

Non-interference or Neo-colonialism? Assessing the Implications of Chinese Foreign Policy and Influence in East Africa Via the Belt and Road Initiative

Xiang Chi

In March 2021, the US Interim National Security Strategic Guidance identified China as one of the primary threats to American national security.¹ The guidance accused China of combining “its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”² One of the alleged mechanisms for China’s challenge of international status quo is through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a transnational infrastructure project development strategy. Some experts believe BRI is solely an economic initiative that aims to enhance global economic connectivity and cooperation, while others argue BRI is a geopolitical tool, part of a larger Chinese grand strategy seeking to further China’s influence abroad.³ Is China’s BRI reflective of a China that is consistent with its traditional foreign policy of “non-interference” or does it portend a neo-colonial power seeking to further its influence abroad and undermining the sovereignty of other states? Does the BRI actually benefit the participating countries or has China utilized debt-trap tactics to seize control of strategic assets from heavily indebted countries?

This paper will examine China’s campaign in East Africa as a case study of the BRI’s influence abroad by exploring specific BRI countries and projects in the region. This empirical inquiry into China’s East African presence will identify trends and patterns of Chinese foreign policy in the region, and potentially explain China’s underlying motivations behind the BRI at large. While China has long engaged in a policy of non-interference with its East African partners, this study argues that China’s current foreign policy—spearheaded by BRI—has transformed into one characterized by soft-power projection with neocolonial undertones. Although China’s engagements abroad fall short of the popular debt-trap diplomacy narrative (defined later in this paper), Beijing nonetheless seeks to elevate itself toward a Sino-centric international order that resembles its former imperial tributary system.

¹ “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, (Washington, DC: The White House, 2021), 8.

² “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, 8.

³ Michael Clarke, “The Belt and Road Initiative: China’s New Grand Strategy?”, *Asia Policy* 24 (2017): 71–72.

Ensign Xiang "Sean" Chi graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 2023 with a B.S. in Political Science and Chinese. He is currently a M.A. candidate at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. Following the completion of his graduate degree, he will begin training as a naval aviator.

Background

Historical Context of Chinese Foreign Policy

Dating back to as early as the Han dynasty (roughly 202 BCE to 220 CE), China once viewed itself as being at the center of a tributary system. In this conception of foreign relations, smaller neighboring states are subordinate to a more powerful country that dominates the region (in this instance, China) in exchange for economic and strategic benefits.⁴ China's tributary system lasted until the Qing dynasty (1644 to 1912), when it was swiftly dismantled upon engagement with Western powers.⁵ This period marked a turning point in China's international status. Beginning with the First Opium War in 1839, Western colonial powers and Japan exposed the Qing Dynasty's weaknesses.⁶ Additional defeats to the West and Japan caused China to experience further subjugation which led to the ceding of territories such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and parts of Manchuria as well as creating internal turmoil within an already-weak Qing Dynasty.⁷ Having been the dominating power in Asia throughout most of history, this low point in China's history became a source of national embarrassment. Coined the "Century of Humiliation," the Chinese historical narratives of subjugation and humiliation by foreign powers are a key driving force of China's modern-day foreign policy.⁸ Consequently, China's tributary system remains a symbol of its previous historical status as a great power and Asia's regional hegemon.

Defining the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative—also known as "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR)—was officially launched in 2013 under President Xi Jinping.⁹ The BRI coincides with President Xi's ascent to power in the 2010s, which has been characterized by a foreign policy shift from passive diplomacy to a more proactive, assertive China. According to the World Bank, the Belt and Road is defined as "a China-led effort to improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale."¹⁰ BRI presents itself as an alternative model of development to the traditional international mechanisms offered by Bretton Woods institutions. BRI seeks to create linkages between China and the rest of the world via infrastructure. The BRI network envisions global infrastructure projects, including dams, railways, highways, and ports, comprising six land-based corridors and a "Maritime Silk Road" linking China to the rest of Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and East Africa via a sophisticated port network.¹¹

⁴ Chen Shangsheng, "The Chinese Tributary System and Traditional International Order in East Asia", *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 5 (2019): 173.

⁵ Shangsheng, "The Chinese Tributary System", 192.

⁶ Alison Kaufman, "China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy", *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing* (Washington, DC: March 10, 2011), 3, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/3.10.11HearingTranscript.pdf>

⁷ Kaufman, "China's Narratives", 2.

⁸ Kaufman, "China's Narratives", 3-5.

⁹ David Shambaugh, *China and The World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁰ Michele Ruta, "Belt and Road Initiative", *The World Bank*, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

¹¹ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 124-126. For a detailed interactive graphic of the envisioned BRI in Africa, see Judd Devermont, Amelia Cheatham, and Catherine Chiang, "Assessing the Risks of Chinese Investments in Sub-Saharan

China's BRI methodology is opaque and ambiguous. A decade after its creation, much external confusion still exists about the scope and specifics of BRI. There is no official list of BRI projects, an organizational charter, or even a total amount of initiative funding.¹² This ambiguity has not deterred countries from joining, with 145 countries having signed on to the BRI via a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China as of December 2021.¹³ The decentralized nature of BRI is perhaps one of its greatest strengths, making it flexible, hard to define, and therefore difficult to counter.¹⁴ BRI began with the goal of investing and developing in infrastructure projects abroad. It has become a catch-all slogan for Beijing's global influence strategy, which now combines multiple aspects of foreign affairs (e.g., culture, education, politics, and technology) into this single initiative.¹⁵ This paper therefore uses the term BRI to reference China's infrastructure network and its foreign influence mechanisms.

Defining Neo-Colonialism

Although China claims to develop its partnerships based on equality and brotherhood, the aforementioned characteristics of Chinese foreign policy establish ideal conditions for China to exploit its overseas partners. These actions by China—particularly in East Africa—can be interpreted as a modern form of colonialism, or neo-colonialism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neo-colonialism as “the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence another country.”¹⁶ Unlike traditional forms of colonialism in the past, neo-colonialism does not require complete military or political control. Former Ghana President Kwame Nkrumah popularized the term “neo-colonialism.” In Nkrumah's book, *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, he noted that neo-colonialism “operates not only in the economic field, but also in the political, religious, ideological and cultural spheres.”¹⁷ Furthermore, he argues “the essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.”¹⁸ This paper will examine two case studies of the BRI and the economic influence China has exercised. In a later section, this paper will look at China's growing influence in East Africa outside of its economic statecraft, including political, cultural, and now technological influences.

African Ports”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-risks-chinese-investments-sub-saharan-african-ports>.

¹² Wade Shepard, “Why the Ambiguity of China's Belt and Road Initiative is Perhaps its Biggest Strength”, *Forbes*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/19/what-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-is-really-all-about/>.

¹³ Liu Meng, “A list of the countries that have signed Memorandum of Understanding with China on the Belt and Road”, China National Development and Reform Commission, 2021, <http://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/roll/77298.htm>.

¹⁴ Shepard, “Ambiguity.”

¹⁵ Andreea Brinza, “Redefining the Belt and Road Initiative,” *The Diplomat*, March 20, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/redefining-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>

¹⁶ “neocolonialism, n.”, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/126019?redirectedFrom=neo-colonialism>.

¹⁷ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York, NY: International, 1966).

¹⁸ Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*.

East Africa and Chinese Engagement

For the purposes of this study, East Africa encompasses ten countries, defined by the six countries of the East African Community (EAC) (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda) and four additional countries in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia). Each of these countries are officially part of the BRI via a Memorandum of Understanding.¹⁹ Geographically, East Africa is situated just south of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and west of the Indian Ocean. The Red Sea connects waterways from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean to the Pacific with added significance due to its proximity to the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula. Roughly \$700 billion worth of annual trade, including millions of barrels of oil daily, transits through the Red Sea's strategic waterways and chokepoints.²⁰

East Africa is currently considered part of China's "greater strategic periphery," which refers to the surrounding geographic belt regarded as strategically important to Beijing.²¹ Three characteristics typify China's relations with developing countries such as those in East Africa: asymmetry, comprehensiveness, and an interlocking structure.²² Asymmetry refers to Beijing's "disproportionate agenda-setting power," exercised bilaterally and through regional institutions like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).²³ The leaders of 51 African countries attended the 2018 FOCAC in Beijing, whereas only about half as many of the same countries attended the 73rd Session of the U.N. General Assembly that same year.²⁴ At the 2018 FOCAC, President Xi pledged \$60 billion²⁵ in financing to the region, with \$15 billion in grants and interest-free loans.²⁶ Comprehensiveness refers to Beijing's ability to combine its wealth of resources, such as the loan of funds from the China Development Bank and other policy banks, to create maximum leverage over other countries.²⁷ As illustrated in Figure 1, below, 23 percent of the bilateral external debt in the combined East African economies belonged to China in 2010. By 2019, China owned an astounding 54 percent of that debt across the combined East African economies.²⁸ Interlocking structure refers to China's extensive network of state partnerships on the bilateral, regional, and international levels.²⁹ China has emphasized that its relations with developing countries are based on bilateral relationships.

¹⁹ Meng, "A list of the countries."

²⁰ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact on Conflict Dynamics in the Red Sea Arena" (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2020), 2-3, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/chinas-impact-conflict-dynamics-red-sea-arena>.

²¹ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 293.

²² Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 294.

²³ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 294-295.

²⁴ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 296.

²⁵ All references to dollars are United States Dollars unless explicitly noted otherwise.

²⁶ Jevans Nyabiage, "China in Africa: No More Hard Cash as Debt-Hit Nations Battle Covid-19 Disruptions", *South China Morning Post*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3159288/china-africa-no-more-hard-cash-debt-hit-nations-battle-covid>.

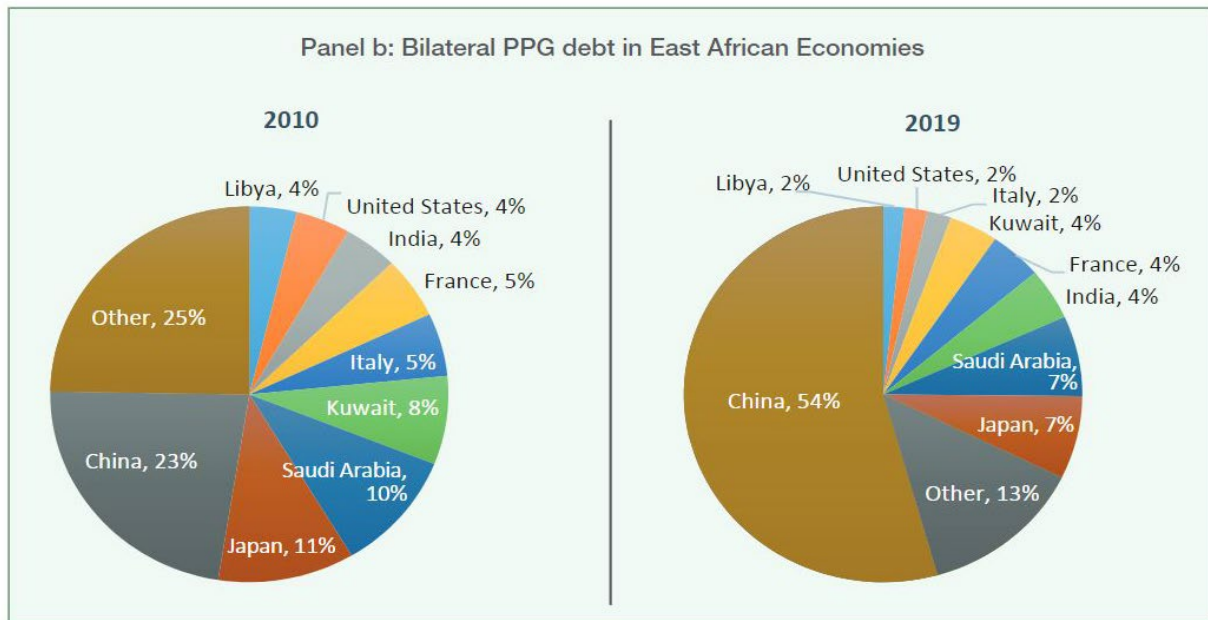
²⁷ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 297-298.

²⁸ "East Africa Economic Outlook 2021," (Abidjan, CDI: Africa Development Bank Group, 2021), 53, <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/east-africa-economic-outlook-2021>.

²⁹ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 295-296.

China currently maintains bilateral, strategic partnerships with sixty-seven states.³⁰

Figure 1: Bilateral Debt Owed by East African Economies³¹



Source: Dafe, Essers, and Volz 2018; World Bank 2021a.

Note: Data do not include Eritrea, Seychelles, and South Sudan. Data for Sudan do not include penalty interest due on arrears.

Case Studies

Two case studies are illustrative of BRI’s function in East Africa: Djibouti and Ethiopia. These case studies allow us to better understand China’s economic influence, with a specific emphasis on China’s investment in development projects in the region.

Djibouti

Between 2012 and 2020, China has spent an estimated \$14 billion on Djiboutian infrastructure investments, including port facilities, railways, pipelines, and airports.³² Djibouti’s debt to China is currently over 70 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).³³ A 2021 report from AidData, a research lab at the College of William and Mary, identified and tracked 96 different Chinese-funded development projects in Djibouti from 2000-2017.³⁴ The most notable project is the \$590 million military support base. In 2017, China established its first overseas naval base in Djibouti only six miles northwest of the US military’s only enduring African base: Camp

³⁰ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 295.

³¹ “East Africa Economic Outlook 2021”, ADBG, Charts, 37.

³² Sebastian Seibt, “Djibouti-China Marriage ‘Slowly Unravelling’ as Investment Project Disappoints”, *France24*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210409-djibouti-china-marriage-slowly-unravelling-as-investment-project-disappoints>.

³³ Mordechai Chaziza, “China Consolidates Its Commercial Foothold in Djibouti”, *The Diplomat*, January 26, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/china-consolidates-its-commercial-foothold-in-djibouti/>.

³⁴ Samantha Custer et al., “Tracking Chinese Development Finance: An Application of AidData’s TUFF 2.0 Methodology”, *AIDDATA*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/aiddata-tuff-methodology-version-2-0>.

Lemonnier.³⁵ China's new base overlooks one of the most strategically important maritime chokepoints in the world: The Gulf of Aden, and specifically, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. An estimated 12 to 20 percent of the world's trade passes through this waterway each year.³⁶ For China, there is a major interest in securing the area's waterways to ensure a continuous flow of trade, particularly oil and natural gas.³⁷ For decades, Beijing's policy of non-interference was a central aspect of Chinese foreign policy. However, its expanding presence in Djibouti—as made evident by the building of an overseas military base on sovereign territory—is in direct contradiction to its historical policy.

The relatively small number of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) (approximately 2,000 troops) currently stationed in Djibouti represents the gradual buildup of China's military presence in Djibouti.³⁸ In 2021, China completed the construction of a 1,120-foot pier at its PLAN base in Djibouti which could accommodate a Chinese aircraft carrier or "four of China's nuclear-powered attack submarines if required."³⁹ On March 28, 2022, a PLA Navy Type-903A *Luomahu* replenishment ship was spotted at the PLAN base in Djibouti, the first Chinese warship ever docked there.⁴⁰ This news comes amid recent US intelligence reports of China looking into building its second military base in Africa, this time along the Atlantic Coast of Equatorial Guinea.⁴¹ China's foothold in Djibouti—and soon potentially in Equatorial Guinea—raised immediate US concerns in regards to "operational safety and counterintelligence issues."⁴² In 2019, US intelligence officials accused China of "irresponsible actions" in Djibouti such as restricting airspace, "attempting to gain access into Camp Lemonnier," and flying drones that interfered with US flight operations nearby.⁴³ A Chinese military presence in the East African region presents long-term international security concerns over China's potential ability to control access to sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and maritime chokepoints, particularly in times of conflict.⁴⁴

The PLAN base in Djibouti is also adjacent to the Doraleh Port, a Chinese-backed multipurpose berthing. The China Merchants Group has a 23.5% stake in the Doraleh Port and exclusive

³⁵ Zach Vertin, "Great Power Rivalry in the Red Sea", *Brookings Institution*, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/great-power-rivalry-in-the-red-sea/>.

³⁶ Monica Wang, "China's Strategy in Djibouti: Mixing Commercial and Military Interests", *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-strategy-djibouti-mixing-commercial-and-military-interests>.

³⁷ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 17.

³⁸ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 6.

³⁹ Sam LaGrone, "AFRICOM: Chinese Naval Base in Africa Set to Support Aircraft Carriers", *U.S. Naval Institute*, April 20, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/04/20/africom-chinese-naval-base-in-africa-set-to-support-aircraft-carriers>.

⁴⁰ Meera Suresh, "PLA Warship Seen for The First Time in China's 'Medieval Fortress' Base in Djibouti", *International Business Times*, March 28 2022, <https://www.ibtimes.com.au/pla-warship-seen-first-time-chinas-medieval-fortress-base-djibouti-1804446>.

⁴¹ Michael Phillips, "China Seeks First Military Base on Africa's Atlantic Coast, U.S. Intelligence Finds", *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-seeks-first-military-base-on-africas-atlantic-coast-u-s-intelligence-finds-11638726327>.

⁴² USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 18.

⁴³ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 27.

⁴⁴ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 6.

rights to one of the port's berths.⁴⁵ The proximity between Doraleh and the naval base is not a coincidence: it is an indicator of the integrative nature of Chinese commercial and military interests in its geopolitical strategy. For now, China's presence in Djibouti is still primarily economic in nature, as both China and the US have a shared interest (at least in the context of the Red Sea) in promoting a "free flow of trade and resources, and the freedom of navigation of naval vessels."⁴⁶

Djibouti's heavy debt burden to China, coupled with a growing Chinese military presence in the country, is a prime example of how Beijing has shifted away from its traditional non-interference policy. In accordance with Nkrumah's definition of neocolonialism, China has used economic and political pressures to increase control over Djibouti through overseas military base and partial ownership of Djibouti's infrastructure facilities. China leverages those ties as a source of bargaining power over other states to achieve military objectives abroad without ever having to compel them via military force. This type of Chinese engagement threatens to erode Djibouti's national sovereignty, particularly in areas of significant strategic and economic importance.

Ethiopia

China and Ethiopia established official diplomatic ties over a half-century ago in 1970. In 2017, China upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, the highest tier relationship in China's foreign partnership hierarchy.⁴⁷ Ethiopia is one of the greatest beneficiaries of Chinese investment, hosting 218 identified Chinese-funded projects ranging from industrial parks to air, road, and rail infrastructure between 2000-2017.⁴⁸ The most notable is Addis Adaba-Djibouti Railway, a modern standard-gauge railway originating in Ethiopia's capital. This railway provides land-locked Ethiopia with access to maritime trade access to the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea by way of the Doraleh Port.⁴⁹ This railway is the backbone of Djibouti's new railway system and according to the Ethiopian Embassy in China, the "lifeline for Ethiopia's economic growth."⁵⁰

BRI projects are a heavy financial burden for Ethiopia. Ethiopia is second among all African countries in total estimated debt owed to China (\$13.5 billion in 2018.)⁵¹ This debt burden creates an overreliance on China that makes Ethiopia significantly more susceptible to financial risks; however, this is not to be confused with debt-trap tactics. The concept of "debt-trap diplomacy" – popularized by Brahma Chellaney – is a commonly cited but frequently

⁴⁵ Lauren Blanchard and Sarah Collins, "China's Engagement in Djibouti", *Congressional Research Service In Focus*, September 4, 2019, 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11304>.

⁴⁶ Blanchard and Collins, "China's Engagement", 29.

⁴⁷ Linda Calabrese et al., "The Belt and Road and Chinese enterprises in Ethiopia: risks and opportunities for development" (London, UK: Overseas Development Institute, 2021), 12, <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-belt-and-road-and-chinese-enterprises-in-ethiopia-risks-and-opportunities-for-development/>.

⁴⁸ Custer et al., "Tracking Chinese Development Finance"; USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 24.

⁴⁹ Istvan Tarrotsy, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, Debt Risk and New Dependency: The Case of Ethiopia", *University of Florida African Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3-4 (2020): 14-15.

⁵⁰ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 24.

⁵¹ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 17.

misunderstood concern of BRI which has been debunked by recent literature.⁵² There is currently no evidence pointing to China employing debt-trap tactics to physically seize Ethiopian assets as repayment for a debt default. Research has in fact shown some signs of the opposite. In 2018, Beijing forgave all of Ethiopia's interest-free loans (an admittedly small fraction of Ethiopian external debt to China) originally due at the end of the year.⁵³ At the same time, the loan repayment schedule for Ethiopia's flagship Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway was extended by twenty years, which will lead to roughly \$1 billion in losses for the involved Chinese state-owned enterprises.⁵⁴ The debt-trap diplomacy narrative is further dispelled by Deborah Brautigam, who asserts "in Africa, we have not seen any examples where we would say the Chinese deliberately entangled another country in debt, and then used that debt to extract unfair or strategic advantages of some kind in Africa, including asset seizures."⁵⁵

While China has not yet engaged in debt-trap measures, the current East African debt situation should still be acknowledged and closely tracked as "there are valid reasons for heightened concern about Chinese engagement, with potentially neocolonial implications."⁵⁶ China's economic investments in East Africa place these countries in a precarious situation. As East African host countries become saddled with unsustainable levels of debt disproportionately owned by China, they become exposed to and are at the mercy of the Chinese. China could leverage a host country's debt obligations for internal influence to achieve its own strategic goals without ever physically infringing on their sovereignty.

Additional Sources of Chinese Influence in East Africa

Under the traditional neo-realist view of international relations, geopolitics is rooted in material resources and hard power.⁵⁷ Hard power refers to a country's ability to influence the actions and behaviors of other actors through its military and/or economic strength.⁵⁸ With globalization, this paradigm has shifted towards "the postmodern world of images and influence."⁵⁹ Joseph Nye defines soft power as "getting others to want what you want, and producing outcomes through persuasion and attraction rather than coercion or payment."⁶⁰ Along with economic power, soft power makes neo-colonial behaviors possible. In Beijing's case, it can leverage its close economic ties into other mediums of influence (e.g., cultural, political, or technological) to enhance China's reputation and achieve its goals abroad. Ultimately, China's vast economic reach, combined with its soft power influences, has created

⁵² Brahma Chellaney, "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy", *Project Syndicate*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01>.

⁵³ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 24-25.

⁵⁴ USIP Senior Study Group, "China's Impact", 25.

⁵⁵ Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme", *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2019).

⁵⁶ Tarrotsy, "China's Belt and Road Initiative", 10.

⁵⁷ Julie Miao, "Understanding the Soft Power of China's Belt and Road Initiative through a Discourse Analysis in Europe", *Regional Studies, Regional Science* 8, no. 1 (2021): 163.

⁵⁸ Miao, "Understanding the Soft Power of China's Belt and Road Initiative", 163-164.

⁵⁹ Miao, "Understanding the Soft Power of China's Belt and Road Initiative", 163.

⁶⁰ Scott Kastner and Margaret Pearson, "Exploring the Parameters of China's Economic Influence", *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56 (2021): 6.

a Chinese neo-colonial system. The BRI serves as a backdrop for China's neo-colonial efforts to penetrate the societies of BRI host nations.

Politics

Political training to promote the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s ideology and political system abroad is a prominent feature of Beijing's neo-colonial approach.⁶¹ China has provided the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front with political training on matters such as political development, capacity building, propaganda systems, and cadre education.⁶² In July 2018, China helped construct the Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania, which will provide political outreach and training to various party cadres in East Africa.⁶³ That same year, China hosted a multilateral meeting in Tanzania which included attendance from forty African political parties from over thirty-six countries.⁶⁴ Beijing's political outreach is not necessarily focused on implementing China's political model across East Africa, but rather seeks to improve African perceptions of China and ultimately legitimize CCP rule.⁶⁵ In doing so, China is establishing a political apparatus to exert influence in the region.

China's robust political influence in East Africa is best illustrated at the international level, where it leverages its regional influence to garner support on key concerns such as the Xinjiang crisis and China's maritime claims to the South China Sea (see Table 1, below). Nearly all East African countries exhibited official support for China on these two controversial issues. Official support is assessed through a combination of joint U.N. statements, embassy statements, media statements, and press releases. In the case of Xinjiang, the parameters for Chinese support were based on signatories of joint statements to the U.N. Human Rights Council (from 2019-2021) written in defense of China's policies. The most notable of these was the 2020 joint statement led by Cuba (backed by 45 countries including Burundi, Eritrea, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda) stating:

We commend that the Chinese government pursues the 'people-centered' philosophy...We note with appreciation that China has undertaken a series of measures in response to threats of terrorism and extremism in accordance with the law to safeguard the human rights of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang...it is an imperative to respect the basic facts rather than making unfounded allegations against China and interfere out of political motivations and bias.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302.

⁶² U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "China in Africa: The New Colonialism", Hearing Before the Subcommittee On Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, And International Organizations, March 7, 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg28876/pdf/CHRG-115hhrg28876.pdf>.

⁶³ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302-303.

⁶⁴ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302.

⁶⁵ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302.

⁶⁶ Catherine Putz, "2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?", *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

Table 1: East African Countries' Positions on Key Chinese International Issues⁶⁷

Country	Position on Xinjiang?	Position on South China Sea?
Burundi	Supports China	Supports China (5/18/2016)
Djibouti	Supports China	Supports China (5/12/2016)
Eritrea	Supports China	Supports China (3/30/2016)
Ethiopia	Supports China	Supports China (6/15/2016)
Kenya	Data Unavailable	Supports China (6/15/2016)
Rwanda	Data Unavailable	Data Unavailable
Somalia	Supports China	Supports China (5/12/2016)
South Sudan	Supports China	Data Unavailable
Tanzania	Supports China	Supports China (5/31/2016)
Uganda	Supports China	Supports China (5/30/2016)

There were similar joint statements defending China's actions in Xinjiang in 2019 and 2021, which were backed by many East African countries.⁶⁸ These statements were written in direct response to a Western-led U.N. statement—backed by 39 countries—which called on China to “respect human rights, particularly the rights of persons belonging to religious and ethnic minorities, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet.”⁶⁹ In the case of the South China Sea, the parameters for Chinese support were based on official support of China in direct response to the arbitral tribunal ruling in 2016 at the Hague. Researchers at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies collected data on countries that support the Chinese position on the South China Sea.⁷⁰ They identified 70 countries—to include eight East African countries—supporting this position.⁷¹ For instance, in June 2016, the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement stating its support for China's “right of optional exception” under UNCLOS Article 298, which allows China to reject the ruling on the grounds of sovereignty.⁷² The table

⁶⁷ This table was inspired by the table “Red Sea States' Positions on Key Issues for China” from the 2020 USIP report. The author created this table illustrate the same topic for the East African countries after being unable to find a comparable table. The information on Xinjiang positions is from joint statements to the U.N. Human Rights Council written in defense of China's policies. The full list can be accessed at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/> (2019 and 2020), <https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/column/2021/09/china-fy2021-01.html> (2021). The information on the South China Sea positions is from the international studies department of Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies following the arbitral tribunal ruling at the Hague, which rejected Beijing's maritime claims in the South China Sea. The article tracked down and identified a list of countries supporting China based on publicly available documents and media. The full list can be accessed at: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/who-supports-china-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why/>.

⁶⁸ Putz, “2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?”

⁶⁹ Putz, “2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?”

⁷⁰ Wang Wen and Chen Xiaochen, “Who Supports China in the South China Sea and Why”, *The Diplomat*, July 27, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/who-supports-china-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why/>.

⁷¹ Wen and Xiaochen, “Who Supports China.”

⁷² Wen and Xiaochen, “Who Supports China.”

above shows the impact of Chinese neo-colonialism in East Africa, demonstrating China's ability to leverage its influence over other states for political clout. As major beneficiaries of BRI, East African countries likely will continue to lend their voices in support of China on the international stage, particularly on the most sensitive issues on Beijing's agenda.

Security

China has recently demonstrated an increasing commitment to security cooperation in East Africa. Beginning in 2008, the PLAN has been providing anti-piracy escorts through the Gulf of Aden off the waters of Somalia. In 2015, China committed \$100 million in military aid to the African Union, and later in 2018, Beijing hosted the first China-Africa Defense and Security Forum.⁷³ China is one of the primary contributors to UN peacekeeping efforts in the region, with over 1,000 troops deployed in the midst of the South Sudanese Civil War as of 2020.⁷⁴ Most recently in January 2022, Beijing announced a special envoy appointment to the Horn of Africa as a broker of peace in conflict-torn areas like Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan.⁷⁵ Ultimately, China's heavy political presence in East Africa shows China's interest in protecting its investments in the region and the depth and breadth of China's influence.

Culture and Society

Cultural hegemony is another aspect of neo-colonialism. According to President Xi, "the Chinese people's unique history endows their nation with great natural advantages allowing it to become a global cultural power."⁷⁶ Winning the hearts and minds of the East African public is a key aspect of China's external outreach. By strengthening cultural ties between China and the countries of East Africa, China is able to establish the cultural sphere of influence in the region that Nkrumah argues is a critical component to neo-colonialism. As of 2019, there were 525 Confucius Institutes around the world, with seven of the ten countries in East Africa – Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda – having at least one.⁷⁷ Confucius Institutes, overseen by China's Ministry of Education, were created with the explicit goal of promoting Chinese language and culture abroad; however, they have been controversial in the West due to the disputed credibility and objectivity of these Institutes.⁷⁸ In developing countries and regions like East Africa, such concerns have not gained as much traction, in part due to scarce educational funding elsewhere.⁷⁹

For example, almost two-thirds (62 percent) of respondents in the survey responded "very positively" or "somewhat positively" when asked about Chinese economic and political influence in their respective countries. Only 14 percent of respondents considered external

⁷³ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 303.

⁷⁴ Richard Gowan, "China's Pragmatic Approach to Peacekeeping", *Brookings Institute*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-pragmatic-approach-to-un-peacekeeping/>.

⁷⁵ Duncan Miriri, "China Plans Peace Envoy for Conflict-Riven Horn of Africa", *Reuters*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-appoint-special-envoy-horn-africa-2022-01-06/>.

⁷⁶ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302.

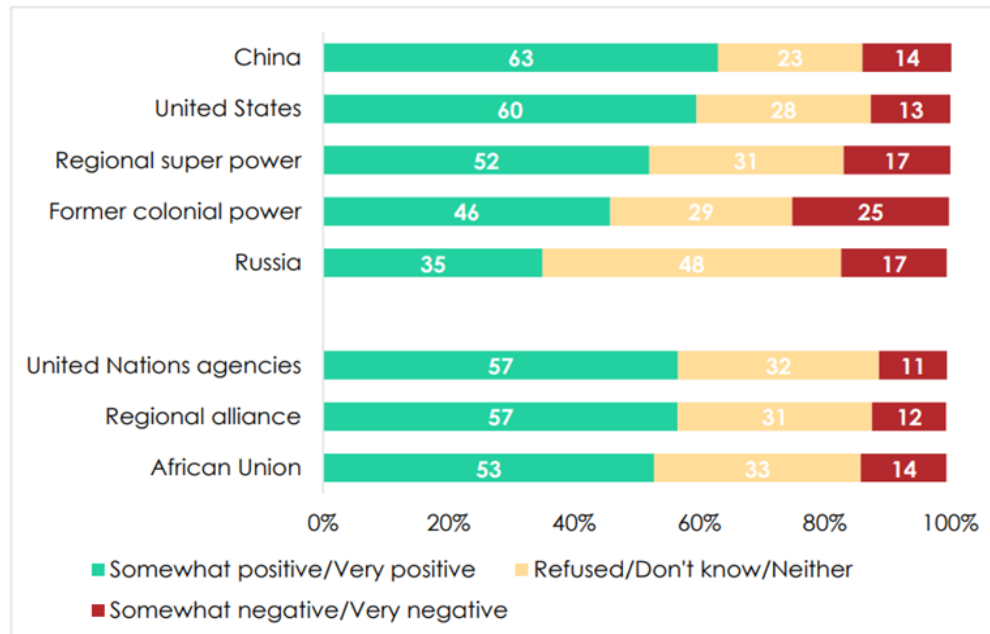
⁷⁷ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302; "Confucius Institutes Around the World", *Dig Mandarin*, <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>.

⁷⁸ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302.

⁷⁹ Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 302.

Chinese influence in their country as “negative.”⁸⁰ In comparison, the percentage of respondents who view United Nations or African Union influences as “somewhat positive” or “very positive” is lower at 57 and 53 percent, respectively.⁸¹ The numbers mentioned above are generally consistent with a similar Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2014/2015.

Figure 2: Positive or Negative Views of External Influences⁸²



Technology

The BRI enhances China’s public reputation in East Africa and establishes a rapport with the political elites of the region. One of the more recent ways China has done this is through technology. The technology branch of the BRI, also known as the “Digital Silk Road (DSR),” provides BRI host nations with China’s most cutting-edge technology such as telecommunications, artificial intelligence, surveillance systems, and smart cities.⁸³

At the 2017 National Party Congress, President Xi publicly offered the Chinese Internet governance model as “a new option for other countries and nations that want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.”⁸⁴ Xi’s statement aligns in theory with China’s traditional policy of non-interference, but a more careful look at China’s DSR makes it evident this is not the case. The increasing amount of the world’s global technology being is matched with growing concerns Chinese intelligence agencies illicitly accessing encrypted data

⁸⁰ Sanny and Selormey, “Africans Welcome China’s Influence”, 8-9.

⁸¹ Sanny and Selormey, “Africans Welcome China’s Influence”, 8.

⁸² Sanny and Selormey, “Africans Welcome China’s Influence”, Figure 6, 8. Respondents were asked: “In general, do you think the economic and political influence of each of the following countries/organizations on [your host country] is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven’t you heard enough to say?”

⁸³ Steven Feldstein, “Testimony before the Commission Hearing on China’s Strategic Aims in Africa”, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, May 8, 2020, 2, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Feldstein_Testimony.pdf.

⁸⁴ Mai Truong, Jessica White, and Allie Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism”, *Freedom House*, October 2018, 7, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2018_Final.pdf.

through state-mandated backdoors.⁸⁵ In 2018, China was accused of digitally stealing surveillance footage (from Chinese-made Huawei cameras) at the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia.⁸⁶ Incidents like these have made Western countries wary of Chinese technology and sparked US-led efforts to ban the use of products from Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE.⁸⁷ Other countries, particularly in Africa, have continued to embrace Chinese technology. At least 47 out of the 54 African countries have had “digital engagements” with China in some form, including “telecom network cables, digital partnerships with universities, surveillance, cloud computing data centers, manufacturing facilities, or R&D research labs.”⁸⁸ At the center of China’s technological influence is its exportation of advanced surveillance technology, dubbed “digital authoritarianism” by Freedom House.

In 2021, China was ranked by Freedom House as the most restrictive Internet environment in the world for the seventh straight year.⁸⁹ China’s model of Internet governance, reliant on high-tech surveillance, censorship, and online manipulation, is an increasingly popular model for authoritarian regimes around the world. Through the DSR, China makes its model available by actively exporting the required technologies (e.g., mass surveillance networks, advanced social media monitoring, and safe-city projects) to East Africa and the world.⁹⁰

China recently led a “charm offensive against Internet freedom,” holding seminars for high-level government and media officials around the world in forums (like the 2017 World Internet Conference) that seek to set new technical standards and norms for the Internet.⁹¹ In 2018, China held two-week-long “Seminar[s] on Cyberspace Management for Officials of Countries along the Belt and Road Initiative”, which discussed “big data public-opinion management systems, tools for real-time monitoring of negative public opinion and a positive energy public-opinion guidance system.”⁹² Representatives from three East African countries—Ethiopia, Kenya, and Rwanda—attended these seminars.⁹³

Conclusion

US Response and US-China Great Power Competition

China has mounted a major challenge to the US in East Africa and the developing world at large. While the BRI does not necessarily pose an imminent threat to the United States, the US has a vested interest in preventing China from continuing to carve out spheres of influence in this region in pursuit of a Sino-centric world order. Despite the strides China has made in the

⁸⁵ Truong, White, and Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018”, 10.

⁸⁶ Truong, White, and Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018”, 10.

⁸⁷ Truong, White, and Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018”, 10.

⁸⁸ Feldstein, “China’s Strategic Aims in Africa”, 1.

⁸⁹ Grant Baker et al., “Freedom on The Net 2021: The Drive to Control Big Tech”, *Freedom House*, 2021, 1, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN_2021_Complete_Booklet_09162021_FINAL_UPDATED.pdf

⁹⁰ Feldstein, “China’s Strategic Aims in Africa”, 1-2.

⁹¹ Truong, White, and Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018”, 8.

⁹² Truong, White, and Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018”, 8.

⁹³ Truong, White, and Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2018”, 9.

region, the United States model remains the preferred development model in the majority of Africa.⁹⁴ An Afrobarometer report indicates respondents who preferred the Chinese development model still overwhelmingly support democratic norms and institutions. For instance, those who preferred the Chinese model still “reject one-party rule,” “support democracy,” and “support presidential term limits” at rates of 79, 70, and 78 percent.⁹⁵

Meanwhile, the US recently established multilateral development initiatives of its own in response to the BRI. In 2018 Congress passed the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, which established the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC). One of the DFC’s missions is to “provide the developing world with financially sound alternatives to unsustainable and irresponsible state-directed initiatives.”⁹⁶ Later in 2019, the US, Australia, and Japan established the Blue Dot Network (BDN). The Blue Dot Network assesses and certifies infrastructure projects based on metrics absent from the BRI such as project transparency, debt sustainability, and quality.⁹⁷ The BDN champions international norms for infrastructure development and lending practices drawn from the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).⁹⁸

These US-led initiatives are indicative of America’s revitalized commitment to development in the developing world, to include East Africa. In a broader geopolitical context, these initiatives demonstrate intensifying great-power competition between the US and China. Ultimately, it is doubtful the US will ever match Beijing dollar-for-dollar on international development or soft power campaigns. Rather, the US and its partners should continue to focus their efforts on providing a BRI alternative to the developing world with a brand that champions core American values: a rules-based solution characterized by quality, transparency, and respect for sovereignty.

Outlook

The strategic implications of the BRI are clear. Combined with China’s current foreign policy posture, China’s primary motivations behind BRI are primarily strategic rather than economic in nature. Although China’s presence in East Africa falls short of debt-trap diplomacy, state concessions allow a neocolonial China to penetrate societies around the world in many ways. The BRI is rooted as much in developing Chinese soft power – via culture, politics, security, and technology – as it is in hard power. China likely will continue to leverage this influence for support on the international level, best illustrated by its strong backing from the East African bloc on key issues such as Xinjiang and the South China Sea. China’s current engagements in East Africa and with all BRI countries draw striking parallels to China’s former tributary system. Like its ancient counterparts, present-day China seeks to be at the center of the international system. But while ancient China maintained the principle of non-interference for the states in its tributary system, China today has done the opposite. In pursuit of a Sino-

⁹⁴ Sanny and Selormey, “Africans Welcome China’s Influence”, 3.

⁹⁵ Sanny and Selormey, “Africans Welcome China’s Influence”, 16.

⁹⁶ “Who We Are”, U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, n.d., <https://www.dfc.gov/who-we-are>.

⁹⁷ Jerre Hansbrough, “From the Blue Dot Network to the Blue Dot Marketplace: A Way to Cooperate in Strategic Competition”, *Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, September 1, 2020, 180-182, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26667.16>.

⁹⁸ Hansbrough, “From the Blue Dot Network”, 182.

centric world order, China is carving out spheres of influence around the world through the BRI, an overseas neo-colonial network propped up by its economic statecraft. Such an order poses a threat to America's national security and challenges the fundamental fabric of the current American-led, rules-based international order.