry that it will damage the area's fragile marine ecosystem, threaten the livelihoods of fishing communities, and pollute the air (Sengupta, 2018). The multinational Chinese company Power China is behind the scenes and is ready to 'help' as soon as the ongoing lawsuit which was filed by a local group in the Kenyan National Environmental Tribunal in November 2016 is over. The plant would also be connected to one of the largest multifaceted infrastructure developments in Kenya. The Kenya Port Authority translates this as one of the flagship infrastructure projects identified by the government in Kenya Vision 2030, which is the development of a new transport corridor linking a new and modern Port of Lamu with landlocked Ethiopia and South Sudan. For many local households whose land has been acquired for the project the promised financial compensation seems to be insufficient when they think about their future. One activist of the group Save Lamu said: 'You can never get enough compensation to evacuate everyone' (Sengupta, 2018).

Ethiopia

There are numerous examples of the tangible manifestation of China's Africa policy all across Africa. Recent large-scale projects have directed the spotlight on Ethiopia. There, Chinese presence has already been overwhelming. They have developed the first modern light railway (tram) system of sub-Saharan Africa in the capital, Addis Ababa. The Chinese were also instrumental in the Addis–Djibouti railway connecting the landlocked country to the maritime trade routes of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (see Tarrósy and Vörös, 2018a; 2018b). These initiatives yet again aim at improving the country's port access, with land having been acquired to set up a logistics facility in the Lamu Port, Kenya. One of the main features of Ethiopia's developmental state is the construction of large projects, such as railways, highways, hydroelectric dams, and, more recently, the plan for the expansion of the capital city, known as the 'Addis Ababa Master Plan' (Záhořík 2017:259). The construction of the light rail system started in December 2011 after securing funds from China's Export-Import Bank (ExIm Bank). The final cost of the railway was US$475 million, 85 per cent of which was covered by a substantial concessional loan from ExIm Bank, China. It took three years for the China Railway Group Limited (CREC – the acronym of the parent company meaning China Railway Engineering Corporation) to finish the two-line, 34.4-km system. Trial operations started in February 2015, while the lines started to operate by 20 September and 9 November 2015 respectively.

The original plan was to ease the overburdened traffic situation in the capital, but according to Tesfaye (2015), it failed to do so. The number of those using the tram – around 110,000 daily passengers in a city of around seven million inhabitants – shows it has limited relevance: with very low ticket prices, the train is comparable to the cost of a bus trip. However, the light rail is overcrowded with a limited network. The number of trams should be increased, but according to the news and locals, the system is limited because of power issues and even with the recent increase in the number of trams it runs infrequently or with single cars. Promises were made to install a dedicated power grid, but even it fails to power the system.

The Addis–Djibouti railway is an almost 760-km-long railway connection between the capitals of Ethiopia and Djibouti, constructed between 2011 and 2016, financed by the Ethiopia government and by a loan from China's ExIm Bank. Details again are not entirely clear, but according to the Embassy of Ethiopia in Brussels (2016), the total construction budget reached US$4.5 billion, at least US$0.5 billion more than was initially planned. According to various sources, ExIm Bank provided a loan of around US$2.4–3.0 billion. In 2017, the Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC) faced financial issues without finishing the project and the connecting infrastructure on time. Anberbir (2017) reported that the ERC had a stunning US$3.7 billion in debt by the end of 2016, and had already started to repay those loans before the railway connection was functional.

As was the case with the Light Railway System, this railway is also operated by a Chinese company, in this case, a consortium of two companies, CREC and the China Civil Engineering Construction

Corporation (CRCC), which were responsible for the construction as well. Their job now is to operate and maintain the line and to also train local personnel for an undisclosed fee until 2023.

This project, similar to the Light Railway System, fails to meet its original goals, which has financial consequences as well. While the light railway was mainly constructed to ease the traffic issues, this railway was built to help the landlocked country to reach maritime trade routes, also to import much-needed fuel, as well as to boost the economy. Failing to generate the income to repay the loans might have negative consequences on the ERC and future projects as well, not to mention on the Ethiopian government.

Tanzania

Neighbouring Tanzania also has a massive port project – the Port of Bagamoyo, which is roughly planned to be completed between 2020 and 2021. Set to be the largest port in East Africa, Bagamoyo is an important junction on China's new Maritime Silk Road. It is not surprising that part of the necessary funding will come from a Chinese entity, the China Merchants Holdings International, which partnered for the project with Oman's State Government Reserve Fund. Some say that the project presents an opportunity to test the potential of this Maritime Silk Road as a game changer for Africa's development (Léautier, Schaefer, and Wei, 2015). The US$10 billion project will contain another Chinese element adapted to the Tanzanian context: an Export Development Zone (EDZ), a kind of special economic and trade area, with an industrial city and even more infrastructure connectivity. Some locals, however, feel threatened and think that their natural habitats will be endangered – in particular, such rich ecosystems as the nearby mangrove swamps, as well as the fishing waters that provide income to many families. Trade imbalances that heavily favour China may also fuel rising negative sentiments about the Chinese. The Chinese have not been consuming as much of either Tanzania's or Kenya's products as Africans have spent on Chinese goods. As Omondi (2018) underlines, Kenya has even made overly generous concessions which have allowed China to bring products such as onions and fish into the country which can easily be locally sourced.

Bagamoyo, however, is only one of the 12 ports – the so-called Strategic Maritime Distribution Centres (SMDCs) – along the Maritime Silk Road. Out of the 12 strategic ports seven are located along African coastal regions. The entire concept (or geopolitical vision) is about a network with China in the centre (as the real

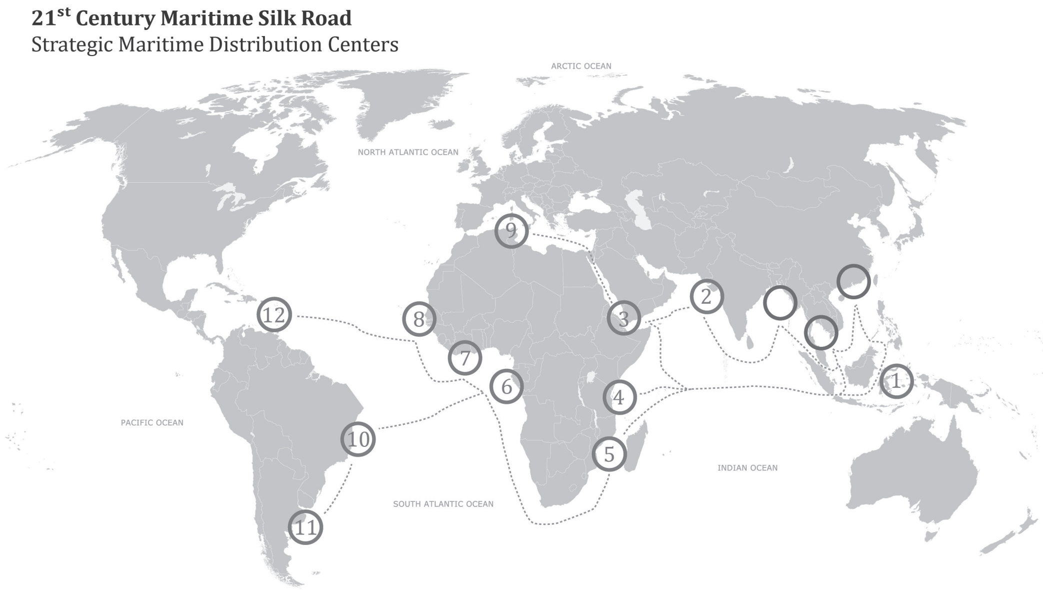
Middle Kingdom again) and all other partnering actors, who are interested in facilitating trade for their own sake. Eyler (2014) rightly points out that this growing network's ocean-bound cargo fleet's ships, whether coming or going, are never empty, and China, sitting at the helm of this network, receives the lion's share of income and resources from trade.

Although the SMDCs collectively are not explicitly part of BRI, the broader SMDCs (presented in Figure 9.2) contextualise BRI within a bigger network of Chinese shipping, significantly expanding the reach of China's trade. China's expertise in infrastructure development assists developing countries in clearing their infrastructure backlogs, thereby facilitating enhanced trade. It concentrates on modernising and constructing transportation networks linking hubs, ports, or important cities in order to allow fast and undisturbed trade (Krukowska, 2016:159–160). BRI is at the centre of a vast maritime and trade network, therefore, which, as a vehicle may also contribute to raising the geopolitical importance of the African coastal regions.

Rwanda

For any investment, a politically and economically stable and secure environment is a prerequisite. Some actors are less cautious than others, but security is of utmost importance to each of them. To be

Figure 9.2 – Strategic Maritime Distribution Centres



1: Makassar, Indonesia; 2: Okha, India; 3: Djibouti, Djibouti; 4: Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; 5: Maputo, Mozambique; 6: Libreville, Gabon; 7: Tema, Ghana; 8: Dakar, Senegal; 9: Bizerte, Tunisia; 10: Salvador, Brazil; 11: Mar del Plata, Argentina; 12: St. Georges, Granada able to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), Africa needs to work out policies and daily behaviours which can convince any possible investor to enter their markets. African countries differ regarding their levels of armed conflict and the openness and regional integration of their markets. This affects what they can offer for their potential trade partners and investors. Although Chinese actors had shown bravery in some cases in the past to enter unreliable markets, today, the Going Global strategy of the People's Republic of China advocates more caution and calculation in any investment or acquisition scheme. Those countries with more safeguards (and still with 'room to manoeuvre' for the sake of the best deal) can expect larger volumes of Chinese money and engagement. One of the best examples for this is the small landlocked East-Central African country of Rwanda.

One of the vehicles of the country's transformation is the Rwandan Development Board (RDB). It focuses on investment promotion and contributes to a services-oriented economy for the future. As Yvette Mutoni, former head of investment promotion in RDB, explained in an interview, tourism has been planned to become one of the main drivers of a brighter future. In particular, conference tourism with all the newest and modern facilities in Kigali City is meant to position Rwanda as the leading actor in East Africa.[3] To be able to attract more companies into this sector the RDB offers a one-stop centre to register any company in the country: in just about six hours on the ground floor of the RDB building, all the necessary paperwork can easily be done, for instance. Also, the government has been making progress in bringing down the costs of running any business, especially concerning electricity costs. Another significant step to attract FDI is to provide transparent procurement procedures. Proposals are double checked in all sectors, and the state organ responsible for all this is the Rwanda Standards Board (RSB), governed by the board of directors, which is composed of major stakeholders from government, industry, and academic institutions, as well as consumer associations.

With regard to construction, especially that of the badly needed physical infrastructure across the country, the role of external actors was highlighted in an interview with President Kagame in the Cabinet Meeting Room in the Presidency Compound on 24 March 2015. President Kagame acknowledged that the 'Chinese are everywhere,

3 Interview recorded by the author on 24 March 2015, in the headquarters of the RDB.

in Europe, as well. If this is good for Europe, why cannot it be good for Africa?' He also added that if 'things go wrong [in a project, for instance], it is not only the Chinese' fault because if things do not have ownership, things cannot be going into a good direction'.[4] Paul Kagame certainly referred to his firm belief in 'home-grown solutions', which presuppose an able African agency to make decisions on behalf of the society. All these statements also highlight the stubborn approach required for the future: African countries need to go their own way in a systematic and also self-critical manner, always learning from both their past and the current successes and failures of others. China, from this angle, is undoubtedly a point of reference for many, including Rwanda. The important thing missing, as many analysts agree, is African countries' China Policy, a comprehensive approach towards China's engagements with African countries. Under such circumstances, individual countries could well be encouraged to develop their national policies on China (Chidaushe, 2007:111). These policies should be firm and confident.

Rwanda's government has been accelerating its policy on localising the industrial sector. Its 'Made in Rwanda' initiative aims to increase the export of more locally made products worldwide. In Kigali, a Special Economic Zone was established, which also hosts a Chinese-owned textile factory. As Jarvis (2018) reports, this Chinese investment and industry knowledge have helped to develop a state-of-the-art textile factory that manufactures clothing for both the international and national markets. According to Jolly Rubagiza, deputy director general of the Rwanda Management Institute,

> the Chinese presence in Rwanda is not very much visible in everyday business as it may be in other East African countries. Only a few restaurants and retail businesses, but still limited. Most of the Chinese are into road and building construction, therefore, Rwandan people do not seem to be that grieved.[5]

Prospects for changing negative perceptions?

Who is expected to change these negative perceptions after all? First, as the four cases have shown, there are similarities and apparent differences at the same time among different localities. Therefore, their

4 Interview recorded on 24 March 2015, in Kigali.
5 Interview recorded by the author on 21 May 2018.

perceptions differ about the 'other', in our discussion, the 'other' being 'the Chinese'. Second, to provide an effective response, both government and individual contexts must be examined. From the Chinese government's perspective, when African civil society organisations point at worrisome developments regarding either social or environmental impact, China is often quick to react and offer to fund a 'social good' such as building a hospital or providing financial assistance towards solving the perceived problem (Rebol, 2010:173). It is also true that China's general approach towards African partnerships is to offer 'package deals', including infrastructure development, financial aid or developmental assistance. With this, they incorporate soft power elements such as a Confucius Institute and a quota of scholarships; a new stadium; a hospital and/or several new schools, all for a longer term mining concession or large-scale investment project. At the individual level, local African businesses can tap into and learn from their Chinese counterparts' business networks (Bräutigam, 2003:447). For African actors, such relations can help to achieve better and more enhanced connectivity. African networks can take advantage of specific kinds of global trade links to form very helpful connections with networks in other parts of the world (Bräutigam, 2003:467) – in our discussion, via a dense network of Chinese businesses and individuals. For African governments, the development of 'African agency' is a key task to decide upon the best pragmatic deals while managing healthy competition between many external actors. Amid rising concerns caution needs to be taken to ensure that China is not another version of an imperialist state (Chidaushe, 2007:113). For the individual Chinese, to build up and run a profitable business is the core objective. However, their behaviour, the relationships they form with Africans, the way they conduct their business, their respect or lack thereof for the law, for local customs, for the environment, and, above all, for the people, will do more to determine China's image (French, 2015:6).

Conclusion

Africa's prospects may be bright if there is proper connectivity into global structures, there are confidently managed societies, with improved leadership, and there is better governance. Many of the continent's countries have been fostering complex and intensive relationships with China, which have continuously deepened and strengthened since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949

(Stewart and Li, 2014:24). China has a clear and well-articulated strategic policy towards the continent, where countries partnering with China have yet to translate their recognition of China's importance into explicit China strategies (Omondi, 2018, referring to a 2017 McKinsey report). African governments obviously welcome China-built infrastructure projects. The question frequently asked, however, will stay with us: Can Africa decide what the best option is, and under what circumstances any such development should take place? As Su (2017) underscored in a piece in *The Diplomat*, African states are likely to require more than just portions of their limited budgets to complete repayment. We may not agree with Su's view on 'a brand-new type of neocolonialism', but we can also point out African vulnerability, which is – in these cases in relation to Chinese infrastructure loans – which surely escalate African dependence on China. The four cases from East Africa presented some challenging scenarios for both African governments and local communities. Although the much-needed railway connections, together with the new ports and additional infrastructure developments are all part of China's comprehensive 'Belt and Road' vision, they also enhance Africa's participation in global processes. Many lessons, however, need to be learnt about how to manage disappointment and frustration, and how to demand proper behaviour from any external actor on African soil. So far, the BRI has not paid attention to such 'soft' requirements. The recent eastern African examples will most probably push the Chinese government to consider these aspects, too. China might become increasingly reactive to avoid being associated with negative headlines (Rebol, 2010:174–175) and compel its business entities and citizens to 'behave'.

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