African Educational Research Journal
Vol. 11(4), pp. 651-664, December 2023
DOI: 10.30918/AERJ.114.23.105
ISSN: 2354-2160
Full Length Research Paper

China-Africa cooperation and challenges related to the belt and road initiative

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Accepted 7 December, 2023

ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents a new vision of three-dimensional international cooperation and relations that break not only the regional development model of scattered distribution but also strengthen connectivity and economic collaboration between China and participating nations. Domestically, it runs through eastern, central and western parts of China, linking major coastal port cities and extending to ASEAN countries. Overseas, it embraces Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia via land and connects Europe and Africa via sea, further forming a circular economic zone linking sea and land. This article reviews the literature on the role of BRI in promoting economic cooperation among countries along these routes. Similarly, it examines criticisms leveled against the BRI and clarifies misconceptions embedded in such criticisms. With specific reference to Africa, the paper analyses the benefits inherent in the BRI and critically examines the challenges that may confront the Initiative. The article equally takes into cognizance the inevitability of future challenges and frictions that may occur between China and Africa and, therefore, suggests a co-development model that could be used to ameliorate, if not solve, these challenges. In conclusion, the paper recommended that despite the high risks and existing threats, the BRI can be implemented successfully with both China and Africa achieving a balance of interest as well as long-term and mutual benefits.

Keywords: Belt and road initiative, balance of interest, benefits, challenges, China, Africa, China-Africa cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could be aptly described as a new Chinese global vision inspired by the ancient Silk Road (an ancient trade route that linked China and the West and also connected Europe and North Africa via land and sea routes). Throughout history, Eurasia was successfully connected with communication routes and paths of trade, which gradually connected to form what could be described today as the Silk Road routes across both land and sea, along which silk and many other goods or commodities were exchanged between people from across the globe. Also, the constant movement and mixing of populations brought about the transmission of knowledge, Science, arts, literature, technologies, ideas, cultures, and beliefs, which had profound impacts on the histories and civilizations of not only Europe, Asia, and Africa but also other continents in the world.

The BRI was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping when he delivered speeches on two occasions (President Xi's Speech, 2015). The first one was made at Nazarbayev University during his visit to Kazakhstan on September 7, 2013, when President Xi proposed building a new Silk Road Economic Belt by promoting policy coordination, road connectivity, unimpeded trade, currency convertibility and strengthened people-to-people ties. Moreover, the signing of a memorandum of understanding between China and the African Union in January 2015, which plans to connect the African continent's 54 countries through modern highways, airports, and high-speed railways, is a way of connecting the entire continent to maritime Silk Road and Europe (Tukić, 2018).

According to the available statistics, the total trade volume between China and its BRI participating countries was more than 6 trillion US dollars in the 2013 to 2018 period, during which more than 244,000 jobs were created for the locals. China's direct foreign investment in those countries has exceeded 80 billion dollars till now. China's imports from and exports to BRI participating countries totalled 300 billion dollars in the first quarter of 2019, up 7.8% year-on-year and occupying 28.6% of the country's total foreign trade volume in the period (Peters, 2019). The massive infrastructure project is designed to develop the seamless flow of capital, goods, services, and cultural exchanges between Asia and the rest of the world by promoting further market integration in the region and by forging new ties among the nations and cultures that comprise the new Silk Road. The original intent focused on fostering development opportunities in five areas with a planned completion date of 2049 (Khanna, 2019). In this vein, re-invigorating the maritime transport link is also at its core. This large infrastructure development project is expected to expand trade, investment, and connectivity significantly. For instance, it was envisaged that the BRI could involve as many as 60 countries, roughly 32% of the global GDP, 39% of global merchandise trade, and 63% of the world's population (Huang, 2016).

Significantly, after the 1990s, Africa became many countries' favourite destination for foreign direct investment (FDI). China, in particular, began investing heavily in Africa (Tewari, 2013). This has been perceived by the Western nations as a severe threat, leading to their renewed interest in Africa. Consequently, these major investing countries – China, Britain, France, and the US – see themselves as competitors in the African markets (Sautman and Hairong, 2007: 78). In 2006, the Beijing Summit of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) set the new rules of the game of trade, popularly known as the Beijing Consensus (BS) – a strategy put forward to counter the concept of Washington Consensus (WS).

As a matter of fact, at the Johannesburg Summit and the 6th Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held on 3 to 5 December 2015, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced several measures to boost cooperation with Africa in the coming three years. The proposed package aims to improve the business environment and support industrialization in African countries. The proposed Chinese assistance was intended to help African countries break the three development bottlenecks of backward infrastructure, talent shortage, and inadequate funds, accelerate industrialization and agricultural modernization, and realize independent and sustainable development (Soumaré, Gohou and Kouadio, 2016). Based on the dynamics of this cooperation, the allocation of Chinese foreign direct investment towards infrastructure financing is expected to continue and grow even more in the coming years.

Over the past decade, Africa became a particularly fertile terrain for this kind of win-win economic cooperation instrument (cooperation that results in mutual benefits for all the concerned parties). This is mostly due to inherent complementarities stemming from Africa's massive infrastructure deficit and endemic scarcity of capital, combined with a large pool of underdeveloped resources and assets. Most of the existing infrastructure in the continent dates from colonial times, a large part of which has been severely damaged by internal wars or neglect. Meanwhile, the Belt and Road Initiative is China's way of addressing the infrastructure gap. Africa, with its abundant natural resources, a wealth of infrastructure opportunities and convenient location, is a perfect match for China's global infrastructure plan, which sets out to create new land and sea trade routes to ensure energy supplies, increase foreign trade, promote Chinese enterprise and products, a necessary step for economic growth in Africa and in particular industrialization. This is widely seen as one of China's major overseas and economic policy goals, which is likely to affect Africa significantly (Benjamin, 2018). Be that as it may, China's phenomenal rise to become the second largest economy in the world after the United States intersected with the 'Africa Rising' story between 2002 and 2013, when six of the world's fastest-growing economies were in Africa – Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Mozambique, and Rwanda. Africa's rise was driven by a global commodity boom, especially demand from China and India for oil and other commodities, and net resources inflows in the post-HIPC era (Akyeampong and Hippolyte, 2019).

Therefore, the other sections of this paper are devoted to evaluating some of the criticisms hitherto levelled against BRI by the "policy cum economic experts,"; clarifying the misconceptions brought about by the untoward criticisms, examining some of the challenges that may likely emanate from the Sino-African relations with respect to the BRI Initiative; suggesting ways by which the challenges and envisaged future frictions can be resolved between China and Africa and in the final analysis, analysing the mutual or symbiotic benefits that all the participants could derive from the Initiative.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CRITICISMS, REBUTTALS AND CLARIFICATIONS OF MISCONCEPTIONS

Since the launch of the BRI Initiative by the Chinese government in 2013, opinions have been divided over the merits and demerits of the Initiative. There have been a series of misconceptions about the Initiative. Even though the Initiative aims at economic cooperation without any geopolitical intention, there are voices from the international community that the Initiative is part of China's expansionist geopolitical strategy targeting its neighbouring countries. In response to this, some choices of words for publicity of the Initiative are not suitable. For example, military metaphors such as pasturing (vanguard), qiaotoubao (bridgehead), Zhan Lue (strategy), and zhongyaojiedian (vital nodes), and other expressions that have strong military connotations have later become the buzzwords used to describe the Initiative.

Washington's ambivalent attitude to BRI, either as an exercise in debt trap (a neo-colonial diplomacy that will last) or a severe threat to China's quest for global hegemony marked by a new Cold War and ongoing trade war has been severely amplified (Khanna, 2019). However, the BRI also offers the West opportunities for business and trade while also providing the chance to steer BRI countries away from excessive debt dependence toward a new multipolar politics, which could be predicated on Afro-Eurasian development that may lead to sustainable global growth and development in the public good.

The above provides the context for many observers of the BRI Initiative. A widely held view is that the BRI represents another major expansion of Chinese economic power in the Asian region and beyond. For instance, it is acknowledged that the BRI is invariably poised to become the Chinese leadership's top foreign policy priority (Yu, 2017; Nadège, 2017). Also, the Initiative had hitherto been described as "the most ambitious and all-encompassing economic development program in human history" (Gal, 2017) and "the most ambitious global connectivity project ever launched by China" (Chatterjee and Kumar, 2017). Perhaps it might be political to underscore that this expansionist theory is a far cry from the reality of China's historical and contemporary political economy.

However, in recent times, when the global economy became lacklustre again, the Initiative was labelled by many Western media as a new version of the Marshall Plan. It is pertinent at this juncture to show some distinctions between the former and the latter. For instance, the Initiative differs from the Marshall Plan in five ways (Wang Yiwei, 2015). First, they differ in the background of time. The Marshall Plan was ideologically driven, given that it aimed to boost capitalist economies and prevent countries like Greece and Italy from being ideologically taken and controlled by the communists and also, in an effort to confront the Soviet Union and other communist countries. Instead, the BRI inherits and carries forward the Silk Road Spirit of peaceful cooperation, openness, inclusiveness, mutual benefits, and win-win results (unlike the zero-sum results (parasitic and one-sided benefits), which could be aptly regarded as the hallmarks of capitalist economies). It welcomes all countries, as well as regional and international organizations.

Second, they differ in intentions. The United States proposed the Marshall Plan to help rebuild the European economy to contain the Soviet Union, thus grabbing the European market. The Plan had stringent strings attached, thereby excluding all the pro-Soviet-Union European countries. Even the American allies had to accept the terms offered by the United States unconditionally. But the Initiative is an open platform, in which China provides public goods for the international community. Guided by the principles of wide consultation, joint contributions and shared benefits from all the participating members, the Initiative (BRI) advocates a new phase or form of international relations and regional cooperation in the 21st century. It promotes the common development of the participating countries along the routes through friendly and equally-footed economic and cultural exchanges.

Third, they differ in members. The Marshall Plan, with its members being the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France and other European countries, doled out aid to the second world instead of socialist countries and the third world. Meanwhile, the BRI includes mainly countries along the ancient Silk Road in land and sea, extending to other countries, mainly developing countries, emerging countries, and developed countries alike.

Fourth, they differ in content. The United States supplied materials, money, labour, and political support to Western Europe through the Marshall Plan. In return, the recipient countries used the financial aid to buy American products, remove trade barriers for the U.S., and scrape or relax restrictions on foreign exchange. As a result, the United States became a big exporter to Europe, and the U.S. dollars became the main currency for settlement. The United States emerged as a post-war dominant financial power. Hence, unlike the unilateral Marshall Plan, the BRI is a platform where countries work together on investment projects and infrastructure and share high-quality industrial capacity and the fruits of cooperation, policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties.

Fifth, they differ in approaches. The United States was the only economic power that provided aid to Western European countries for their economic recovery under the Marshall Plan. In contrast, China was a proposer of the Initiative, and all the countries along the routes were enjoined to participate in it. The Marshall Plan divided Europe, pushed Europe into the Cold War, and put the world on the brink of a nuclear war (Jianbo, 2015). However, the Belt and Road Initiative featured peace and development, win-win cooperation, and mutual benefits. Its purpose is to get countries richer and more closely connected.

Another criticism against the BRI is that the Initiative replicates the Thucydides Trap. Thucydides Trap proposes that an emerging country is bound to challenge the ruling power in particular and the existing international order in general. The ruling power is also sure to respond to the growing threat from an emerging power. Hence, a war is inevitable. This concept originated from the Athenian sage Thucydides, who predicted that rivalry and conflicts between a rising power and a ruling power often ended up in a war. But the fact is that believers of the concept equate the way the world goes about with the "Law of Jungle". They think the existing "king of the jungle" (the ruling power) is sure to fight back when it is challenged by another strong beast (the rising power). Such a way of thinking does not hold water because the essence of the Initiative is to enhance economic development globally by giving room for cooperation and mutual understanding.

Parts of the Western criticisms of BRI are a push for Chinese dominance in global affairs with a China-centred trading network and a push for greater geopolitical influence for China. In modern times, rising Western countries, with strong sea power and through land grabs, invaded, exploited, and enslaved other countries to secure resources, thereby sowing the seeds of hatred. The argument is not about naming and shaming Western countries, some of which are faithfully trading with Africa as opposed to attempts at recolonizing the African continent through unbalanced terms of exchange. The real argument is about Africa strategizing before entering into intensive trade negotiations with all its partners and being able to independently and objectively select which foreign partner to do what for the benefit of African citizens. China's emerging relations (and its culmination under the BRI initiative) with Africa offer such possibilities that could serve as a stepping point for Africa to try and gain a bit more perks for the betterment of its economy and citizens (Mbaidjol, 2019).

Other analysts equally adduced that since overcapacity in many Chinese industries has motivated Chinese investments in many infrastructure projects in other countries, those projects may need to reflect what those countries need, leading to waste or misallocation of resources (*Financial Times,* 2017). Unwise investments may burden some countries with debt (*Financial Express,* 2018). The most critical view of China's BRI is that China engages in a "colonial race" through "capital" and "coercion" both to secure sources for the Chinese economy and to seek naval base rights in Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Seychelles, the Indian Ocean region (Dos Santos Alves, Vicente and Salum, 2017).

BRI: NEW PHASE FOR CO-DEVELOPING REGIONS AND MUTUAL BENEFITS FOR THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Several African statesmen have acknowledged the presence of China in the African continent. Referring to their relations with China, Senegal President MackySall, argued that he could not say that there is exploitation of natural resources in the relationship between China and Senegal (Xinhua, 2014). Sall maintained that the reality of the situation was that cooperation between China and Africa is mutually beneficial (Xinhua, 2014). China is different as a donor and strategic partner because it is also a fast-growing developing country, and its development success (explicitly, its rapid economic transformation and its reduction of poverty) gives it great credibility as a partner with relevant recent experience. It can be plausibly argued that building a new type of international relations underpinned by win-win cooperation is one of the strategic blueprints of the Initiative.

The BRI, originating from the ancient Silk Road, reflects the pursuit of values of peace, concord, and harmony. It is a crucial national strategy and an important measure for China to practice the concept of win-win cooperation. Indeed, the Initiative shakes off the outdated logic of the rise of traditional major countries through the agency of economic and cultural colonization. It tends to follow a new path of peaceful rise, oppose hegemonism and power politics, and fundamentally reject the old belief held by Western countries that a country that grows strong is bound to seek hegemony. The Belt and Road Initiative also serves as a roadmap, charting a course for China and the participating countries to work together for win-win cooperation and achieve common development and prosperity. Therefore, the Initiative strives to improve infrastructure, trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds across more than 70 Asian, African, and European countries. And its digital dimensions are far-reaching, including fiber optic cables, 5G networks, satellites, and devices that connect to these systems (China’s Digital Silk Road, 2020).

Infrastructure is a key to future sustainable economic development, and it is considered a positive factor for the efficient allocation of resources, greater productivity enhancements, and acceleration of economic growth. The availability and the quality of infrastructure can determine a country’s level of development. Countries with poor infrastructure often struggle to develop, and this has been the case in Africa. Many African states have old and poor infrastructure, so they do not have a foundation for economic growth and development. Lack of investment in infrastructure has been a challenge that most African countries face. Lack of financial resources has made investing in infrastructure difficult in Africa (Mlambo, 2012). Through infrastructure-for-resources loans, China has made a substantial contribution towards the provision of 'hard infrastructure' across the continent, ranging from roads, railroads, ports, airports, and power generation and distribution grids to pipelines and refineries. These are making an important input towards revamping Africa's transportation network and power supply and, as such, contributing towards a more conducive business environment and unlocking Africa's wealth and, indirectly, to poverty reduction in the continent.

The extension of infrastructure-for-resources loans to African countries enables Beijing to promote the expansion of its construction companies abroad and simultaneously access strategic resources. These deals, targeting primarily resource-rich countries, are often guaranteed by long-term resource supply and have even facilitated access to resource assets in the borrowing country for Chinese state companies in several cases. Moreover, Chinese infrastructure-for-resources loans allow countries with no creditworthiness in the international market to contract loans against resources output, thereby allowing them to circumvent IMF and World Bank "transparency requirements. Raw materials and fuels account for almost 80% of total goods imported by China from the African economies. As China becomes a major importer in the world commodity market, African countries with immense natural resources can increase export volumes, mitigate export volatility, and enjoy higher export prices. This might increase public revenue for the exporting governments to finance social programs, develop infrastructure, improve education and health systems, and pursue pro-poor policies.

This opportunity must be fully exploited and maximized if Africa is to extricate itself from the periphery and take center stage in the global economy. For example, Africa must diversify its economy by identifying strategic niches and insisting on local beneficiation, negotiating better terms of trade at a bilateral and multilateral level, and using its natural resources endowment as leverage in political and economic negotiations with international partners. However, for this to be effective, Africa must adopt a more coordinated and integrated approach in its dealings, whether at the bilateral or multilateral level. Unlike China and other major economies of this world, backed up by strong political and economic clout, Africa's ability and capacity for leverage is rather limited (Rocha, 2007). After all, China would gain more from a united Africa than from a balkanized continent.

China has become the first external partner in the financing of infrastructure investment across the region, a trend that is accelerating the growth rate of its stock of investment within the region. Yuan Wang and Uwe Wissenbach, in this issue, examine the case of the Chinese-financed and built Standard Gauge Railway project in Kenya. One of the largest single investments carried out by China in Africa is the financing of a hydropower plant worth US$5.8 billion in Mambila, Nigeria (ICA, 2018).

This state-supported commercial strategy (that originated from the 'Go Out' policy) that entails leveraging bilateral diplomatic negotiations with African states to create business opportunities for Chinese companies and entrepreneurs has incrementally allowed China to become an economic powerhouse across a host of African commercial sectors and thus on the continent as a whole. It is thus of no surprise to learn that bilateral trade volumes between China and the African continent, for instance, amounted to approximately US$170 billion in 2017 (Elliot, Zhu and Wang, 2019). One of the reasons behind Chinese commercial success in Africa has been the willingness of Chinese companies to operate in parts of the continent that some of its competitors have deemed too risky or insufficiently cost-effective, either from a security or an investment perspective (Benjamin, 2018).

Meanwhile, for the Chinese firms investing in Africa, improved economic conditions of most African nations, rich natural resources, and large potential markets will all contribute to location advantage (Chun, 2013). Africa's motive for increased trade, infrastructure development, institutional environment, and increased investment relationships with the Chinese will also add to the internationalization advantage for China's firms running a business in Africa, which is part of the aims of the BRI. Critics of the plan tend to view the BRI as merely a trade route for oil and minerals. African natural resources help power factories across China and provide the minerals and metals for manufacturing. Indeed, the top 10 Chinese imports from Africa are raw materials. For instance, oil-rich Angola is the top African exporter to China, and 99% of its exports to China are petroleum products (Benjamin, 2018).

The socio-economic development level of African nations is not a bottleneck preventing them from joining the Initiative. On the contrary, the engagement of Africa with the Initiative will further strengthen China–Africa economic cooperation. For instance, in a survey of 54,000 individuals spanning Africa by Afro-barometer, it was found that 63% of respondents believed China was either a somewhat or very positive influence on their countries (Afrobarometer, 2016).

SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF BRI

It is significant to note that the BRI, at its core, contains a large infrastructure development effort that can facilitate higher trade and integration, leading to greater overall national and international welfare. Meanwhile, the challenges that African states face in infrastructure development include but are not limited to access to funding, inadequate regulatory frameworks, internal capacity limitations, political instability, policy incoherence (about regional integration), reported corruption, and a debilitating shortage of capacity and skills

(PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), 2014). However, apart from these, other challenges could arise to militate against the full realization of the objectives of the Initiative.

Challenges of Mal-infrastructuralism

Africa has largely been unable to attract adequate investment to close its infrastructure gap. Over the years, infrastructure development has mainly been financed through open tender projects, aid, foreign direct investment (FDI), and direct trade-financed initiatives. Almost half of all infrastructure projects have been financed by aid or loans (New Partnership for Africa's Development, 2012). It has, however, become obvious over the years that funding from Africa's traditional Western development partners is inadequate for closing Africa's infrastructure gap.

Over the past decade, China has invested tremendously in infrastructure development, resulting in dramatic social and cultural changes in rural and urban regions. It has also promoted an infrastructural development model beyond its borders as part of an increasingly outward-looking foreign policy and as part of the strategy to foster the realization of the Chinese dreams of BRI. Nonetheless, the rapid completion of infrastructure projects in Africa and the use of the majority of Chinese labour in the implementation of such projects translates into very little technology transfer, job creation, or capacity building in African countries along the project cycle. This has been a thorny issue in infrastructure development assistance from China to African countries. It needs to be addressed, and Africa's numerous new strategic visions on infrastructure development must be properly synchronized with each other and linked to other global infrastructure development initiatives like China's BRI. Also, without skilled personnel, like engineers, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, and the like, the infrastructure that is being built on the African continent by foreign companies, including Chinese ones, will eventually face dilapidation because of lack of maintenance, which is a direct result of lack of skilled personnel. In this regard, pre-emptive maintenance should be developed, which would involve supervision, evaluation, monitoring, and technical knowledge transfer.

As the BRI and FOCAC strategies unfold, the African continent must be fully incorporated into China's grand vision of the Initiative to cement historical bonds further (Sooklal, Thokozani and Anand, 2018). To achieve this, it will be vital to determine how the BRI and FOCAC can complement Africa's Agenda 2063: the re-industrialization of the continental economy, improved connectivity and infrastructure, diversification of economies, technology transfer and skills development (African Economic Outlook, 2015). Hence, the prevailing trade, economic, and development initiatives linked to the BRI's Strategy and Africa's blueprint outlined in Agenda 2063 seem to bring closer China-African cooperation.

In addition to the foregoing, the story of China's economic success in recent decades is possible in many African countries, and it is through platforms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation that such aspirations can be pursued better (Brigety, 2018). Therefore, the high degree of complementarity between China and Africa provides an important opportunity for the strategic alignment of the Sino-Africa development agenda. However, to take that complementarity to high levels, there is a need for more cooperation, including upgrading the existing common trade relations to industrial cooperation and technological transfer, to help propel Africa's nascent manufacturing base. Meanwhile, since African countries are undergoing a stage that China has only previously experienced, there is plenty of experience to share between both parties (Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 2020).

Mal-investment and corruption

One of the key challenges to massive projects such as the BRI, identified in recent papers that focus on growth, among other things, is the rising signs of mal-investment and corruption (Gunter, 2017; Morck and Yeung, 2016; Woo, nd). An associated issue is that a global investment and lending venture such as the BRI can also create 'debt traps' that adversely affect participating developing countries. A classic example is the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota harbor and airport development projects, both funded by one of China's largest state-owned enterprises. Both projects turned out to be failures, with the Airport reaching fame in Forbes for being the 'world's emptiest airport' (Shepard, 2016). However, since the infrastructure is the priority area of the Initiative, Chinese enterprises are likely to face challenges in the rule of law, environmental protection, labour, human rights, charity, and anti-corruption. When going global, Chinese enterprises need to deliver benefits to local people, take more corporate responsibilities, stay wary of potential risks, and lower and avert losses. In doing so, China can counter China's threat theory and improve its soft power and its image overseas (Gong, 2015).

The BRI presents Africa with an opportunity for development and will arguably be an important catalyst for infrastructure expansion on the continent. However, the BRI raises fundamental questions for Africa: How will BRI projects be financed, and how will this financing impact African debt? What will qualify as a BRI project, and how will it relate to established priorities for infrastructure development set by African governments? How will BRI projects be distributed geographically, and will this exacerbate regional infrastructure imbalances? How will the current deficit in publicly available information about possible BRI projects be overcome in a way that African governments can optimize their involvement (Anzetse, 2018)? The combination of a growing appetite for debt from Africa, Chinese lending, and the emerging opportunities for infrastructure financing presented to Africa via the BRI will decide whether African governments decrease or increase borrowing. Regarding Chinese debt specifically, there are concerns that the opaque nature of debt provision by China to Africa makes the real effectiveness and affordability of the debt unclear. How many loan agreements do African governments have with China? Are African governments presenting the right projects for debt financing? Is the financing being used efficiently? Will the debt be economically productive? Without answers to these questions, African citizens will become increasingly concerned about the scale of debt accrued and whether it yields dividends in terms of economic growth and development.

Another area of concern is the top-down model often employed by China, which lends itself to interaction mostly, or even only, with Africa's autocratic political elite. Decisions made at an authoritarian level do not always trickle down to benefit the aggregate of people; they only serve the state nonpareil. Historically, such immoral ties have allowed individual officials to become wealthier while the region as a whole hardly develops at all. Many African countries are blessed with oil and mineral wealth that has the potential to transform their economies. Meanwhile, the continent is partly bedeviled by the problem of the leadership crisis. Also, there is the get-rich-quick mania in the continent, especially among the political leaders. The inordinate ambition for wealth accumulation is an offshoot of corrupt practices, which are aspects of underdevelopment (Iheriohanma and Oguoma, 2010). The question, therefore, is how would laudable programs mapped out in BRI Initiatives be of any benefit to all and sundry in African resource-rich countries that are plagued with political and commercial corruption? Indeed, the Initiative will have to battle with the challenges of social inequality and the instability that result from systems that fail to meet the basic rights of its people.

Strong legal and political institutions play important roles in developing any country and realizing the BRI's goals in any of the participating countries. Unfortunately, most of the resource-rich countries of Africa are characterized by weak governance, outdated laws, and weak institutional capacity. Outdated laws create a conflict of interest within the agency responsible for managing the sector (Global Witness et al., 2011). Because of the nature of the political system, which is essentially alien to the traditions and customs of the people in most African countries, the legal system and other institutions, especially the economy, have been either weak or marginalized (Ali, 2009).

Cross-border crises

Another challenge that may hamper the functioning and full realization of the objectives of the BRI is the cross-border crises, such as the problems of insecurity due to terrorism and health crises. These, coupled with political tensions in the form of internal insurrections, certainly complicate the situation further, resulting in a lot of uncertainty. The biggest challenge that the BRI faces is the state of perpetual warfare experienced in African states. For instance, war and conflicts have exacted a heavy toll on Africa's development since time immemorial (Sabelo, 2012). Therefore, necessitated by China's rising investment in Africa and the local African security risks associated with them, peace and stability are very important key areas for Chinese-African cooperation.

Indeed, resolving the persistent and unprecedented rise of emerging and re-emerging epidemics and new priorities of Ebola, Coronavirus, Zika, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) requires collaborative and cooperation between the governments in the two regions, bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including boosting private-public partnerships, regional and international organizations in achieving the global health security threat and agenda. Also, effective good governance and leadership coordination of sustainable strategies on emerging outbreak preparedness and response capacity is necessary to transform from traditional to modernized digital laboratory systems in timely and effective quality service delivery. However, the need for laboratory quality improvements and accreditation of methods, tools, and programs is critical in upholding the gains in preparedness and emergency response in various infectious disease programs, and strategies should be supported through the Initiative.

Diplomatic and administrative bottlenecks

Most African countries are emerging and developing markets, while China is a fast-growing economy (Deng, Zhang and Li, 2015). In the exchange and cooperation with countries along the route, the first thing to go through is the language barrier. It has been learned that BRI covers more than 40 official languages in five regions: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and East Africa. In the same vein, trade can be interrupted by a lack of trust between parties or countries involved, changing terms of trade – free trade or tariffs competition as one country or industry surges ahead political turmoil, terrorism, and war along the route – even the threat of war.

On the other hand, the Initiative will require careful and shrewd diplomacy to manage the relations and interactions of the many nations together with prudent planning to achieve maximum effectiveness. According to Ehizuelen and Abdi, it will further be challenging to make the initiative work since it encompasses a vast number of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds who do not speak a common language and who have dissimilar political and economic systems (Ehizuelen and Abdi, 2018). Combative issues such as tariffs and currencies might have to be determined for everyone to share and enjoy the benefits of BRI. Constant political upheavals characterize a few countries within the BRI region, and this presents a great challenge since political instability is often, at times, accompanied by cultural challenges. Also, it is essential to note that there has been an evident lack of specialized and qualified personnel in host countries in Africa, which has meant that over a million Chinese citizens have had to move to Africa to fill this gap (Lee, 2016).

Besides, the main issues on implementing the BRI currently belong largely to the diplomatic agenda. An appreciable number of countries have already been involved in the negotiations. Their economic and foreign policy interests are unique. Nevertheless, the prospect of implementing the BRI is real, as the projects included in it are tied to the existing infrastructure or the one under development, which meets the interests of states participating in it.

Africa has largely been unable to attract adequate investment to close its infrastructure gap. Infrastructure development over the years has mainly been financed through open tender projects, aid, foreign direct investment (FDI), and direct trade-financed initiatives. Almost half of all infrastructure projects have been financed by aid or loans (New Partnership for Africa's Development, 2012). It has however become obvious over the years that funding from Africa's traditional Western development partners is inadequate for closing Africa's infrastructure gap.

Over the past decade, China has invested tremendously in infrastructure development, resulting in dramatic social and cultural changes in both rural and urban regions. It has also promoted an infrastructural development model beyond its borders as part of an increasingly outward-looking foreign policy and as part of the strategy to foster the realisation of the Chinese dreams of BRI. Nonetheless, the rapid completion of infrastructure projects in Africa and the use of the majority of Chinese labour in the implementation of such projects translates into very little technology transfer, job creation, or capacity building in African countries along the project cycle. This has been a thorny issue in infrastructure development assistance from China to African countries. It needs to be addressed and Africa's numerous new strategic visions on infrastructure development must be properly synchronised with each other and linked to other global infrastructure development initiatives like China's BRI. Also, without skilled personnel, like engineers, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, and the like, the infrastructure that is being built on the African continent by foreign companies, including Chinese ones, will eventually face dilapidation because of lack of maintenance, which is a direct result of lack of skilled personnel. What should be done in this regard is the development of pre-emptive maintenance, which would involve supervision, evaluation, monitoring, and technical knowledge transfer.

As the BRI and FOCAC strategies unfold, the African continent must be fully incorporated into China's grand vision of the Initiative to further cement historical bonds (Sooklal, Thokozani and Anand, 2018). To achieve this, it will be vital to determine how the BRI and FOCAC can complement Africa's Agenda 2063: the re-industrialisation of the continental economy, improved connectivity and infrastructure, diversification of economies, technology transfer and skills development (African Economic Outlook, 2015). Hence, the prevailing trade, economic and development initiatives linked to the BRI's Strategy, and Africa's blueprint outlined in Agenda 2063, seem to bring the China-African cooperation closer.

In addition to the foregoing, the story of China's economic success in recent decades is possible in many African countries and it is through platforms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation that such aspirations can be pursued better (Brigety, 2018). Therefore, the high degree of complementarity between China and Africa provides an important opportunity for the strategic alignment of the Sino-Africa development agenda. However, to take that complementarity to high levels, there is a need for more cooperation, including upgrading the existing common trade relations to industrial cooperation and technological transfer, to help propel Africa's nascent manufacturing base. Meanwhile, since African countries are undergoing a stage that China has only previously experienced, there is plenty of experience to share between both parties (Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 2020).

Mal-investment and corruption

One of the key challenges to massive projects such as the BRI, identified in recent papers that focus on growth, among other things is the rising signs of mal-investment and corruption (Gunter, 2017; Morck and Yeung, 2016; Woo, nd). An associated issue is that a global investment and lending venture such as the BRI can also create 'debt traps' that affect adversely participating developing countries. A classic example is the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota harbour and airport development projects both funded by one of China's largest state-owned enterprises. Both projects turned out to be failures with the Airport reaching fame in Forbes for being the 'world's emptiest airport' (Shepard, 2016). However, since the infrastructure is the priority area of the Initiative, Chinese enterprises are likely to face challenges in the rule of law, environmental protection, labour, human rights, charity and anti-corruption. When going global, Chinese enterprises need to deliver benefits to local people, take more corporate responsibilities, stay wary of potential risks, and lower and avert losses. In doing so, China can counter China's Threat Theory and improve China's soft power and its image overseas (Gong, 2015).

The BRI presents Africa with an opportunity for development and will arguably be an important catalyst for infrastructure expansion on the continent. However, the BRI raises fundamental questions for Africa: How will BRI projects be financed, and what will the impact of this financing be on African debt? What will qualify as a BRI project, and how will it relate to established priorities for infrastructure development set by African governments? How will BRI projects be distributed geographically, and will this exacerbate regional infrastructure imbalances? How will the current deficit in publicly available information about possible BRI projects be overcome in a way that African governments can optimise their involvement (Anzetse, 2018)? The combination of a growing appetite for debt from Africa, Chinese lending, and the emerging opportunities for infrastructure financing presented to Africa via the BRI will decide whether African governments decrease or increase borrowing. Regarding Chinese debt specifically, there are concerns that the opaque nature of debt provision by China to Africa makes the real effectiveness and affordability of the debt unclear. How many loan agreements do African governments have with China? Are African governments presenting the right projects for debt financing? Is the financing being used efficiently? Will the debt be economically productive? Without answers to these questions, African citizens will become increasingly concerned about the scale of debt accrued, and whether it yields dividends in terms of economic growth and development.

Another area of concern is the top-down model often employed by China which lends itself to interaction mostly, or even only, with Africa's autocratic political elite. Decisions made at an authoritarian level do not always trickle down to benefit the aggregate of people; they only serve the state nonpareil. Historically, such immoral ties have allowed individual officials to become wealthier, while the region as a whole hardly develops at all. Many African countries are blessed with oil and mineral wealth that has the potential to transform their economies. Meanwhile, the continent is partly bedevilled by the problem of the leadership crisis. Also, there is the get-rich-quick mania in the continent, especially among the political leaders. The inordinate ambition for wealth accumulation is an offshoot of corrupt practices which are aspects of underdevelopment (Iheriohanma and Oguoma, 2010). The question therefore is how would laudable programmes mapped out in BRI Initiatives be of any benefit to all and sundry in African resource–rich countries that are plagued with political and commercial corruption? Indeed, the Initiative will have to battle with the challenges of social inequality and the instability that result from systems that fail to meet the basic rights of its people.

Strong legal and political institutions play important roles in the development of any country and the realisation of the BRI's goals in any of the countries of the participating members. Unfortunately, most of the resource-rich countries of Africa are characterised by weak governance, outdated laws and weak institutional capacity. Outdated laws create a conflict of interest within the agency responsible for managing the sector (Global Witness et al., 2011). Because of the nature of the political system which is essentially alien to the traditions and customs of the people in most African countries, the legal system and other institutions especially the economy have been either weak or marginalised (Ali, 2009).

Cross-border crises

Another challenge that may hamper the functioning and full realisation of the objectives of the BRI is the cross-border crises, such as the problems of insecurity as a result of terrorism and the health crisis. These, coupled with political tensions in the form of internal insurrections certainly complicate the situation further as it results in a lot of uncertainty. Perhaps the biggest challenge that the BRI faces is the state of perpetual warfare experienced in African states. For instance, war and conflicts have exacted a heavy toll on Africa's development since time immemorial (Sabelo, 2012). Therefore, necessitated by China's rising investment in Africa and the local African security risks associated with them, peace and stability are very important key areas for Chinese-African cooperation.

Indeed, resolving the persistent and unprecedented rising of emerging and re-emerging epidemics, and new priorities of Ebola, Coronavirus, Zika, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) requires collaborative and mutual cooperation between the governments in the two regions, bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including boosting private-public partnerships, regional and international organisations in achieving the global health security threat and agenda. Also, effective good governance and leadership coordination of sustainable strategies on emerging outbreak preparedness and response capacity is necessary for the transformation from traditional to modernized digital laboratory systems in timely and effective quality service delivery. However, the need for laboratory quality improvements and accreditation of methods, tools and programmes are critical in upholding the gains in preparedness, and emergency response in various infectious diseases programmes and strategies should be supported through the Initiative.

Diplomatic and administrative bottlenecks

The vast majority of countries in Africa are emerging markets and developing countries while China is a fast-growing economy (Deng, Zhang and Li, 2015). In the exchange and cooperation with countries along the route, the first thing to go through is the language barrier. It has been learned that BRI covers more than 40 official languages in five regions of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia and East Africa. In the same vein, trade can be interrupted by: a lack of trust between parties or countries involved, changing terms of trade – free trade or tariffs competition as one country or industry surges ahead political turmoil, terrorism and war along the route – even the threat of war.

On the other hand, the initiative will require careful and shrewd diplomacy to manage the relations and interactions of the many nations together with prudent planning to achieve maximum effectiveness. According to Ehizuelen and Abdi, it will further be challenging to make the initiative work, since it encompasses a vast number of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds who do not speak a common language and who have dissimilar political and economic systems (Ehizuelen and Abdi, 2018). Combative issues such as tariffs and currencies might have to be determined for everyone to be able to share and enjoy the benefits that come with BRI. A few countries within the BRI region are characterized by constant political upheavals and this presents a great challenge since political instability is often at times accompanied by cultural challenges. Also, it is important to note that there has been an evident lack of specialized and qualified personnel in host countries in Africa, which has meant that over a million Chinese citizens have had to move to Africa to fill this gap (Lee, 2016).

Besides, the main issues on the implementation of the BRI currently belong largely to the diplomatic agenda. An appreciable number of countries have already been involved in the negotiations. Their economic and foreign policy interests are not uniform. Nevertheless, the prospect of implementing the BRI seems to be real, as the projects included in it are tied to the existing infrastructure or the one under development, which meets the interests of states taking part in it.

Participatory developmental model

Participatory development is a process through which participating countries can influence and share control over the Initiative, and over the decisions and resources that affect its goals and objectives. Participatory development has long been a widely discussed concept in development debates. The concept of participatory development got further momentum when global financial institutions and agencies such as the World Bank promoted "basic needs on approach" in development. Even as such attempts were underway, many began to argue that participatory development could emerge as an alternative to the mainstream growth path anchored on the metrics of capitalism. A final key element in participatory development is the system approach. These approaches are rooted in the realization that the context in which the participating countries in the BRI come to decisions and control their processes is always the whole system.

Moreover, stakeholders within the organic arrangement of the system may strive towards several, often potentially conflicting, objectives. This implies that questions and solutions arising from extensive and open discussions always deserve to be studied and solved in a system context. Therefore, working under a system approach requires a good analysis of the total system in which the change has to take place.

Participatory development that is rooted in the system theory is considered in the wider context: different ideas about the future are imaginable in the development. This opens a new vista to not only one but several possible solutions to a perceived challenge that may confront any of the participating countries in the Initiative. Each country or participant requires its elaboration. In this, the cooperation of many participants is needed. In this way, working on technological solutions becomes more embedded in socio-economic and institutional innovation as several innovations come together to produce what could be described as a system innovation.

Indeed, development initiatives have a high level of quality, effectiveness, and efficiency when participating countries view their participation as meaningful. On several occasions, a consensus among development partners and intended beneficiaries is always evident on the right of affected countries to participate in the activities. This strengthens the justification for implementing participatory approaches in development planning. For instance, results are typically enhanced when each participating country develops a sense of ownership of development efforts due to their engagement in decision-making about selecting, planning, managing, and monitoring project activities, and the impact is more sustained. Similarly, when relevant institutional stakeholders are involved in designing programs or policy changes and planning their implementation, the outcomes are usually improved. Hence, participation ranges from superficial to deep - from passive exchange of information to full engagement. Stakeholders may be engaged in many ways, from merely being informed that "development" is "happening" to taking part in projects that help them take charge of their development.

As exemplified in the preceding, the elements that make up co-development theory can be considered as a process composed of three stages. The first stage is the search and selection of participating countries in the Initiative and, consequently, the formation of rules and getting agreements on how the process will work and how benefits later will be shared. This will lead to selecting the most suited partners (this may culminate in establishing the symbiotic relationship between China and Africa) and putting rules and agreements into some form of a joint development arrangement. Secondly, an orientation stage is entered where both regions try to get a mutual understanding's development process by exchanging and cross-fertilizing ideas on the strategies for realizing the BRI's objectives. Also, a further understanding is developed of the future view of directions on the evolvement of the market and technologies and exploring what the collaborative development process will look like. The third and last stage is the co-development process, where a collaborative development process is in place where both regions have one or several teams working. Relevant knowledge and expertise are shared, and product and management information is exchanged between both regions, as well as the joint allocation of resources to develop the blueprints that are mapped out for the successful realization of the objectives of the Initiative.

To mitigate against the downside effects of development that could emanate from realizing the BRI goals, the people who live with the consequences of development must be allowed to take control of their destiny or future desirable development. The only practical and arguably defensible approach to development is to involve people at the grassroots level as principal actors in the decision-making process rather than treating them as appendages to the Initiative. Hence, people should be involved in the participatory development process as conceived through the open systems theory, where they would have to determine the ends of development and the means of achieving them.

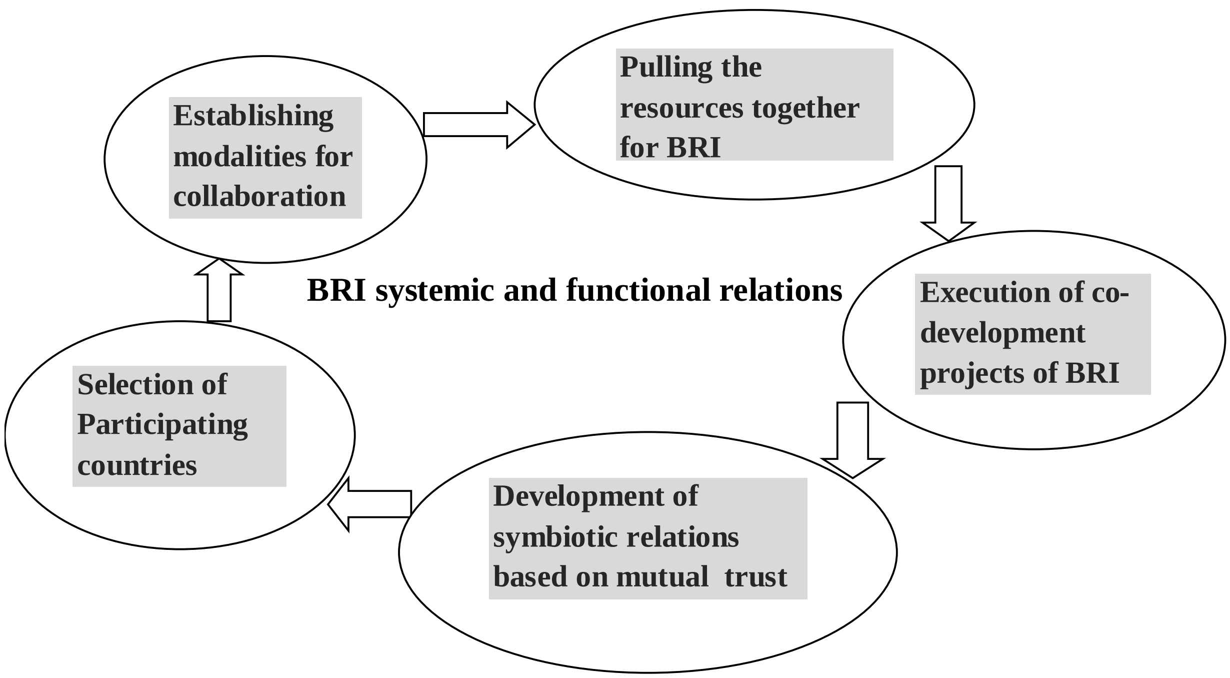

Figure 1. Model showing the functional relations between the two regions with respect to BRI. Source: Researchers' conceptualization.

The concept of systems can be traced back to Aristotle, who suggested that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Since then, the term "system" has been applied to the functioning of almost everything, animate or inanimate objects. Von Bertalanffy (1972), who propounded the systems theory in 1920 and continued to write about systems until his death in 1972, contended that it is not enough to understand the parts, it is also important to understand the relationship among the parts. Thus, systems theory is a theory designed to study unified whole systems. It has some key features: its ability to represent anything of interest and the fact that each system is a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. It is, however, conceived in this treatise that a system is a collection of interrelated components that work together to achieve BRI objectives. For instance, in Figure 1, the participatory development process is predicated on the systemic cum functional relations among the members of the BRI as well as the specified objectives. However, the model specifies that the first onus that characterizes the functional relations among the BRI members is the selection of the participating countries, followed by the establishment of modalities for collaboration to develop symbiotic relations based on mutual trust.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The BRI offers prospects for the extension of Sino-Africa cooperation, and it will be of great benefit to both parties. Hence, the Chinese and African leadership must explore this relationship further. Some prospects for further cooperation still exist, however. Perhaps BRI can be used by China and Africa to bring more foreign direct investment onto the continent, which will benefit Africa's advantage. The Initiative has been presented to the rest of the world by the Chinese government as an action plan which is envisioned as an economic plan that has the potential of propelling Chinese trade and investment with its African partners and, at the same time, creating positive spill over effects that extend beyond the initial projects (win-win). It is evident that China is making attempts to stimulate shared prosperity with its partners and south/south cooperation. The BRI is to be viewed as a vital initiative for cooperation through an innovative approach aimed toward sharing responsibility, resources, and benefits. It is, therefore, most likely that the effective implementation of BRI will result in the creation of a single distinct Asian-European-Africa trading bloc, which will offer a stern challenge to the present US-centred transatlantic and transpacific trading bloc system. Also, the Initiative will most likely reinforce China's "special role" in the global economy, where developing (especially African) countries have increasingly come to play a significant role.

It is equally apposite that China should refine its communications strategy in Africa. At the moment, the BRI narrative is dominated by the theme of China's 'win–win' approach to economic diplomacy. This has been China's rhetoric in Africa for at least two decades and needs refreshing. Like all nations, China has national self-interest at heart and self-seeking elements in its interaction with the continent; Africans know this. It is time for China's commentary on Africa to reflect the complexity of the relationship. Continuing with oversimplified narratives in Africa will only create room for misunderstandings, and the relationship is too meaningful for both sides to hazard such an outcome. It might be argued that different national interests would call for different policies and engagement mechanisms with China. Under such circumstances, individual African countries could be encouraged to develop their national policies on China within a complimentary continental policy framework. China's stance on Africa will likely harden in the long term, with more manipulation and exploitation and less benefit for the continent. The soft stance remains as long as China is settling in. One way out would be the development of a comprehensive African policy on China. This would result in more structured, secure, and beneficial engagement and potentially create the platform for a true win-win situation.

Equally important is that at this opportune moment, when powerful economic rivals threaten to undermine African cooperation with China, it is incumbent for African states to open their eyes to the benefits of a partnership with China concerning the BRI initiative. Like any other independent nation cooperating with China, African nations must be able to avoid, or at least limit, possible backlashes in their cooperation with the world's fastest-growing economy. The new economic power may, indeed, be tempted to always go for the lion's share, disregarding the 'win-win' principle it pretends to abide by and defending against other "predators" who are considered to be looting African resources.

The new economic power may also be tempted to follow the 'neo-colonial 'model as a path of least resistance. It is up to Africa to prevent this with sound policies and an unwavering commitment to better its people (Mbaidjol, 2019). Hence, African leaders must be prepared to make it mandatory that China, under the Initiative, abide by ethical principles such as accountability, responsibility, and transparency to help build sustainable development as espoused in the objectives of BRI. However, in order to do so, Africa should do its homework, which could include the following: a better understanding of China as a partner, knowing its (China) domestic challenges as well as its challenges in the international emerging economy; aggressively pursuing opportunities for cooperation; taking note of China's existing best practices, so that Africa can make better deals with them in the interest of the continent, and establishing conditions conducive to fostering beneficial international relations and sustainable development.

Meanwhile, facility connectivity is one of the priority areas for implementing the Initiative. Facilities here refer to infrastructure, including not only the construction of transport infrastructure but also that of oil and gas pipelines, electricity networks, and cross-border optical cable networks. Among these, transport infrastructure construction is the top priority. As a Chinese saying goes, the first step to being rich is to build roads; the participating countries along the Initiative are generally backward in transport infrastructure. It is very inconvenient for them to trade and travel because they are cut off from other places by mountains, deserts and rivers. Therefore, only by building roads can the common interests be shared. On the basis of respecting each other's sovereignty, the participating countries need to align with each other's infrastructure construction plans and technical standard systems, jointly push forward the construction of international trunk passageways, and gradually build up a sound infrastructure network connecting all sub-regions of the countries that are involved in the Initiative.

Unimpeded trade is a major task in building the Initiative. The trade between China and African countries has witnessed great progress in recent years. However, various trade barriers have prevented cooperation and exchange from deepening and expanding. Thus, all the countries should make suitable arrangements to facilitate trade and investment, enhance customs cooperation, information exchange, mutual recognition of regulations, and mutual assistance in law enforcement, and improve bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the fields of inspection and quarantine, certification and accreditation, standard measurement, and statistical information.

In the final analysis, a critical look into its objectives suggests that the BRI can lead to more trade and increases in welfare. However, this can also lead to various challenges, such as increasing evidence of mal-investment in infrastructure and investments. Hence, if the Initiative worsens these phenomena, the consequent financial and economic crisis in China is likely to have serious contagion effects with global ramifications. On the other hand, trade brings about winners and losers within a country, and unless there is adequate redistribution of the gains within an economy, it can lead to increased inequality, poverty, and structural unemployment. Also, there are some unwholesome consequences to the environment that trade expansion may bring about on the part of Africa unless effective legal, political, and economic institutions are in place to address any of the issues. However, there are a number of risks, such as foreign exchange volatility, risk of recession, price instability, 'crowding-out' of private sector investment, legal and regulatory issues, bureaucratic issues, and poor transparency. These issues can be easily overcome if necessary mechanisms are implemented, and mutual trust among the participating members is sustained.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is financed by: China National Education Science Planning on the General Project "Study on Synergy Effect of Incentive Policy for Primary and Secondary School Teachers" (Project No. BGA180059).

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Citation: Hazzan, M. K., Longlong, H, Ogunyemi, B. F., and Abeka, F. O. (2023). China-Africa cooperation and challenges related to the belt and road initiative. African Educational Research Journal, 11(4): 651-664.