

## **CHINA'S COOPERATION IN AFRICA IN THE AREA OF PHYSICAL CONNECTIVITY INFRASTRUCTURE. THE CASE OF THE MOMBASA-NAIROBI RAILWAY LINE**

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### **Abstract**

In the 21st century, China proposes a cooperation scheme with its own characteristics. In relation to the cooperation projects that China has been carrying out in the African continent, an exponential growth of infrastructure works was observed that has contributed to the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of Africa. In this context, it is worth asking, what distinctive characteristics does Chinese cooperation in infrastructure have that makes it so attractive to African countries?

For the purpose of answering this question, we propose to analyse the link that Beijing has established with the African countries, specifying the characteristics its cooperation scheme presents. Likewise, the priority areas around which cooperation projects are directed and their financing modality are investigated. Secondly, we consider the construction of one of the sections of the railway in Kenya (Mombasa-Nairobi project) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a typical case of China's infrastructure cooperation in an African country.

### **Keywords**

China, cooperation, infrastructure, BRI, Kenya

### **How to cite this article**

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## **CHINA'S COOPERATION IN AFRICA IN THE AREA OF PHYSICAL CONNECTIVITY INFRASTRUCTURE. THE CASE OF THE MOMBASA-NAIROBI RAILWAY LINE<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Since the end of the nineties, it has been observed that China has displayed great international activism in all regions of the world and in most thematic areas, which have allowed it to gain greater prominence in the international system. In this sense, although the countries of Africa are not crucial in their expansion strategy 'outside borders', the truth is that they have gained priority in the design of their foreign policy.

Simultaneously to its internal modernization process, since 1999 the construction sector in China has grown by 20% annually, making this country the largest infrastructure market in the global economy. While Africa shows an unsatisfied demand in this regard as well as in the financing to undertake the necessary works, Beijing has not only accumulated substantial financial reserves but has become a global leader in construction services, with great experience in civil infrastructure development (Johnston, 2016). In other words, the complementarity is evident.

On the other hand, it should be considered that China's infrastructure cooperation in Africa is presented as an alternative to Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by traditional powers, discursively governed under the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence<sup>2</sup>. However, in practice the "mutual benefits" are not tangible enough. It becomes questionable that the Asian country, being the second most important economy worldwide, claims to cooperate "on parity of conditions" with African countries by recognizing itself as a developing country.

In the new century there was a strong advance of Chinese state-owned companies in different infrastructure construction projects in the African continent. To some extent, this involvement of China in cooperation projects has contributed to the improvement of the economic and social conditions of African countries. Given this scenario, it is worth

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<sup>2</sup> They are analysed on the following pages.



asking: What distinctive characteristics does Chinese cooperation have that makes it so attractive to African countries? What are the priority areas to which cooperation funds are directed? What interests are seen in infrastructure cooperation projects for African countries, particularly sub-Saharan Africa? And finally, infrastructure works, who really benefits?

In order to answer these questions, we intend to analyse, at first, the characteristics that the cooperation between China and Africa presents, investigating the priority areas around which the cooperation projects are directed and the modality of financing of those projects. In a second moment, we consider the construction of one of the sections of the railway in Kenya (Mombasa-Nairobi project<sup>3</sup>) within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (hereinafter BRI) as a typical case of China's infrastructure cooperation in an African country.

It is important to note that the academy is divided among those who consider China as an emerging power (Stuenkel, 2018; Ikenberry and Lim, 2017; Xing and Shaw, 2016; Zeng and Breslin, 2016; etc.) and those who claim that it has already become an emerged power in the current international order (Oviedo, 2019; Muñoz, 2019; Borella, 2019). Consequently, it is based on the presumption that as China transforms from "emerging to emerged", its infrastructure projects conceived as part of the conceptual umbrella of South-South Cooperation (CSS) are losing the solidarity character, to form a global strategy that bears similarities with British Pax<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, the cooperation that China makes in the countries of Africa has changed depending on the evolution and deepening of the development model that is going through its economy, characterized by being a fundamentally financial cooperation – expressed in loans (concessional and non-concessional), foreign direct investment, subsidies, etc.

On the other hand, these infrastructure projects have been framed in the BRI, being erected as a megaproject of interstate connectivity that aims, on the one hand, to stimulate trade and, on the other hand, to boost Chinese productive capacity abroad; objectives backed by large financial capital.

It is worth noting that, for the development of this work, a qualitative methodology using the technique of triangulation of statistical data issued by various international organizations (World Bank, OECD, Infrastructure Consortium for Africa) was applied and by the national governments worked here (Kenya, Exim Bank of China, *White Papers* de China, *African Policy Paper* de China). The temporary cut focuses on the period from 2000 to 2017, focusing on the coming to power of Xi Jinping and with it, a more assertive action in Chinese foreign policy. In this regard, it is worth noting two events that illustrate this, such as the launch of the BRI in 2013 and the achievement of the "Forum a Strip and a Route for international cooperation" in 2017.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to clarify that in the present work we opted for the definition of Mombasa-Nairobi as a way of designating the railway project, which coincides with that adopted by Kenya. This decision is due to geographical orientation, when going from the coast of the Indian Ocean to the interior of the continent.

<sup>4</sup> British Pax refers to the historical period in which the British Empire extended its dominance worldwide, characterized by control of maritime trade and the extension of rail networks in its colonial territories and priority trading partners (such as Argentina).



## **1. Africa in China's foreign policy: a look at the political and economic dimensions**

Since the mid-1990s, the People's Republic of China began a process of intensifying ties maintained with African countries, guided by fundamentally economic interests. In this sense, the attention given to the Chinese presence in African countries from the beginning of the 21st century is directly related to the qualitative leap of this relationship in the world economy, becoming a cause for concern (and criticism) for the interests of traditional powers (Visentini, 2013). However, it should not be forgotten that the extension of its diplomatic relations in the continent is functional to its objective of isolating Taiwan internationally, by imposing its "one China only" policy."<sup>5</sup>

Under this repertoire, the foreign policy of the People's Republic adopted the principle of "towards all directions", which theoretically does not imply differentiation between geographical regions or continents. Likewise, China's speech as a developing country, the foundational basis of its foreign policy, intensified. While in practice the great powers and their regional environment are crucial in the design of the external agenda<sup>6</sup>, Africa has kept some priority (Yun, 2014: 13).

In the new century, the diplomatic activity of the Chinese government towards Africa has been intense and high-level, both bilaterally and multilaterally. In chronological terms it is necessary to mention as a first step the launch of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) in October 2000<sup>7</sup>, initial framework that channelled and gave impetus to the actions of the People's Republic of China. Two legal instruments emanated from that first multilateral meeting, the Beijing Declaration and the Program for Sino-African Cooperation for Economic and Social Development, which became the political axes that guided Chinese intentionality (Li et al, 2012).

The Beijing Declaration (2000) stated that the forum was a framework for collective dialogue on the pillars of equality and mutual benefit, recognizing themselves as developing countries. In addition, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were mentioned as well as the principles of the UN and AU Charter. In the attached program, the areas of cooperation were detailed, including: trade and investment; infrastructure projects; financial cooperation; debt relief; tourism; migration; agricultural cooperation; exploration and use of natural resources and energy; cultural cooperation; scientific and technological, public health, education and human resources development; environmental and biodiversity management and arms control. Subsequently, at the second FOCAC ministerial meeting in 2003<sup>8</sup> in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) a new Action Plan for the period 2004-2006 was adopted, which sought to improve the implementation of the previous documents.

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<sup>5</sup> This principle of Chinese foreign policy implies that those countries that recognize Taiwan must break diplomatic relations in order to establish them with the People's Republic of China.

<sup>6</sup> For illustration, China's main trading partners in the world are the United States, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan and Hong Kong (Information taken from <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn/> - Consulted on 27-09-2019).

<sup>7</sup> The first ministerial summit was held in Beijing and was attended by 44 ministries of African countries (ministries of foreign affairs and trade) and officials from 80 Chinese ministries. The first leaders of Togo, Algeria, Zambia, Tanzania and the Secretary General of the African Union also attended. Information extracted from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/gylt/dyjbzhy/t157577.htm> [Consulted on 05-09-2018].

<sup>8</sup> On this occasion, 44 African countries participated again.



The actions mentioned in the previous paragraph are important as they were the guide of Chinese actions towards African countries until 2006, the year in which the first policy paper on Africa was published. That report and the holding of the third ministerial conference of FOCAC<sup>9</sup> led to classify it as the "Year of Africa" for China. With this, the continuity granted to the treatment of the African theme can be observed. Also, in 2010 a White paper entitled "China-Africa Economic and Commercial Cooperation" was released, which was followed by a second edition in 2013, already under the change of administration in the hands of Xi Jinping. On the other hand, between 2003 and 2014, two other White papers were issued on "Chinese foreign aid" in 2011 and 2014 respectively, where the privileged place of African countries was explained in Beijing's South-South cooperation policy (detailed below).

The transfer of the government of Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping kept the Chinese policy for Africa unchanged. For Xi, the consolidation of friendship with African countries reinforces the Chinese identity of a developing country and its goal in achieving the democratization of international relations and a new international order (Yun, 2014: 13). In 2015, the second policy paper on the Chinese position in Africa came to light, repeating the principles and areas of cooperation established in 2000. It only innovated by boosting the category of comprehensive strategic partnership between the actors involved (The People's Republic of China, China's second Africa policy paper, 2015).

In this regard, Beijing has a hierarchical gradation by which, as ties intensify, the relationship is scaled to a greater position. In this sense, the links start from the lowest gradation to the highest. Comprehensive strategic partnership, then, is the highest condition that a relationship can achieve (Malena, 2015). However, the Asian country has also deepened the link with certain African countries officially<sup>10</sup>.

As for the commercial exchange, China advanced steadily from 2000 onwards, consolidating itself as the main trading partner of the continent in 2009 (The People's Republic of China, 2013). More specifically, in 2013 China became the first export destination of the Sub-Saharan Africa region, surpassing the European Union and the United States - traditional partners of African countries - who went on to take second and third place (Pigato and Tang, 2015: 6). In 2017, the total China-Africa trade volume reached 139 billion dollars (World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank online). The main destinations for Chinese goods were South Africa and Nigeria, while the largest exporters were Angola, South Africa and Sudan (China Africa Research Initiative online; MOFCOM, The People's Republic of China online).

When analysing the composition of trade, it is observed that it is based on the import of raw materials from African countries and the export of high value-added products. China's imports from sub-Saharan Africa are concentrated in extractive resources such as the crude oil that tops the list. Simultaneously, the People's Republic exported to this region a most diversified production. The highest percentage was met by capital goods (machinery, transport equipment), followed by textiles. The transition to the purchase of

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<sup>9</sup> As of the third ministerial conference of the FOCAC, the action plans included specific actions rather than a score of intentions. That is why, from 2006 onwards they will be worked on in chapter VI, corresponding to cooperation.

<sup>10</sup> Beijing has signed, then, "Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" with the Republic of Congo; "Comprehensive strategic partnership" with South Africa, Algeria and Egypt; "Strategic partnership" with Nigeria, Angola, Sudan and the African Union; "Comprehensive cooperative partnership", With Ethiopia, Gabon and Tanzania and finally, "Long term friendship and cooperative partnership", with Senegal (Li and Ye, 2019).



this type of products - which previously came from the United States or the European Union - is because they are more accessible in terms of costs, making them more attractive.

China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa has increased substantially since 2003, reaching a peak in 2008, then declining as a result of the international financial crisis. FDI is distributed in all sectors of the economy, within which infrastructure has been increasing exponentially. Regarding sector distribution, although Chinese capitals have varied destinations, the extractive industries were the predominant ones at first, exceeding 30% of the total, followed by construction and the financial and manufacturing sectors (The People's Republic of China, 2010 and 2013; Pigato and Tang, 2015: 11).

FDI in the Asian country has grown from 1.000 million dollars since 2004 to 35.000 million in 2015, representing an average annual growth rate of 40% (Sun et al., 2017: 20). In the region, the main recipient countries have been Angola, Kenya, Congo (DRC), South Africa and Zambia. In 2017, Chinese investment in Africa reached 4,100 million dollars, which meant a year-on-year increase of 70.8% but representing only 2.6% of China's total FDI flows in the world. That said and considering that Asia accounted for 69.5%, Europe 11.7% and Latin America 8.9%, there should not be an overvaluation of the place that Africa occupies in the distribution of FDI from China at the level global (Ministry of Commerce, The People's Republic of China, 2017: 96).

Beijing has a battery of government tools to deploy its economic interests in the countries of Africa, many of which were specified or proposed in the framework of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC). Among them, bilateral investment treaties with 32 African countries, zero tariff agreements on some exports with the Least Developed Countries and debt relief. Second, in 2006 and as part of one of the commitments established in the FOCAC, the China-Africa Development Fund was inaugurated, created by Chinese financial organizations to provide special support to national companies interested in investing in Africa. Finally, it is interesting to announce that China has promoted the installation of "special economic zones" in African territory - formulating the experience in its own country - in which Chinese companies take over the infrastructure. Finally, it is important to mention the Chinese financial institutions from which most of the loans emanate: China Development Bank, Export-Import Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Bank of China and China Construction Bank (The People's Republic of China, 2010 y 2013).

In other words, China has been deploying a multidimensional strategy in Africa in the 21st century. Here is noted, in particular, the type of cooperation that Beijing directed to African countries in order to demonstrate the crucial interest it has had in the development of infrastructure works.

## **2. China's cooperation in Africa: large infrastructure works at the centre of the scene**

The character of the Chinese CSS evolved along with its own internal dynamics and based on its external insertion needs. The political objective of strengthening and developing friendly cooperation with all developing countries, including especially African countries, has been an important component of China's foreign policy for long (Shelton, 2006). To understand the CSS of China in the 21st century, it becomes necessary to take a brief



tour to the recent past of the link established with Africa.

Specifically, at the dawn of the People's Republic, solidarity action responded to the need to obtain recognition from the international community as the legitimate government of all of China, and in turn, it was an ideological tool to internationalize communism in the world. So much so that this country began transferring grain, cotton or industrial materials to countries of the socialist orbit (North Korea and North Vietnam) in 1950. That is why the conception of Chinese cooperation arose closely linked to the relationship that the Asian country had with Third World countries, mainly with Africans.

The 1955 Bandung Conference - an event that marked the emergence of the countries of the South in a rigid bipolar order - and the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence<sup>11</sup> that emanated from it, helped to inform and give confidence to the relations that Beijing was trying to establish with those Afro-Asian nations. Taking advantage of the spirit of Bandung that gave impetus to the first links of communist China with African countries, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in 1963 enunciated in Sub-Saharan Africa "The Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Cooperation for other countries", which have guided Chinese cooperation to the present. In other words, "the philosophy of Chinese aid" can be summed up in four keywords: self-sufficiency, non-interference, infrastructure works and mutual benefit (Shimomura and Ohashi, 2013: 220). The most striking example that has transcended relations between China and the African countries was the construction of the railway between Tanzania and Zambia (TAZARA) during 1967 and 1975<sup>12</sup>.

Given the period of introspection that China started going through in the eighties due to the process of economic reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping, the motivation to maintain or increase the CSS decreased. The following decade is known as the return of China to the countries of the Global South as part of its international reintegration strategy post Tiananmen massacre, a return enthroned by Jiang Zemin's visit in 1996 to six African countries<sup>13</sup> where the principles of Sino-African cooperation were highlighted again, guidelines that would lay the foundations of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) established in the year 2000, as previously mentioned.

During the first decade of the 21st century, there was a resurgence of the CSS that was due to the new impulse granted by emerging powers such as China. According to the analysis of the two White papers on Chinese foreign aid, from 2011 and 2014 respectively, a series of issues related to our analysis theme emerge.

In semantic terms, the 2011 document emphasizes the category of "Chinese foreign aid" as a concept that synthesizes the different forms of cooperation carried out by the Asian country; which is why it can be considered that there is no longer such a resounding rejection of the word "help" (aid) in government circles (Grimm et al, 2011: 4). Such rejection was due to the fact that developed countries had appropriated the concept

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<sup>11</sup> The five principles of "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence" were brought to the conference by China and India. It is worth mentioning that although a proposal of ten principles emanated from the Bandung Conference, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are those recognized by China as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Information taken from the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Costa Rica <http://cr.chineseembassy.org/esp/xwdt/t1173044.htm> [Consulted on 31-03-2019].

<sup>12</sup> The case of TAZARA is discussed in more detail in the following pages.

<sup>13</sup> Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mali, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Information taken from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18001.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18001.shtml) [Consulted on 24-03-2019].





Official Development Assistance (ODA). According to the excerpt: "As development remains an arduous and long-standing task, China's foreign aid falls into the category of South-South cooperation and is mutual help between developing countries" (The People's Republic of China, 2011: 3). From then on, the foreign aid provided by Beijing entered into the CSS category, as an umbrella and generic concept that would contemplate various forms of cooperation among developing countries. Likewise, there was a crucial difference between the first and the second *White Paper*: while the former referred to the "foreign aid", the second is positioned in the term "foreign assistance", restricting the term "aid" only when it is linked to "humanitarian aid" (*emergency humanitarian aid*) (Lechini and Dussort, 2016).

Regarding the modalities acquired by the cooperation offered<sup>14</sup>, since 2000, the most commonly used have been the so-called "complete projects", destined mainly to the sectors of economic infrastructure (transport, electrical energy and telecommunications), industrial and energy (petroleum, metallurgical and coal production industry). By the way, the second *White paper* clarified that while 72.4% of the funds between 2010 and 2013 were absorbed by infrastructure projects, 5.8% were directed to technical cooperation and cooperation for human resources development (The People's Republic of China, 2011 and 2014).

Regarding the institutional architecture in charge of international cooperation, historically the general direction of development assistance policy depended on the Chinese Communist Party Leading Grouping for Foreign Affairs. The latter and the State Council [*State Council Leading Group for Foreign Affairs*] are the highest level administrative bodies that regulated the agencies responsible for administering cooperation projects: MOFCOM (which had an Aid department for foreign countries); the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA); a series of specialized ministries (Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Communications) and the International Liaison Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Chin and Frolic, 2007).

According to Huang and Wei (2015), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance had the greatest influence on the foreign assistance policy. But the Ministry of Commerce was the most important government agency in the execution of Chinese assistance since 2003. While the Ministry of Finance established the budgetary funds for aid programs, the Ministry of Commerce was responsible for analysing their viability, coordinating the process of their implementation through the ministries and carrying out their review. From the beginning, the Ministry of Commerce nucleated the total administration of the financial funds. With the creation of EXIM Bank in 1994, this institution began managing soft loans and the Ministry of Commerce to manage subsidies and tax-free loans. The Chinese Development Bank, also founded in 1994, provided financial support to the investments of Chinese companies in developing countries. By positioning external aid within MOFCOM, the strong economic motivation behind each project awarded is demonstrated.

Recently, there was an intense academic debate in China in order to provide institutional alternatives that nucleate cooperation programs. Finally, in 2018 the Xi Jinping

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<sup>14</sup> From the beginning, they were classified in technical cooperation, human resources training, aid for humanitarian emergencies, complete projects, materials and goods, medical equipment, volunteer programs and debt forgiveness. The first three are supported by subsidies, that is, no payment is expected in return from receiving countries (Mthembu, 2018).





government inaugurated the Chinese Agency for International Development Cooperation (CIDCA) (Huang and Wei, 2015).

Due to the above, it can be understood that historically the financial resources that have sustained the Chinese SSC have been divided into three types: subsidies (financial extension without repayment agreement by the beneficiary), loans at zero interest rate (with a term of 20 years) and soft loans (with a term of 15-20 years and an annual interest rate of 2-3%). The fact that from 2000 onwards the soft credits have increased, and the subsidies decreased, also sees the intent of Chinese cooperation.

In geographical terms, the largest recipients of external aid have been the countries of Africa and Asia, and to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania and Eastern Europe. However, since 2010 Africa has accounted for 50% of all aid (The People's Republic of China, 2011 and 2014).

Simultaneously, it is interesting to compare the above with the analysis made on the state of infrastructure situation in Africa of other international organizations and *think tanks* (Foster et al, 2009; Gutman et al, 2015; The Infrastructure Consortium for Africa<sup>15</sup> -ICA-, 2017). According to the 2009 World Bank report (Foster et al, 2009), it was announced that between 2000-2007 the two sectors mostly benefited by Chinese capitals were energy, gathering 33.4% (particularly hydroelectric power) and transport, with 33.2% (especially railways). Beijing's financing commitments remained at an average of 5.000 million dollars between those years, focusing on 70% in Nigeria, Angola, Ethiopia and Sudan. However, from 2007 to 2012 a certain change in the destiny of Chinese financing was demonstrated, from countries rich in strategic natural resources - such as the four previously indicated - to countries that are not. Such is the case that Ghana and Ethiopia were the largest recipients, followed by Cameroon, Zambia and Nigeria (Gutman et al., 2015).

Based on the latest ICA report (2017: 16), Chinese investment commitments in infrastructure works in Africa peaked in 2013, demonstrating that the Asian country collected the highest percentage of financing for the continent (66% of the total), surpassing international financial organizations and traditional powers. Within this framework, the almost 4 billion dollars allocated to the Mombasa-Nairobi railway section in Kenya were included, the case study that will be addressed below. It should also be mentioned that the amounts for the analysed sector continued *in crescendo*, reaching a value close to 20,000 million dollars in 2017.

In short, of what transpired in the preceding pages, we can say that China's cooperation was born and developed simultaneously with the relations that the People's Republic maintained with the developing countries, mainly African. Although initially such an action was aimed at spreading the Maoist revolution in the Third World, it was transformed as domestic changes occurred in that country. In this way, Beijing (and its state-owned companies as executing arms), has become the promoter, financier and executor of many of the infrastructure projects that African countries need today.

Departing from the assumption of Xi Jinping in 2012, signs of a global foreign policy are being given, following the launch of initiatives such as the BRI, which gave a central role

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<sup>15</sup> The ICA is made up of multilateral development banks and regional development banks such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), the South African Development Bank (DBSA), the European Commission, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the countries that make up the G8, the Republic of South Africa and the World Bank Group.



to interconnectivity and with it, the extension of the works for that purpose. In the following pages, the inclusion of the African continent in the initiative and, in this context, the intensification of the role of China as a state supplier of public goods. Likewise, progress is being made on the Mombasa-Nairobi project, in an attempt to delve into the cost / benefit binomial of Chinese development cooperation in Kenya.

### **3. Interconnectivity, focus of the Belt and Road Initiative**

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan announced the economic belt of the Silk Road ("The One Belt"). The same year and in similar circumstances in Indonesia he announced the Maritime Silk Road ("One Road"). Both form what was initially known as the initiative "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR), which is currently defined as "Belt and Road Initiative". The economic belt of the Silk Road aims to link China with Europe through Central Asia and Russia; with the Middle East through Central Asia and unite China and Southeast Asia, southern Asia and the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the Maritime Silk Road focuses on the use of Chinese coastal ports to link China with Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Africa enters the scene on the sea route. Although, initially, their participation in official terms was not entirely clear, in fact some African countries are part of the initiative. However, "only African countries considered strategic for OBOR, especially those vital to establish and secure commercial links, would be prioritized by the Chinese government" (Bagwandeem, 2017: 2).

The BRI stands as one of the most ambitious and important programs of the 21st century, which aims to achieve an integrated economic architecture (Concatti, 2017). Therefore, it is fundamental for the Chinese government to improve physical connectivity between the countries involved as a first step. Consequently, a succession of projects aimed at narrowing the "infrastructure gap has already been launched."

With China's global strategy in mind, numerous projects focused on transport infrastructure were initiated in several African states with the backing of Beijing. In 2009, the *East Africa Railway Master Plan Study* (EARMP) was published, in which a report on the status of the railroads in East Africa was made. EARMP issued a proposal to optimize their use and increase the volume of tons transported, projecting an increase from 3,700 million in 2007 to 16 million in 2030 (CPCS, 2009). In the updated version of that report, published by the *East Africa Community* (EAC) In 2017, the Asian country appeared as the key actor in the completion of the railway master project.

Beijing promised to lead the formation of *Chinese group for Sino-Africa cooperation in railway and high-speed railway*<sup>16</sup> in that region of Africa, which would integrate resources from financing institutions, railway construction companies and railway operations management companies. In this way, it can be seen that the Asian giant has been advancing steadily in the railway sector of the region<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For more information see press report of the African Union. Available at: <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20161010-2>

<sup>17</sup> At the continental level, progress was made in infrastructure cooperation through the Memorandum of Understanding between China and the African Union signed on January 25, 2015, which consolidated China's plans for Africa with the aim of promoting railroad cooperation, roads, regional aviation networks and industrialization fields. On October 5, 2016, a Five-Year Action Plan was signed at the UA headquarters, between the African Union Commission (AUC) whose presidency was in charge of Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini



Four years after the launching of the initiative, China convened the first Belt and Road Forum for international cooperation -Belt and Road Forum (BRF)- in May 2017 in Beijing, under the motto "*Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*", in which government representatives from more than one hundred countries participated. In the opening address, President Xi Jinping emphasized that the initiative is based on the principles of peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusion, learning and mutual benefits. He also stressed that there are four major priority areas of cooperation, all crossed by the principle of "interconnectivity": infrastructure, commerce, finance and contact between people (*people to people connectivity*). In this regard, it is highlighted that the initiative strives to increase cooperation and exchange in fields such as technology, natural resources, tourism, environmental protection and NGOs. Within the infrastructure cooperation, the emphasis was on railroads, roads, air routes, telecommunications, pipelines and gas pipelines and ports (XinhuaNet, 2017).

From the African continent, four countries participated in the event, namely: Egypt, Tunisia, Ethiopia and Kenya (The Diplomat, 2017). It is no accident that two of them are part of the East African region, with its shores in the Indian Ocean, becoming key places in the Chinese initiative. In fact, the port of Nairobi is marked on the maps that show the route of the sea route<sup>18</sup>.

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, initially African participation in the BRI appeared with a question mark. However, at present, the interest and impulse of African countries to extend it to their territories can be affirmed. Such is the case, that some authors already classify it as "a second belt" (Breuer, 2017). The truth is that in the framework of the 2018 FOCAC summit in Johannesburg, China included the BRI at the conclusion of the signing of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) bilaterally with thirty-seven African countries and the African Union<sup>19</sup>, where they expressed the political will for the joint development of the initiative (Xinhuanet, 2018). It should be noted that Kenya is among the signatory countries (Mbogo, 2018), reaffirming the geostrategic relevance it has for its spatial location.

### **3.1 Kenya, another gateway to Africa: the Mombasa-Nairobi railway**

As it became known, China's participation in railway infrastructure projects in Africa dates back to last century. It is necessary to remember that already in the sixties Beijing was the key player in the construction of the TAZARA<sup>20</sup>, binational railroad jointly owned by

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Zuma and the representative of the government of the People's Republic of China, Mr. Xu Shaoshi, Minister of National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). Within the framework of the Action Plan several milestones were proposed to be developed during the period in question, such as: the agreement on relevant laws and regulations on railway cooperation; the establishment of a Project Implementation Unit (PEU) by the AUC; collaboration and simplification between African and Chinese companies; technology transfer, education and capacity building for manufacturing locally-owned goods (African Union, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> See maps of the following sites: Xinhua; World Economic Forum; The Economist, Kenyan Wall street.

<sup>19</sup> According to *Belt and Road Investment Index Report 2018*, prepared by the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Commerce, the countries that are part of the initiative are South Africa, Kenya, Morocco, Ghana, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Madagascar, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Congo and Angola. Anyway, it is important to consider that all the projects previously agreed between an African government and China -after signing the MoUs for which they have been called "BRI countries" - have been incorporated into the initiative.

<sup>20</sup> In the sixties, the governments of Tanzania and Zambia were working on the design, but they knew that this gigantic project required large amounts of funds to take off. At first, they contacted Western countries to get help to build the line, but those rejected the idea and insisted that "the project was not economically viable". It was there that the government of the People's Republic of China, under the direction of Mao quickly accepted and offered to finance it as a turnkey project. It was then that on September 5, 1967, an



the governments of the United Republic of Tanzania and the Republic of Zambia. In terms of interconnectivity, TAZARA linked Zambia with the seaport of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and provided roads and railways. In essence, it was a backbone communication network for the East African Community. This project has become a symbol of China's solidarity cooperation in Africa, which persists to the present. It realizes that in July 2018, a meeting was held between the Minister of the Central Committee of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (PCCh), Mr. Song Tao, and the authorities of TAZARA, to whom he has requested the advancement of the "Spirit of TAZARA" as a symbol of friendship, committing himself to the modernization of it (TAZARA, 2018)<sup>21</sup>.

In this context, China and the African Union signed a MoU in 2015 with the objective of connecting their capitals and important cities with an integrated high-speed rail network, an emblematic project of the 2063 Africa Continental Agenda. Meanwhile, the Chinese project of modernization and railway construction of the Mombasa-Nairobi section in Kenya is also part of the East African Railway Master Plan - which aims to extend throughout Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

The case of the Mombasa-Nairobi (or Madaraka Express) railway section is of particular interest since it runs parallel to the *Uganda Railway* (known as "Lunatic Express"), built by Great Britain at the end of the 19th century, when these territories were under British rule (Duell, 2017). The lack of maintenance of these communication channels generated a significant deterioration in transport capacity<sup>22</sup>.

Consequently, the SGR project, funded mostly by China, was designed in two large corridors: Northern corridor and Lapsset corridor<sup>23</sup>, which cover different sections of the railway. The *Northern Corridor* It consists of two phases: the first of 472 km from Mombasa to Nairobi, which is completed and was inaugurated on May 31, 2017. The second phase, of 490 km total completing the Nairobi - Kisumu - Malaba route, is in turn made up of 3 subphases of which only the first one is underway.

The main actors involved in the design, construction and execution of the Mombasa-Nairobi section were mainly two large Chinese companies. On the one hand, the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC)<sup>24</sup> which was hired by Kenya Railways (KR) to carry out the first phase of the *Northern Corridor* and also two commercial contracts were signed, namely: one related to the construction of civil works under the turnkey modality and another for the supply, purchase and installation of locomotives and rolling stock. On the other hand, KR and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) have signed four commercial contracts for the development and execution of the second phase

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agreement was concluded for the construction of TAZARA in Beijing, between the governments of China, Tanzania and Zambia. The Chinese financed the project, provided support for construction, experience and equipment, including buildings, workshops, training schools and related infrastructure. The initial idea was for the rail line to start from Kidatu in Tanzania to Kampoyo in Zambia. In 1970, China agreed to grant Tanzania and Zambia an interest-free loan repayable in thirty for a total of 988 million yuan- to cover the costs of construction of the line and the supporting infrastructure of the stations and the training school, as well as the supply of motor energy and rolling stock.

<sup>21</sup> For more information about this project you can read: "Freedom Railway. The unexpected successes of a Cold War development Project". Available: <http://bostonreview.net/jamie-monson-freedom-railway-tazara-tanzania>

<sup>22</sup> The *Uganda Railway* is a railway that connects Lake Victoria to the port of Mombasa. In the eighties its transport capacity was 4.8 million tons and in 2012 1.5 million (Mugwe, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> For more information about this corridor visit: <http://www.lapsset.go.ke/projects/railway/> . It consists of two large sections: the first *Lamu - Isiolo - Nakdok* that will cover 1,350 km; and the second *Nairobi - Isiolo - Moyale* over 700km.

<sup>24</sup> It is a subsidiary of the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC).



of the Nairobi-Malaba section of the project. With regard to construction supervision, it is the responsibility of the China Railway Development Company, Apec Consortium Limited and Edon Consultants International (CRDC/APEC/EDON Consortium) who are responsible for the review and supervision of design and construction to ensure that quality standards are met.

The cost of the first phase Mombasa-Nairobi amounted to 3,223 million dollars, which made it the most expensive infrastructure projected in Kenya since its independence and equivalent to 20% of its national budget (Changfeng & Ziro Mwatela, 2016). The financing was provided by 90% of the Exim Bank of China through the granting of a loan to the Kenyan government. The remaining 10% was financed by the African country who did so through a Railroad Development Fund, anchored in a 1.5% tax on the cost of overseas imports transported in Madaraka Express (Kenya Railways, 2019; Railway Gazette, 2017).

To summarize we can see that according to the above detailed, China is concerned not only with the financing, construction and execution, but also with the provision of materials and project supervision. What can be seen is that the Madaraka Express meant advances and improvements reflected, on the one hand, in the increase in volumes transported to and from the port; and on the other hand, the reduction of costs and travel time, the promotion of investments and an improvement in the competitiveness of markets.

To account for this, the National Statistics Office of Kenya (KNBS) reported that the rail service transported 699,055 passengers between June and December 2017, a number that increased to just over 1.5 million in 2018. In addition, the SGR freight service transported 5 million tons of merchandise in 2018, with a total revenue of 863,177 million dollars (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). Regarding the reduction of transport time, while the "Lunatic Express" takes about 12 hours to make Mombasa-Nairobi, the Madaraka Express completes the section between 4 and 5 hours. As far as employment is concerned, the project has created at least 19,400 direct jobs and 6,000 employees by subcontractors (Breuer, 2017).

Once the project is fully completed, further decongestion in the Port of Mombasa and an exponential increase in cargo volumes transported to and from the port are expected. Another advantage will be reflected in the even greater decrease in production costs, making the region a competitive and attractive destination for foreign investments that will help in the export of various resources stranded in the region. Finally, it is argued that road wear will be reduced, so maintenance costs will also be reduced (Kenya Railways, 2019).

However, despite the great contribution that the railway project has achieved, there are also two major challenges that the Kenyan government must face as a side effect of its realization. First, as of 2013, the trade balance deficit between Kenya and the Asian country deepened, amounting to 3,681 million dollars in 2017. This is due to the substantial increase in imports of Kenya from China equivalent to 5,000 million dollars mostly of consumer, capital and intermediate goods. (World Integrated Trade solution, World Bank, 2019).

Second, the environmental issue is another of the problematic axes of the project. Although the first section crossed "Tsavo National Park", bridges, underground passages and pens were built to provide the animals with alternative passageways. However, the



second phase was stopped because the project implied that it crossed the “Nairobi National Park”, to which were opposed self-proclaimed conservation sectors of the society (Breuer, 2017). In order to overcome this obstacle, the government undertook to reduce the carbon footprint of the trains involved in the project in order to reduce the environmental degradation of its territory (Kenya Railways, 2019).

In summary, from the above, we can affirm that although the railway project is a work that contributes in the short and medium term to the growth of Kenya, its government must face an ever deeper external debt, with China being the main creditor accounting for 66% (Anzette Were, 2018). In the same way, a viable path to deal with the debt with the People's Republic cannot be observed in the near future. So much so, that Kenya had to borrow from third countries (such as Japan, France, Germany, etc.) in order to support it. In other words, the African country is trapped in a vicious circle that assimilates a new dependence, but with Chinese characteristics, known as ‘debt trap’.

## Conclusions

After having approached infrastructure cooperation in Africa, particularly the case of the Mombasa-Nairobi project, it has allowed us to make the following final reflections. First, it is important to highlight that the CSS was always present as China's foreign policy tool in the approach to developing countries. Moreover, infrastructure cooperation has emerged as a symbol of development cooperation, mainly towards African countries. It is true that the first example that illustrates such a commitment was the TAZARA, at a historic moment when the Asian country was not the economic power that it has become today. Therefore, beyond the political and ideological interests that went through the realization of such a project in East Africa, it was a solidarity action per se.

However, as China consolidates its internal development model, its foreign policy interests have changed to the extent of its rise in the international order. In this sense, infrastructure cooperation projects are not only of vital importance to stimulate development in African countries, as the Asian giant affirms, but mainly to promote commercial exchange and expand the activities of its state-owned companies. Precisely, the launch of the BRI in 2013 responds to Beijing's global strategy and it is no less than its nerve centre is the construction of civil-type infrastructure works.

Within the framework of the BRI, the efforts of the African countries to incorporate their continent in this initiative should be highlighted. The fact of being part of a strategy that involves half of the globe and that has prospects of becoming global, gives Africa a position of unenforceable geopolitical relevance. However, African countries also compete with each other for more benefits in their relations with China. In this regard, Kenya is perceived and perceives itself as another point of entry (or exit, depending on the point of view) to Sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to the states grouped under this characteristic, namely South Africa or Nigeria. The Mombasa-Nairobi railroad project has granted Kenya a privileged position, because it postulates Mombasa to become the main port of East Africa, in addition to becoming a modern transit route from the Indian Ocean to central Africa.

Lastly, it is interesting to evaluate whether the above-mentioned infrastructure cooperation project effectively allows for a mutually beneficial relationship. As for China, as stated, the gains are evident. On the contrary, for Kenya, from a first approach, the





project would be very beneficial, although, it is necessary to examine some effects in the short and medium term. Regarding the "pros", this type of works reduces production costs indirectly, by reducing the cost of freight. Consequently, it would increase the competitiveness of Kenyan exports (and those of neighbouring countries) as well as Nairobi would improve tax collection by exploiting this new communication channel.

However, as noted, Kenya's way of paying the Chinese Exim Bank loan is through a lien on the use of the railroad. In addition, while the project is being carried out, China is the one who decides on all phases of implementation. That is, the African country does not have autonomy on the matter in any way. At the same time, Kenya's balance of payments has deteriorated since project implementation, becoming highly deficient. This is because China imports the machinery, goods and services it needs for project execution. Which leads us to affirm that in a short period of four years (2013-2017) Nairobi's economy became very dependent on the relations with Beijing.

It is clear that China gives countries such as Africans the possibility of accessing tangible, necessary, rapid investments without the bureaucracy characteristic of international financial organizations. However, projects that are framed as CSS have many similarities with the attached help (better known as "tied aid") practiced by the traditional powers, when certain conditionalities are established that end up blurring the advocated solidarity horizon.

All of the above leads to reinforcing the idea that China is intensifying its role as a state supplier of world public goods. So, this "hegemon aspirant" seems to be emulating certain characteristics of British Pax on the way to the establishment of its own China Pax.

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