

CHINA BELT ROAD INITIATIVE AND AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT CRISIS

OJO OLUWOLE SIMEON

**Department of International Relations and Diplomacy
Newgate University Minna
Niger State, Nigeria**

And

MFON EKPOOTU (PhD)

**Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria**

ABSTRACT

This paper examines China Belt Road Initiative (CBRI) and its implications on African development challenges. The paper's method of analysis is qualitative and historical, employing descriptive and analytical tools to arrive at the conclusion. The initiative, developed by the Chinese government in its relations with its allies, is generally popular in the developing world, especially in countries with infrastructural deficits, and a shortage of resources to overcome them. It emphasizes five areas of cooperation with Third World countries: coordinating development policies and forging infrastructure, strengthening investment and trade relations. Pertinent questions however are: To what extent will this initiative engender development among the participating countries in Africa? What are the contending issues and benefits arising from such an initiative? Using the dependency theoretical construct, the paper argues and also demonstrates that the current trend in CBRI is laden with Chinese strategic interest and collaboration as well as mutual cooperation among participating countries. In Africa, this initiative is seen as a bold attempt by African governments at connecting African countries with age-long Chinese economic interests. The paper concludes that the CBRI initiative is China's economic escalation strategy and development expansion opportunity programme that will drive business and investment fortunes for China.

Keywords: China Belt Road Initiative (CBRI), Africa, Development.

Introduction

Road development has always been critical to economic development from ancient times to the present age. Its pivotal role derives from the significance of road infrastructure in facilitating the transportation of people, goods and services from one place to another. Arising from the foregoing, the importance of road transport systems in the development of societies is adequately emphasized by scholars. For instance, Ojo and James-Iduma have argued that;

The significance of transport system to human development cannot be over-emphasized. Transport system is very essential to the functioning of any society whether primitive or advanced...it is a truism that transportation system has inevitably influenced human civilization and societal development...¹

Against the backdrop of the significance of road networks, the governments of developed and underdeveloped nations as well as the international community has shown interest in developing road infrastructure critical in the advancement of the society. This is exemplified in the construction of both local, national and trans-border road networks across the globe.

In Africa, in the quest to connect new territories through physical human movements precipitated by the instinct of engendering development, the volume of road construction (both locally and internationally) has drastically increased. During the early period of human civilization, African societies constructed roads to link new communities and settlements facilitating trade contacts and other forms of inter-group relations. African road networks in the pre-colonial period served as avenues through which local trade and later international trade through the Sahara was conducted. During the era of colonial rule, national governments of colonized African territories embarked on aggressive construction of roads to link areas of economic interest across Africa. Although these colonial road networks have been criticized by pundits as infrastructures of exploitation,² they have nonetheless contributed to the development of respective African countries. In the contemporary period, the growing nature of the interconnectedness of sovereign states of the world has encouraged the construction of national and trans-border roads hence, the China Belt Road Initiative (CBRI).

Against the backdrop of the foregoing, this paper interrogates the impact of CBRI on African infrastructural development. The rationale for this study is lack of knowledge on the implication of CBRI on the development of participating countries especially African countries. The objective of the study is to appraise the implications of CBRI on the African development crisis. In order to achieve this objective, the paper is structured into six sections. Section one which is introduction underpins the rationale for the study. Section two clears some conceptual cobwebs arising from the analysis in this paper and adopt a workable theory that serves as frame of analysis. Section four reviews the origin of China Belt Road Initiative which section five interrogates the implications of CBRI on Africa's development. Section six concludes the discussion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concept used in this paper is the concept of development, and provides an essential backdrop for understanding the issue under scrutiny. The concept of development is almost as old as civilization. Its extensive use in western societies from Greco-Roman civilizations to the late 19th century as a generic construct that designates the most varied aspects related to humanity's well-being.³ As such, the concept suffers with a lot of conceptual explanations and debate that an acceptance of any is a matter of deliberate choice of a scholar to suit a line of argument. Given that development has been variously described and defined, we will not allow the debate on the idea definition of the concept to detain us here. Rather, we will adopt a workable definition of the concept to serve as a peg for us to hang our wares of analysis. Hence, development is conceptualized here to mean progressive change in infrastructural development, health facilities, and other social amenities that make life more meaningful to citizens of a given nation for a number of years. This conceptualization brings to the fore, the issue of sustainability in the development index. Sustainable development is defined here as a transformation process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction

of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are reconciled and reinforces present and future potential, in order to attend to needs and future aspirations.⁴

Although there are a lot of theories that have been advanced in explaining the development of countries, this paper is anchored on the dependency theoretical construct. The theory emerged in 1950s from the research of economic commission of Latin America and the Caribbean ECLAC.⁵ One of the leading apostles of the dependency paradigm, Raul Presbich, proposed that in order to create conditions of development within a country, it is imperative to control the monetary exchange rate with the government placing emphasis on fiscal rather than monetary policy; to promote a more effective governmental role in terms of national development; to create enabling environment for investment, giving a preferential role to national capitals; to allow the entrance of capital in accordance to planned national plans for development; and to develop import substitution protection of internal production through quotas and tariffs for import, among others.⁶

The dependency theory in its intent and purpose de-emphasized the dependence of developing economies on developed nations. The theory encouraged the development of viable structures that could sustain and improve economies of developing nations rather than depending on externally induced development. The theory articulates that the condition of underdevelopment is precisely the result of the integration of Third World Countries into Western capitalist construct dominated by metropolitan countries of the northern hemisphere.⁷ They argue that underdevelopment in Third World countries can be linked to the expansion of the world capitalist system.⁸ It is from this perspective that this paper analyzes and sees Chinese Belt Road Initiative as an externally induced development that will undermine development in the continent or, at best, compound Africa's development challenges.

Overview of China Belt Road Initiative

The origin of the China Belt Road Initiative (BRI) can be traced to the visit of the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, to Kazakhstan in 2013 where he announced a proposal for a "Silk Road Economic Belt." In South East Asia later that year, Xi proposed a "21-Century Maritime Silk Road." The idea harks back to the fact that for more than a millennium the Silk Road served as the world's first "trade super high-way." The initiative emphasizes five areas of cooperation with Third World countries: (1) Coordinating development policies; (2) forging infrastructure and facilities networks; (3) strengthening investment and trade relations; (4) enhancing financial cooperation; and (5) deepening social and cultural exchanges.⁹ This initiative is to cover underdeveloped countries of South East Asia, Latin America, and Africa. While part of the Chinese effort on BRI is aimed at these specific corridors, in fact, the programme is global and not directed at any specific geography. Latin America is deeply involved, as are all parts of Africa. The main objective is for China to lend money to developing countries to construct infrastructure in transport, power, water supply, and other sectors.¹⁰

China's second BRI meeting in Beijing in April 2019 hosted 37 states and over 5,000 delegation members; whereas 125 states along-with over 40 global organizations have already associated themselves with Initiative.¹¹ Reflected numbers, on one side, indicate the recognition of aspiration amongst emergent states to imitate the China's economic model and

perception that it could offer a valuable course towards international trade and industry development, with peace, prosperity, and security within developing states.¹² The 'Belt and Road' initiative is an ambitious venture that foresees connecting the whole Euro-Asia, along with peripheral South, South-East, and West Asian regions, European, Latin-American and the African regions.¹³ Ever since 2013, mass media has envisaged varying BRI maps along with unreliable signals of African state's membership in the initiatives, though majority of the maps represent the course from Indian-Ocean to African states namely Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, Egypt and Eritrea unless joins the Mediterranean.¹⁴

Implications of CBRI on Africa's Development

China's Belt and Road Initiative (CBRI), as it appeared and endorsed is an economic escalation approach and growth expansion prospects, however besides various opportunities, offers numerous challenges, demanding way forward. Fore mostly, akin to any other transnational inventiveness, the CBRI will entail intelligent diplomatic strategies to deal with beneficial bilateral relationships, and carefully executed policies to expand efficiently. However, many African states are facing regular political instability and uncertainty that would significantly manipulate the panning parameters, policies, implementations, and outcomes yields from the initiative. As a matter of fact, Africa's political instability and diplomatic governances' issues, including corrupt and ineffective measures to implement restructuring and development expansions offer another major challenge, causing socio-political and socio-economic pressures (in addition to, in few regions, the potential threats of insecurity issues), that carry scores of uncertainties to the initiative.¹⁵

CBRI investment projects are estimated to add over USD 1 trillion of outward funding for foreign infrastructure over the 10-year period from 2017.¹⁶ While new vehicles have been formed to help with the financing, such as the Silk Road Fund, most of the Chinese funding for these projects will actually come from state-directed development and commercial banks.¹⁷ Because the Belt and Road is a Chinese initiative, it is important to evaluate its implication on Africa's development. It is important to bear in mind that any development policy developed from the outside of any given country as can be discerned from the theoretical exposition in this paper may not be sustainable. Given Africa's experience in the past, it is imperative that the CBR should be viewed in the context of its negative implication on engendering sustainable development in Africa.

One of the implications of CBRI on Africa's development is considered on the backdrop of the influx of Chinese products in Africa thereby inhibiting local manufactures. With the benefit of this road network on the sideline of China, it will be easy for the giant of Asia to dominate Africa's market in a short possible time. It should be borne in mind that the Chinese economy and general social ideology emanating from this initiative with Africa will encourage the influx of more Chinese products such as Chinese drinks, foods, dresses, implements, movies, artworks, entertainment, etiquette and the taste that will gradually replace indigenous choices and equivalents. For example, Chinese finished products will replace indigenous types. This will discourage indigenous efforts at developing modern technologies of production because Chinese products will be readily available for consumption. This will further create trade imbalance between Africa and China with more benefit on the Chinese side as is currently the case. Presently, record have it that;

Currently, China is Africa's largest country trade partner - accounting for 16.3% of Africa's total trade in 2015 and 11.9% in 2016... China's foreign trade balance is positive. According to the statistics by China Customs, in 2017, the value of Chinese-African trade amounted to US\$170 billion, and China's exports to Africa reached US\$94.74 billion; China's imports from Africa reached US\$75.26 billion...The structure of trade is not advantageous for Africa...¹⁸

China's infrastructural interest in Africa can simply be a result of her trade interest with African nations. It should be reemphasized that trade, most especially external trade, around which wealth revolved, determined the interest of a state more than any other factor in international relations.¹⁹ The point to emphasize is that in the end, Africa will continue to remain a dependent economy which is detrimental to balancing Africa's share in the global economy. In other words, Africa's contribution to the world economy through trade will recede more drastically.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that Africa's infrastructural needs far exceed the current and planned investments under the CBRI. Addressing these needs will therefore remain an essential priority of development agenda of participating African countries. In particular, regions not lying within the current CBRI corridors will also require increased investment in infrastructure to support economic development and avoid the widening of geographical divides. There is some risk that investment in other critical sectors, such as water and sanitation, could be under-addressed in these countries. It is also critical that investments in low-carbon, sustainable and high-quality infrastructure will be given adequate support elsewhere than Africa. In broad stroke, the initiative will simply shift excess capacity and less environmentally-friendly energy sources to African countries with little net gain. Again, the maintenance, rehabilitation, and upgrading of existing infrastructure, since Africa suffers total infrastructural deficit, in order to benefit from the initiative will be tasking.

Again, the CBRI initiative should be viewed by African governments with suspicion given the country's experience during colonial days. During the period of colonialism, colonial powers developed certain road infrastructures to link up with their areas of strategic economic interest. This was not done in order to bring development to the colonized territories but to facilitate the exploitation of Africa's rich resources for onward exportation to Europe. This explains why pundits like Njoku and several other African economic historians were quick to dismiss it as the infrastructures of exploitation.²⁰ The export drive associated with colonialism did not arise by accident. Rather, it was preceded by deliberate efforts of developing this road infrastructure in order to exploit resources demanded by the developing European industries. In the case of China, it could be that the initiative is a deliberate effort to dominate Africa's market with Chinese products as well as to facilitate the exploitation Africa's resources as the project is to cut across only few areas with Chinese strategic interest.

More elaborately, it should be recalled that historians, political scientists, cultural anthropologists and the commentators on African relations with the West have often written about how Europe underdeveloped Africa.²¹ While these allegations are cogent, given Africa's unsavory history of slave trade, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, the growing influence this Chinese initiative might have on African countries may raise a specter if not addressed urgently, might lead future scholars to grumble again, this time about how China

underdeveloped Africa. The current trend in Sino-Africa relations generally and through the CBRI, to be candid, is laden with Chinese strategic interest,²² rather than genuine development as was the case with Europe during the era of colonialism.

Finally, the share of African workers in Chinese infrastructure projects through the CBRI scheme on the continent will be low. This is because during the implementation of the scheme, Chinese multinational companies will dominate the construction project thereby making African mere onlookers than participators. This is given that African countries lack indigenous companies and expertise in construction like their Chinese counterparts. Indeed, the giving that Chinese companies will be importing laborers from China has made the whole project, like the China's unconditional aid, to be seen as the "devil's gifts" – giving in one hand and taking it back on the other, as Osondu puts it.²³ More worrisome is the fact that this project if successfully carry out may result to Africa's partial loss of political sovereignty since the rail network is to be controlled by China due to the fact she holds the economic war-chest of the project. It should be reiterated that like the assertion of Nkrumah as cited by Odeh inferred, in any bilateral or multilateral relations, a country that holds economic power controls the political power.²⁴

Conclusion

From the analysis in this paper, it is pertinent to stress that Africa is facing the crisis of underdevelopment and it is even more profound in the area of infrastructure development. Indeed, the continent has remained largely underdeveloped despite the presence of huge mineral and human resources. More worrisome is the fact that several decades after the end of colonialism, most parts of Africa is still fighting with problems such as high poverty rate, lack of basic infrastructural facilities in all sectors of the economy, unemployment, high mortality rate, political instability and insecurity of lives and property.²⁵ Against the background of Africa's development crisis, it is pertinent that policies and programmes aimed at bringing development to the continent are carefully scrutinized hence this study. It is imperative that African policymakers should be meticulous in scrutinizing policies and programmes that are perceived to supports the development. From the analysis in this paper, it suffice to say that the CBRI initiative is a policy that is not meant to develop participating countries per se but to facilitate China's global expansion. This paper sees the initiative as China's economic escalation strategy and development expansion opportunity programme that will drive business and investment fortunes for China.

Notes

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16. This figure is the most often quoted from an adding up of projects already invested and foreshadowed for the next 10 years, using their own staff and expert consultants. For elaborate details visit www.pwc.com/gx/en/growth-markets-center/assets/pdf/china-new-silk-route.pdf.
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18. F. Kaczmarek "African Dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative." *Przegląd Strategiczny*, Iss.12, (2019), 150 – 151.
19. B.M. Atime and K.T. Akange "International Relations in Pre-Colonial Africa South of the Sahara." *VUNA Journal of History and International Relations*, Vol.6, No.2, (2022), 108.
20. Professor O.N. Njoku is Nigeria's economic historian. This argument is captured in his pioneer book on Nigeria's economic history in the 19th and 20th centuries. For elaborate details consult O.N. Njoku *Economic History of Nigeria in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2001).

21. See for instance W. Rodney *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (Abuja: Panaf Publishing Inc, 2005).
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