

The Curious Case of the BRI Shapeshifting in Africa

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A poem titled ‘ci’ by Bai Juyi from the *Shijing* or Book of Odes (772-846) goes ‘A flower and yet not a flower, A mist and yet not a mist. It comes at midnight and leaves at day-break’ (Gu 2011: 220). Delving into the nuances of *Shijing* hermeneutics, Dong Gu explains that these poems are often composed in a way leaving the ‘subject matter, theme or persona completely open to the reader’s response’ (Tu 2005: 47). Hazy themes and sketchy description often force readers to fall back on their imagination. This ‘difficult-to-determine’ motive of the poet and the subject of the poem being ‘open-to-interpretation’ was created unconsciously in the *Shijing* tradition, however, Chinese lyric poetry since then has employed it deliberately. This carefully crafted vagueness is believed to have had a tremendous influence of Confucian thought and politics with ideas and tones informing instruments of statecraft. Today, the haziness of intent, subject, context, meaning and description can be associated with many things Chinese, beyond its classical poetry.

Opaque structures, institutions shrouded in secrecy and questionable data sets are familiar challenges while studying China’s layers. This lack of clarity spills into literature and conversations surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well. Although the feasibility of the BRI was strongly contested

after it was introduced by President Xi in 2013, it’s centrality has now been recognized, with some even describing it as a ‘game changer’. Since its incorporation into the party constitution during the 19th National Party Congress in 2017, it has become the fulcrum of China’s geopolitics. However, the numbers surrounding the BRI are as impressive as they are vague. As Hillman states ‘Mapping the BRI is part art, part science. It is a moving target, loosely defined and ever expanding’ (Hillman 2018). For one, it is unclear how many countries have signed up, with estimates ranging from 39 to 92 while investment figures suggesting up to \$1 trillion. Retroactive addition of projects to the BRI project further complicates the list. Nevertheless, BRI cooperation agreements have been signed between the UNDP, WHO and UN Environment, while the Silk Road Fund, Exim Bank and the China Development Bank are nodal points in the disbursement of finances.

The idea, purpose, concept and the agenda of the BRI mutates and takes on many forms depending on who is describing it. Scholar Li Xing asks if China’s pursuit of the BRI ‘is a new world order with Chinese characteristics’ (Li 2019). From mirroring the romantic notion of the old silk road and reviving trade routes to being perceived as a Marshall plan of sorts, a tool of statecraft and economic diplomacy, a Chinese conspiracy, a global domination

strategy, an instrument to achieve the Chinese dream to an outlet for Chinese overcapacity and for its corporations to go completely global, the descriptions are multiple.

Surely similar to the old silk road - a term first used by the German geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in the mid-1800s - that connected Xi'an to Rome through land and sea lanes. But the BRI will cross lands that are far beyond the traditional trade routes including Central Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe. Alessia Amighini argues that the main differentiator between the Silk Road and the BRI is that while the former was 'largely an unplanned outcome of trading activities between China and its partner countries', the later is a 'comprehensive national development strategy designed by the government, with a potentially strong international development impact'(Amighini 2017).

Likewise, it could be perceived as the 'Go Global strategy 2.0', but even that fails to encompass its incredibly wide scope as it includes both economic and political goals. The multiple corridors making up the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Maritime Silk Road', is expected to increase connectivity, provide business opportunities, create new trade routes, alter the geopolitics of multiple regions and even reconstruct the rules of globalization. Moreover, Chinese corporations today are dissimilar to their earlier avatars with state guided corporate policy. It could also be perceived as an instrument of achieving its larger geopolitical goals. For instance, when Sao Tome and Principe, cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2016 and reestablished ties with PRC, Beijing announced a \$146 million deep water port in the island country, indicating that Beijing has succeeded to use the potential of the BRI as a lever to further its One China Policy.

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Africa's position on the discourse emanating from China on the BRI was marginal at first as the focus was on Europe and Asia, but now with countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, Egypt signing MoU's to join the BRI, the initiative is becoming central to conversations surrounding China-Africa engagement (American Enterprise Institute 2018). Literature from multilateral frameworks such as the China Africa Action plan (2019 - 2021) - a document adopted under the auspices of the FOCAC in September 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2018)- mentioned the BRI twelve times, in different contexts, highlighting the shapeshifting nature of the BRI in Africa. From leveraging the strengths of the FOCAC summit to support BRI activities to declaring that the BRI was in 'line with (African Union's) Agenda 2063' - the centrality of African nations to the project as well as the synchronicity of BRI with the AU's development goals was emphasized. It was presented as a cooperation mechanism that would underline the spirit of the Beijing declaration and help build a strong China-Africa community, it was also touted as a mechanism that would enhance cooperation in security as well as science, technology & innovation and one that would improve international legal systems and expand the scope of the legal systems in countries involved in the BRI. Furthermore, the China Africa Action plan also presented the BRI as a driver that would 'create new financing models' and would 'improve the terms and conditions of credit' to support projects under its realm. African nations were recognized as 'important partners' that were to 'jointly build' the road with China. By linking the BRI to not only the continents developmental agenda, but also to the infrastructure development plans of individual countries, Beijing is bringing in Chinese characteristics into the African growth story.

While scholars and experts try to pin down the scope and scale of the BRI, countries in Africa have emerged as critical partners. Their almost-collective support for the BRI is vital as Beijing manufactures a narrative around the BRI, linking it to lessons of the past and promise of the future. In the words of President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya:

'The Belt and Road Initiative gives our continent the opportunity to make a paradigm shift. Post-colonial Africa has been stuck in a rut...It will be a win-win situation when our people have the skills, assets and financing necessary to participate in the development of the infrastructure corridors that will enhance connectivity, support trade and reduce the cost of doing business between our countries...We will all win when the economic corridors we develop hasten industrialization; and when they hasten the development of domestic private-sector capabilities' (The Nation 2017).

This is of course not the first time that pan-African support was sought by the Chinese leadership. Just as countries in the continent supported China's entry into the UN Security Council and provided it a sense of legitimacy in the post-Tiananmen era when it was largely isolated, the vocal support of African leaders of the BRI is critical on two main accounts. One, the major criticism of the initiative encouraging 'debt trap diplomacy' and forms of neo colonialism, is challenged by African voices, although African countries jointly owe China about \$143 billion (CARI 2019). Hambantota, the Sri Lankan port taken over by the Chinese due to non-payment of debt is an oft-used example of the perils of BRI. When similar accusations were leveled against the Kenneth Kaunda International airport in Zambia or its national gas agency ZESCO, officials were quick to assuage fears and play down the issue (Lusaka Times 2018).

Two, studies show that poor connectivity is impeding African growth and with an infrastructure gap in Africa estimated to be at \$130-170 billion (AFDB 2018), countries in the region stand to gain tremendously from the mega projects proposed by Beijing. Estimates from AidData point out that China has already built over 3000 largely critical infrastructure projects, more than 6200 km of railways and has trained 160,000 local people. With several African nations signing the official cooperation document on the BRI, it appears to be the best example of China's win-win cooperation with

Africa and projecting itself as a viable partner in growth.

Although there have been experts and scholars from the continent recommending caution against increasing Chinese debt and influence, a significant number believe that 'it is not debt that is the problem, it is the mismanagement of it which is'. Nevertheless, recently Sierra Leone became the first African country to cancel a BRI project - a \$318 million airport, due to fears of mounting debt as it already owes China \$224 million- there could potentially be more pushback for BRI projects (Chaudhury 2018). This brings to the fore the fact that the BRI is taking shape in an ecosystem that is fraught with challenges and the concerns regarding the mammoth initiative are aplenty. One study suggests that about 270 of 1814 BRI projects undertaken since 2013, representing 32 per-cent of total project value, were embroidered in controversies regarding unsustainable debt, labour policies, performance delays and national security concerns (Kynge 2018). Added to this, the BRI does not seem entirely in sync with the domestic challenges in China, as it seems to provide the opposite incentives in the effort to shift China's export oriented economy into a domestic consumption driven model. Moreover, the slowdown in Chinese economy is also expected to dampen the scale of the projects proposed.

Questions of environmental safeguards have also been repeatedly highlighted in conversations surrounding the mega projects that come under the purview of the BRI. The Mombasa-Nairobi leg of the SGR in Kenya, for instance, passes through the Tsavo National Park, where occupants of the trains are treated to sights of herds of Elephants and Zebras wandering the flat plains. The SGR phase 2A that extends from Nairobi to Naivasha, has been embroidered in controversy when conservation groups exposed the number of animals that were being killed by the speeding trains. The contractors from China Communication Construction Company (CCCC) building the SGR were then forced to design parts of bridges at 58 metres height so that animals weren't affected. Other concerns include the heavy debt host countries endure, relocation of people, fair land acquisition, a

growing security component, lack of transparency, increasing Chinese influence and tying in Chinese companies to Chinese funding and implementing Chinese standards among others. The story of China building the African Unions Headquarters in Addis for free and later allegations by Le Monde that the AU was bugged by the Chinese - a claim denied by all parties - provides a synoptic view of the opportunity/risk dimension of the BRI.

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At a time when India is reengaging countries in Africa, with Prime Minister Modi announcing 180 Lines of Credit worth \$11 billion over 40 African countries, a concessional line of credit with \$10 billion and \$600 million in grant assistance, the idea of the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) had also gained traction. Although this was in essence an opportunity to leverage the strengths of Japan and India to jointly address the infrastructural deficits in Africa, it was also touted as a competition to the BRI. However, not only has there been no further development of the idea beyond the vision statement that was published, there could be a chance that Tokyo has pulled out of the pact effectively ending the cooperation on AAGC. In light of this, it would be more astute for New Delhi to provide sector specific alternatives to develop African infrastructure.

However, it is crucial to understand that the shapeshifting nature of the BRI – where the drivers, modalities and quantum of funds remain nebulous – is by no means accidental. This lack of clarity and ambiguity surrounding it allows for constant expansion of its geographic and thematic reach. Regardless, fact remains that the success of the BRI largely hinges on the productivity and profitability of the infrastructure projects. Scholars like Saith posit that ensuring success would involve giving Beijing a certain degree of clout to intervene politically or militarily so that the

viability, usage and sustainability of the projects are ensured (ICS Lecture Series 2019). This would not only mean a more pronounced role for China in global politics, but would also provide it the leeway to steer clear of its long standing policy of non-intervention. Furthermore, countries in Africa are vital to further the narrative of the ‘benign BRI’, and therefore it is critical to watch out for new dimensions of the initiative as they are expanded in real time. It will also be interesting to see how African states will utilize their agency to craft policies or to negotiate better deals with China, seeing how they do have a certain degree of authority, when it comes to implementing BRI projects, in an otherwise lopsided power dynamic. ■

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