

BEYOND TRADITIONAL AID: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE-FUNDED INFRASTRUCTURE IN KENYA AND ETHIOPIA, 2010-2023

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade and a half, China has expanded its trade relations with Africa, becoming the leading economic partner for numerous nations across the continent. This article examines South-South Cooperation (SSC) in the infrastructure sector, focusing on Chinese engagement in Kenya and Ethiopia between 2010 and 2023. These countries were selected due to their central role in Africa's economic dynamics and their historical diplomatic ties with Beijing. The case studies reveal that African states are not merely passive recipients of SSC; rather, both Kenya and Ethiopia demonstrate significant agency by aligning Chinese infrastructure investments with their own national development agendas. Contrary to the narrative of China as a new hegemonic power, this paper argues that China acts as a strategic partner that respects sovereignty and promotes mutual benefit – notwithstanding the risks associated with rising debt levels. Therefore, China offers a cooperation framework that distinctively contrasts with the models established by traditional donors.

Keywords: South-South cooperation; infrastructure; China; Africa; Kenya; Ethiopia.

SINOPSE

Na última década e meia, a China ampliou suas relações comerciais com a África e tornou-se o principal parceiro econômico de muitos países do continente. Neste artigo, analisa-se a cooperação Sul-Sul (CSS) no setor de infraestrutura realizada pela China com o Quênia e a Etiópia entre 2010 e 2023. Esses países foram selecionados para o estudo devido à sua relevância para a dinâmica econômica da África e aos laços diplomáticos históricos com Pequim. Os estudos de caso evidenciam que os países africanos não são receptores passivos da CSS: tanto o Quênia como a Etiópia exercem agência ao alinhar os investimentos chineses em infraestrutura às suas agendas nacionais de desenvolvimento. Diferentemente de autores que enxergam a China como uma nova força hegemônica atuando no continente africano, o texto defende que a China atua como um parceiro estratégico que respeita a soberania e promove o benefício mútuo – apesar dos riscos associados ao aumento do endividamento dos países africanos –, oferecendo, portanto, um modelo de cooperação distinto daquele exercido por doadores tradicionais.

Palavras-chave: cooperação Sul-Sul; infraestrutura; China; África; Quênia; Etiópia.

JEL: F21; F34; F35; F54; O55.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century opened with a series of shifts that reconfigured the international system. Although the United States retained its hegemonic status, the early 2000s saw Western European States struggling to preserve their influence and relevance amid the rise and consolidation of new powers (Alden, Morphet and Vieira, 2010). This reorganization was further underpinned by a fundamental shift in the global economy's center of gravity, which, following a long and gradual process, realigned toward Asia (Tonby et al., 2019). Countries once relegated to a peripheral position, such as China and India, emerged as global or regional powers. In these shifting times, African countries also aspire to make significant changes in their position within the international hierarchy.

Regarding these ambitions, the African Union adopted Agenda 2063 in January 2015, which its conceivers consider the blueprint and masterplan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future (African Union, 2021). The call for this 50-year development plan first emerged in 2013 at the 21st African Union's Ordinary Assembly held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Agenda 2063 outlines a strategic project for inclusive and sustainable development to foster unity, freedom, progress, and collective prosperity within the continent. Furthermore, the document presents a strategic framework with notable particularities; specifically, the texts lack any mention of the United States or Western European powers as potential investment sources (African Union, 2015). Instead, recent African Union meetings position emerging powers and China as the desirable economic partners for the coming decades, a calculated move within the African economic landscape.

The contemporary Sino-African relationship has its roots in the 1960s. Following the Sino-Soviet split, China's foreign policy was reoriented to challenge the superpowers' hegemony within the international system (Visentini and Oliveira, 2012, p. 27). To this end, the Asian country adopted Mao Zedong's Intermediate Zones Theory⁵ and initiated new strategic engagements with developing nations. This new orientation led China to support several anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements across Africa. Consequently, China expanded its diplomatic ties and economic partnerships in the region, ultimately transforming the nation into one of Africa's top investors over the last decades (Visentini and Oliveira, 2012).

In this regard, this article conducts a content analysis of the Kenyan and Ethiopian cases. Both have maintained long-standing relations with Beijing; notwithstanding, these ties have strengthened significantly over the last decade. Through foreign direct investment (FDI) and the provision of credit to national development policies, China has become a pivotal actor in the developmental trajectories of both countries. This relationship further deepened and acquired a more formalized structure in 2017-2018, when Kenya and Ethiopia formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative (Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs of Kenya, 2025; Nedopil, 2025). These significant steps support a key premise of this article, that Chinese presence in Kenya and Ethiopia is not shaped solely by Beijing's global interests. Rather, these African countries see China as a strategic partner in advancing their own agendas and interests (Farooq, Feroze e Kai, 2019;

5. The Intermediate Zones theory was based on the idea that the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1960s unfolded within a highly complex and diverse international landscape. Mao identified "two intermediate zones" coexisting in the global arena. The first comprised peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, primarily located in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The second comprised more developed nations, mostly situated in Eastern Europe, along with countries like Japan, which, while economically advanced, were still under the influence of either superpower. According to Visentini and Oliveira (2012, p. 27), Mao envisioned China positioning itself as an alternative force, countering the influence of both superpowers by supporting countries in the first zone and diplomatically engaging those in the second.

Procópio, 2019; Cheru, 2016). Therefore, these countries are not passive recipients of Chinese influence; instead, they bring their own demands to the negotiation table.

With a gross domestic product (GDP) exceeding US\$ 45 billion in 2013 (IMF, 2025), a sizable population, and a vast Indian Ocean coastline, Kenya was considered a natural gateway for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative's entry into Africa from Asia (Farooq, Feroze e Kai, 2019). Over the last decade, the country has become a significant recipient of Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure. China's geopolitical interest in Kenya's geographical position is reflected in its port and railway projects, which are being developed to function as strategic logistical corridors for the export of goods – particularly energy resources – from South Sudan and Uganda, with planned extensions aimed at enhancing connectivity with landlocked countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi (Farooq et al., 2018; Farooq, Feroze e Kai, 2019; BRI..., 2024). Nevertheless, Nairobi utilizes its State institutions to assert its own strategic goals when negotiating with China (Procópio, 2019). Ethiopia is in an analogous situation. Situated in a strategic region for Beijing's affairs in the Horn of Africa, and bordering South Sudan, the country has maintained close ties with China since the Cold War, when the Chinese development model became a reference to the Ethiopian government (Adem, 2012). In recent times, this relationship has evolved, with Ethiopia receiving more favorable terms in its negotiations with China than those typically offered by the Western countries (Cheru, 2016).

Kenya and Ethiopia were selected as case studies for five primary reasons. First, both countries are among the ten largest economies in Africa (IMF, 2025) and play central roles in their respective regional contexts – Kenya in East Africa and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. Their economic size and regional influence make them particularly relevant for examining China-Africa investment dynamics. Secondly, between 2010 and 2023, both countries emerged as leading recipients of Chinese FDI in Africa. While annual flows fluctuated, their accumulated FDI stock grew consistently, maintaining both countries among the continent's top ten recipients of Chinese FDI stock from 2017 to 2023 (China Africa Research Initiative, 2025). Thirdly, they share long-standing diplomatic relations with China, dating back to the Cold War, when Beijing's anti-colonial stance resonated with their own post-independence aspirations. Fourth, unlike major resource-exporting nations, neither Kenya nor Ethiopia is a significant producer of strategic commodities such as oil or coal. Their reliance on agricultural exports means that China's substantial investment in these countries cannot be explained solely by resource-seeking motives but rather points to a broader strategic rationale behind their deepening ties.

Finally, a fifth motive for the selection of Kenya and Ethiopia is their distinct historical and geopolitical trajectories. Ethiopia, having avoided formal colonization, prioritizes sovereignty and has historically pursued a more autonomous foreign policy. Kenya, in contrast, experienced British colonial rule and retains strong historical, economic, and institutional ties with Western countries. This contrast allows for an assessment of whether China's South-South Cooperation approach adapts to different historical legacies and geopolitical contexts or maintains uniform principles regardless of the partner country.

By focusing on Kenya and Ethiopia, two of the most illustrative cases of Chinese engagement in Africa, the article aims to contribute to a broader understanding of China's cooperation with the continent. These countries exemplify dimensions of China-Africa relations that extend beyond resource extraction, highlighting how infrastructure investments intersect with local

development strategies and historical diplomatic ties. Through a closer analysis of these cases, the article explores the dynamics of agency, interdependence, and strategic negotiation that characterize China's partnerships in Africa. In doing so, we expect to enrich the debate on the implications of Chinese cooperation in the Global South while offering insights that may inform and inspire innovation for Brazil's relations with China and other Global South nations. By identifying how Kenya and Ethiopia align national development goals with Chinese investment frameworks, this study aims to offer valuable analytical insights for Brazilian policymakers when designing cooperation strategies with China and other Global South partners.

Centered on railway and port projects, the article contends that these partnerships show the agency of African States, whose development strategies and goals receive support from Chinese actors. Therefore, it seeks to demonstrate that these partnerships reflect a significant degree of autonomy among African countries in their development trajectories, rather than framing China as a new hegemon in the continent. After exploring the debate on South-South Cooperation (SSC) and its presence in the Chinese foreign policy towards Africa, the paper analyses railway and port projects with Chinese engagement. Finally, the last section presents the conclusions drawn from the analysis. We assume that these case studies serve as illustrative examples of China's presence in the region and its strategic engagement with key sectors.

2 THE HISTORY OF SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

A clear understanding of the theoretical foundations of this article is essential for an accurate interpretation of its arguments. This research departs from the premise that, up to 2023 – the final year analyzed in this article – China's engagement and foreign policy toward the Global South has reflected, albeit not without challenges, the fundamental principles and rich experiences of South-South Cooperation (SSC). These principles are grounded in mutually beneficial cooperation, shared development goals, respect for sovereignty and human rights, and a sense of solidarity. Another fundamental premise of this article is that, unlike traditional aid models, SSC is not merely about one side giving and the other receiving; rather, "it is about countries working together to address common challenges through the exchange of knowledge, skills, and technology" (United Nations, 2025). In this sense, SSC is voluntary, driven by the priorities of the countries involved, and free from the conditionalities commonly present in North-South Cooperation.

Finally, although South-South Cooperation differentiates itself from traditional aid models and developed-to-developing countries cooperation (North-South Cooperation), it does not replace the latter. Instead, SSC is understood as a complementary mechanism, intended to address both the conceptual and material gaps left by traditional North-South approaches. With this conceptual framework established, the historical development of SSC is examined in the remainder of this section.

SSC is not a novelty within the debate on international cooperation (UNOSSC, 1978; Pino, 2014). According to the traditional literature on the subject (Pino, 2014; Medeiros and Pereira, 2015; Mawdsley, 2012; Bergamaschi and Tickner, 2017), its origins can be traced back to the struggles for independence among Asian and African countries during the 1940s and 1950s, their early efforts in technical cooperation, and the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) a few years later. These initiatives emerged in the post-war period as an effort

to create an alternative mechanism of international development cooperation (IDC), contrasting with the assistance programs established by developed nations, especially the United States, to support countries affected by World War II and developing nations. With the onset of the Cold War, the competition between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics transformed these initiatives from *ad hoc* diplomatic expedients into consistent and permanent patterns of interaction among states, international organizations, and agencies (Milani, 2014). These early years saw the establishment of many international organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Furthermore, the countries leading this new type of cooperation arrangement created their own bilateral agencies specialized in international development cooperation.

In the realm of bilateral and multilateral organizations, a clear division of labor soon emerged: bilateral agencies focused on technical assistance and budgetary aid, while multilateral institutions were tasked with supporting and managing project implementation. Discursively, both spheres converged on the themes of human rights, decolonization, and development. However, as Milani (2012, 2014) observes, these mechanisms were heavily shaped by geopolitical interests, marked by asymmetrical distributions of benefits, and permeated by recurrent cultural, social, economic, and political interventions.⁶ Compounding these limitations was the persistence of “top-down” and colonial forms of cooperation, which, under the banner of development, frequently sought to transplant economic, institutional, and cultural models from metropolises to colonies.⁷

It was precisely against this backdrop that the Bandung Conference (1955) emerged as a landmark in what is understood today as contemporary SSC. Gathering representatives from 29 newly independent Asian and African nations, led by China and India, the conference fostered discussions grounded in principles that would inspire cooperation among countries of the former Third World⁸ in the years that followed. The conference members wished to secure their place in international society as independent countries, opposing imperialism, racism, and socioeconomic inequalities (Medeiros and Pereira, 2015). These deliberations culminated in the adoption of the Ten Principles of Bandung, which emphasized respect for human rights, sovereignty, equality among nations, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence (see table 1). By establishing a framework for political solidarity, these principles also underscored the importance of mutual support in technical and economic development, marking a pivotal moment in the history of SSC.

6. Within the bipolar order established at Yalta, neither the West nor the East tolerated genuine autonomy from their satellites or spheres of influence, as illustrated by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, the repression of the Prague Spring in 1968, the United States' support for military coups in Latin America, and the resistance faced by Brazil's Independent Foreign Policy (Milani, 2014).

7. A clear example is the British Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, later reinforced by the 1947 Overseas Development Act, which channeled resources into social and educational projects aimed at molding colonial elites and institutionalizing Britain's development cooperation both within its colonies and abroad (Olutayo, Olutayo and Omobowale, 2008).

8. According to Visentini (2015), the Third World was an expression coined in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy, drawing an analogy with the pre-revolutionary French “Third Estate” – the social class representing the common people. The term encompassed a diverse group of developing nations, primarily from the peripheral or semi-peripheral regions of the world, that were not aligned with the major geopolitical blocs of the Cold War: The First World (capitalist nations), and The Second World (socialist countries). These nations were generally characterized by young populations, abundant natural resources, significant potential for economic growth, and anti-colonial ideologies. In 1961, many of these states became part of the Non-Aligned Movement.

TABLE 1

The ten Bandung principles (1955)

- 1) Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.
- 2) Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.
- 3) Recognition of the equality of all races and of all nations, large and small.
- 4) Abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country.
- 5) Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself, singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
- 6) (a) Abstention from the use of collective defense arrangements to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers;
(b) Abstention from exerting pressure on other countries.
- 7) Refraining from acts or threats of aggression, or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country.
- 8) Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
- 9) Promotion of mutual interests and co-operation.
- 10) Respect for justice and for international obligations.

Source: Final... (1955).

In the Final Communiqué of the conference, two sections were dedicated to laying the groundwork for economic and cultural cooperation between these countries. In its “Economic Cooperation” section, the communiqué emphasized the need for Asian and African countries to go beyond aid and expertise sharing by promoting structural reforms in their economic relations. It recommended diversifying exports, promoting intra-regional trade fairs, and strengthening business and information exchanges, while also addressing structural challenges such as high freight rates, the need for better transit facilities for landlocked countries, and broader infrastructure development. These proposals show that Bandung was not only symbolic in its political principles but also pragmatic in tackling concrete economic obstacles to cooperation – an orientation that would resonate in later SSC initiatives. Complementing this, the communiqué stressed cultural cooperation, encouraging exchanges in education, science, and the arts to foster mutual understanding and solidarity among Asian and African nations (Final..., 1955).

As Pino (2014) notes, the conference transcended the African-Asian context, went beyond purely political considerations, and laid the foundation for a shared agenda among Third World countries. In the following years, Latin American nations joined this emerging bloc – the countries of the South – united by a common concern: the challenges of economic development.

The initial demands of the developing nations focused on addressing asymmetries in international trade. This agenda soon translated into coordinated action through pressure groups within the United Nations (UN), notably the NAM, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). As Alden, Morphet and Vieira (2010) argue, these coalitions often exerted normative influence within international organizations thereby enhancing the political visibility of developing countries.

Regarding UNCTAD specifically, the organization supported developing countries in formulating trade policies, facilitated the exchange of experiences during its plenary sessions, and contributed to the creation of another key SSC body: the Group of 77 (G-77). This group, comprising 77 developing countries, advocated for a new international trade framework aligned with their requirements for accelerated industrialization. Committed to unity and solidarity, its members coordinated consultations and joint action plans. Despite its relatively simple structure,

including an annually rotating presidency based on geographic distribution, the G-77 played a crucial role in advancing the institutionalization of SSC.

While these political advancements unfolded, the traditional donor–recipient cooperation framework faced persistent criticism. Developing nations frequently challenged its aid-based foundations, the incorporation of geopolitical and strategic interests by traditional donors, the limited participation of recipient countries, and the neglect of their own development priorities in the design of international cooperation programs. According to Iglesias (2010, p.76-77), these frustrations with the prevailing cooperation model contributed to a growing awareness among developing countries of the need to be full partners in addressing their own problems, rather than merely passive recipients of external aid.

The growing recognition of (i) the limitations of the developed-to-developing countries cooperation model and (ii) the legitimacy of the developing-to-developing countries cooperation model as an instrument for development culminated in the adoption of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) in 1978. Organized by the newly established Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), BAPA institutionalized SSC as a framework for a mutually beneficial cooperation. This effectively broke with the traditional donor–recipient logic that had long characterized relations between developed and developing countries. It emphasized the role of Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC) as a vital mechanism to foster national and collective self-reliance, enabling countries to create, acquire, adapt, and pool knowledge for mutual benefit (UNOSSC, 1978). In practical terms, this translated into the promotion of expertise exchange in areas such as agriculture and health, knowledge-sharing in public policy design, technology transfer, and academic research (Mawdsley, 2012).

It is also important to highlight that BAPA was among the first multilateral documents to formally connect the United Nations Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC) with the broader concept of the Southern Hemisphere and its peoples. By doing so, it not only provided a structured framework for SSC but also embraced a symbolic dimension, adopting an emblem that represented unity, solidarity, and shared aspirations among the countries and populations of the South (UNOSSC, 1978).

By anchoring these principles within the UN system, BAPA signaled a transition from a discourse of solidarity to a more structured and operational agenda of development cooperation. However, despite securing a more prominent position in international relations following the BAPA conceptualization, SSC underwent a period of stagnation in the following two decades. During the 1980s, several obstacles emerged: the conservative agendas of the Western countries viewed the Third World's movements against economic and political inequality as a problem (Medeiros and Pereira, 2015). Furthermore, the rise of the Washington Consensus⁹ and the shift toward neoliberalism eroded the investment capacity of the state through structural adjustment programs. The predominance of liberal governments in Western countries, the inherent heterogeneity of the Third World, and the gradual weakening of the multilateral institutions

9. The Washington Consensus is a term first coined in 1989 by the British economist John Williamson to describe a set of ten economic policy recommendations prescribed to developing countries facing economic crises. According to Williamson (1990), this "standard" reform package was formulated by American institutions, think tanks, and Washington-based international financial organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

were the roots of the SSC decline in the 1980s and 1990s. This context hindered the efforts of African nations to secure better commodity prices in international trade and reduced the aid provided by the Western countries.

At the beginning of the 21st century, SSC experienced a resurgence as emerging powers gained greater political and economic prominence in the international system. After the Cold War, the former Third World transitioned into what is now referred to as the Global South¹⁰ – though the changes in the international system involved much more than mere terminology. New challenges, opportunities, and actors emerged in the global arena. The limited success of neoliberal policies led states in the Global South to reevaluate their development strategies. In this context, the ascension of the Chinese economy played a key role in the economic growth of other developing countries. Emerging powers initiated coalitions organized as variable-geometry arrangements, such as IBSA and BRICS, which pursued overlapping agendas focused on development, the reform of global governance, and SSC. These groups sought to represent the demands of Global South countries, promoting better representation and improved economic opportunities within international organizations (Vieira, 2012; Bergamaschi, Moore and Tickner, 2017).

The partnerships between these emerging countries, in conjunction with enhanced relationships with other Global South actors, especially in Africa, re-established SSC within current global debates. In 2008, the financial crises in the United States and the European Union (EU) provided emerging countries with more space to expand their cooperation partnerships with nations sharing similar colonial histories and development agendas (Bergamaschi, Moore and Tickner, 2017). This new phase of the SSC differs from the 1960s and 1970s, as it goes beyond the normative aspect. The emerging powers, led primarily by the BRICS, achieved concrete results, such as the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the establishment of regional forums – for instance, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), and the Africa-South America Summit (ASA), initiated by Brazil. Their strong socio-economic growth indicators transformed them into reference points for the rest of the Global South.

This boom in SSC entered a new phase after 2014, putting key emerging countries in a more delicate position. The decline in commodity prices left developing nations under economic distress, lowering economic growth rates. The financial recovery of the Global North from the 2008 crisis – which repositioned them as aid and cooperation agents – combined with the heterogeneous interests of the Global South, especially among the leading actors from BRICS, were essential to this scenario (Gray and Gill, 2016; Mawdsley, 2019). Despite this context, China is an international actor that continues to expand its SSC partnerships all around the globe, primarily in Asia and Africa.

10. The term Third World emerged during the Cold War to describe countries that were neither aligned with the Western nor the socialist bloc, often carrying connotations of underdevelopment and dependence. In the post-Cold War era, the concept of the Global South gained prominence, referring to developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere, as well as others in the Northern Hemisphere with low to medium development indicators, including newly independent African and Asian nations alongside Latin American states that have been independent for over two centuries (Pino, 2014). Beyond geography, the Global South reflects shared histories of colonization, structural inequalities, and common development challenges.

3 THE CHINESE PRESENCE IN AFRICA

Regarding Sino-African relations, Mawdsley (2007) identify “three main eras: the Mao years (1949-1976), the first reformist decade associated with Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989), and the post-Tiananmen Square years (from 1989)”. During the Mao era, China’s principal goal in Africa was to encourage socialist revolutions and guarantee more allies to secure the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist State. In this context, trade usually served as a bridge between African countries and China and bolstered these alliances.

While the Sino-Soviet rift slowed Chinese advances in the continent, it was the economic and diplomatic pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping’s influence that led to a relative decline in Sino-African relationship. The new administration was more pragmatic and took a less ideologically driven approach to foreign policy, prioritizing China’s modernization and the expansion of its relations with the United States, Western Europe, and Japan (Taylor, 1998). This reorientation led to a relative shift away from Africa, as the continent’s limited economic development and marginal role in global markets were deemed less relevant to China’s new economic objectives. Throughout the 1980s, Beijing reduced its aid to African countries (see table 2). Although trade between China and Africa grew modestly in absolute terms, it declined as a proportion of each party’s total global trade. This contraction in relative importance occurred during a period of significant Chinese economic expansion. According to Shinn and Eisenman:

In 1978, China-Africa trade was \$914 million and, buoyed by a surge in Chinese exports, rose to about \$1.5 billion in both 1981 and 1982. But after peaking in 1981–1982, China-Africa trade fell throughout the mid-to-late 1980s and only regained nominal 1983 levels in 1989. (...). In 1977, Africa represented 6.5 percent of China’s total foreign trade; by 1980, African trade accounted for only 2.6 percent and that percentage continued to fall steadily until bottoming out at about 1 percent in 1987 and 1988 (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012, p. 112).

TABLE 2

China’s aid to Africa in the 1980s

(In US\$ million)

Year	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Amount	157	412	390	309	222,5	262	230	306

Source: Taylor (1998).

Authors’ elaboration.

In addition, the frequency of delegations and high-level visits between China and African nations – which had previously served to reinforce the SSC discourse – declined from the mid-1980s until the post-Tiananmen period (Mawdsley, 2007; Taylor, 1998, p. 445). However, this decline in aid and official visits must be understood in context. Although China reduced its aid throughout the 1980s, it still ranked as the sixth-largest aid donor to Africa by 1984 (Mawdsley, 2007). Furthermore, the relative absence of high-profile visits to Africa coincided with a period in which China significantly expanded its diplomatic engagement with other regions.

Finally, the most recent stage in Sino-African relations corresponds to the post-Tiananmen Square years (Mawdsley, 2007). Following the negative repercussions, in the Western World, of the repression of the Tiananmen Square protests, China decided to seek alternative political allies (Taylor, 1998). At that time, many Asian and African leaders shared a common skepticism toward

Western critiques. They perceived such criticism as a reflection of imperialist thinking. Moreover, several African leaders – who often suppressed internal demonstrations in their own countries – were quick to endorse China’s handling of the protests, a gesture that Beijing welcomed. After this episode, the political bases for a rapprochement were set.

China opted to reorient its investment, aid, and foreign policy toward African countries, resulting in a steady intensification of bilateral trade and diplomatic engagement (Aiping and Zhang, 2018). However, the primary driver of these stronger ties was the rise of the Chinese economy, which was the starting point for the deepening of relations in the twenty-first century. In recent years, aid, trade, investment, and diplomatic encounters between Beijing and African countries have expanded significantly, initially fueled by the commodities boom and, more recently, by the Belt and Road Initiative prospects.

Between the late 1990s and 2000, China sought to further deepen this relationship. Following a series of diplomatic and economic nods,¹¹ the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was launched through the Beijing Declaration in 2000 (Mawdsley, 2007; Aiping and Zhan, 2018, p. 89-90). FOCAC is built upon the promotion of pragmatic cooperation and the establishment of win-win partnerships (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a). These ministerial meetings, held every three years, have become an instrument for promoting diverse partnerships, including technical cooperation and investments in infrastructure and agriculture (Ouriques and Schmid, 2015; Lopes, Nascimento and Vadell, 2013). FOCAC serves to bolster bilateral dialogue between China and African nations, as well as with regional institutions such as the African Union (AU), fostering cooperation that benefits both parties.

Over the years, FOCAC has evolved into the central platform for shaping China-African relations, expanding its scope beyond economic cooperation to include political dialogue, cultural exchange, and development planning. This institutionalization of cooperation culminated in 2021 with the publication of the Chinese white paper “China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a). In this document, Beijing emphasized that FOCAC was established to address the challenges brought about by economic globalization and to foster shared development between China and the African continent. Framed in an optimistic tone, the white paper also underscored the Forum’s role as a key platform for Sino-African dialogue and an effective mechanism for pragmatic cooperation.

The ascension of Xi Jinping to the presidency of the People’s Republic of China, in 2013, is widely regarded as a turning point in the country’s foreign policy. Poh and Li (2017) consider that his administration is laying the foundations of a new place in international society. Shifting away from the reformist era, spanning from Deng Xiaoping (1978-1992) through Hu Jintao (2003-2013), Beijing has transitioned from a low profile position in the international system, characterized by a focus on domestic reforms and cautious engagement with the West, to a more assertive stance in global governance, actively engaging with contemporary global issues, such as the climate crisis.

11. Between 1995 and 2000, China introduced government-subsidized concessional loans as a novel financing mechanism to support Chinese enterprises operating in Africa. During this period, Beijing also organized many high-profile visits by senior political figures to African countries and articulated a five-point proposal aimed at establishing a long-term, stable, and comprehensive China-Africa partnership for the 21st century. This proposal was presented in a speech delivered at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (Aiping and Zhan, 2018, p. 89).

Influenced by the Ten Principles of the Bandung Conference – or the Bandung Spirit¹² (Xi, 2015) –, Xi Jinping’s foreign policy is centered on the “Chinese Dream” (Poh and Li, 2017). This overarching vision seeks to sustain China’s development, reinforce its position as a unique global power (distinct from Western nations), expand its role in foreign aid and peacekeeping operations, and establish an international network of win-win partnerships alongside the Global South.

This strategy positions SSC as a key instrument in China’s outreach to African, Asian, and Latin American countries, supporting its broader goal of reshaping the international order. Alongside other BRICS countries, Beijing tries to single out its cooperation mechanisms from the aid framework typically provided by the Global North. These SSC initiatives are rooted in the Bandung Principles and are presented as viable alternatives for development planning in the Global South. A core feature of these partnerships is the absence of political conditionalities, which sharply contrasts with the traditional aid and cooperation models promoted by the United States and the European Union (Vieira, 2019). This approach aligns with what some scholars have termed the Beijing Consensus – a model that emphasizes respect for national sovereignty, mutual benefit, and non-interference in domestic affairs. Farooq, Ferozi and Kai (2019) argue that China’s cooperation model is shaped by the needs and capacities of its partners, making it more inclusive and adaptive than conventional donor-driven frameworks.

According to the official white paper *China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, the country’s foreign aid¹³ totaled nearly US\$ 38 billion (RMB 270.2 billion) between 2013 and 2018 (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021b). Over half of this assistance was provided as grants and interest-free loans, reinforcing China’s emphasis on non-conditional support.¹⁴ Africa received nearly US\$ 17 billion, equivalent to 44.65% of China’s total foreign aid during this period, a figure that represents an enormous increase compared to the country’s aid to Africa in the 1980s (see table 2) (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a, 2021b).

12. The Ten Principles of Bandung – also known as the Bandung Spirit or the Ten Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – constitute a 10-point “declaration on promotion of world peace and cooperation”. Adopted in the Bandung Conference (1955), it incorporates some principles of the United Nations Charter alongside the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, originally established in the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement. For a comprehensive analysis of this framework, see Kebebew et al. (2025).

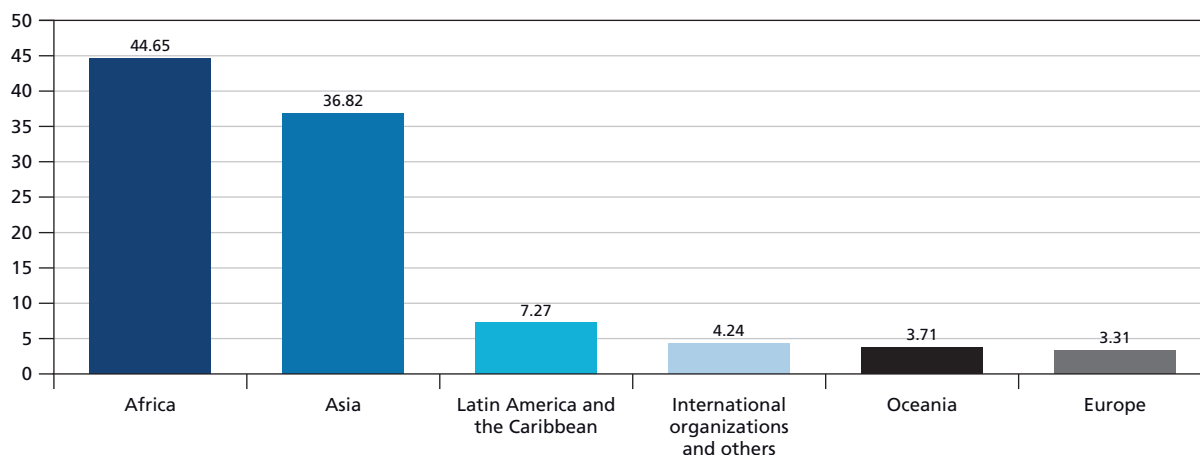
13. China adopts a unique definition of *foreign aid*, as outlined in its official white papers. It encompasses grants, interest-free loans, and concessional loans, all of which embedded within the discourse of SSC and guided by principles of non-interference, mutual benefit, and a focus on infrastructure and capacity-building. This approach contrasts with the framework established by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which defines Official Development Assistance (ODA) as concessional flows provided by official agencies with the main purpose of promoting the economic development and welfare of developing countries. Until 2017, DAC rules required a minimum grant element of 25% for a loan to qualify as ODA. However, since 2018, the DAC has applied a *grant-equivalent measure*, with differentiated concessionality thresholds depending on recipients’ income groups (OECD, [s. d.]).

14. In China’s terminology, grants are non-reimbursable transfers supporting social welfare, human resources, technical cooperation, material aid, and humanitarian projects. Interest-free loans finance public facilities and livelihood projects without charging interest. Concessional loans are extended at below-market rates for longer periods, mainly to fund industrial and large- or medium-scale infrastructure projects that yield economic and social benefits, and for the supply of technical services, sets of equipment, mechanical and electrical products, and other goods and materials (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a, 2021b).

FIGURE 1

Distribution of China's foreign aid by region (2013-2018)

(In %)



Source: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2021b).
Authors' elaboration.

In 2013, China outlined these principles through the articulation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Two years later, in 2015, its first official policy document was issued, formally launching the strategic project¹⁵ aimed at shaping a different World Order. The initiative primarily focused on a series of international economic and development projects (Fulton, 2020) via the seaborne Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). Nonetheless, as the years passed, Beijing broadened its scope to include regions such as Latin America, Africa, and the Arctic. Objectively speaking, the material result of this outreach has been the increasing presence of Chinese enterprises around the globe. However, it is the less tangible results that are under scrutiny in political and academic arenas.

The growth of China's power in the international system is undeniable. Consequently, some scholars started to argue that Beijing's primary motivation for the BRI is power projection. This article recognizes the economic and political interests, as well as the asymmetries, within the SSC partnerships. However, the analysis presented here intends to go beyond the idea of China as a new colonial power in Africa. As Muhr (2016) explains, SSC is not a partnership based solely on moral considerations; political and economic interests coexist with elements of solidarity. While outcomes may not be entirely equal, the horizontal nature of these relationships allows all involved parties to benefit.

The most recent white paper on Chinese foreign policy (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a) corroborates Muhr's (2016) conceptualization of SSC. The document asserts that while solidarity and a sense of community are central features of Chinese cooperation, the win-win aspect of the partnership is also vital. Therefore, both actors within the

15. Although the BRI was officially launched in 2015, its direct impact in Kenya and Ethiopia is relatively recent, dating from 2017-2018 onwards, when both countries joined the project. Acknowledging the academic debate on the purposes and role of the BRI in shaping China's partnership policy priorities (Kallio, 2023; Mações, 2019; Ferdinand, 2016; Nunes et al., 2022; Ungaretti et al., 2022), we understand the BRI as having a dialectical relationship with decision-making on these investments: it functions simultaneously as a channel that facilitates Chinese projects already conceived outside the BRI framework and as an important driver influencing the allocation of resources, consistently in line with China's strategic political and economic interests.

relationship are expected to derive benefits and uphold responsibilities (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a).

President Xi Jinping has consistently stated that the BRI aims to provide a global platform for economic cooperation (Fulton, 2020). This rhetoric finds support in several elements of the initiative, particularly in the characteristics of its projects across Africa. This article focuses on the African perspective of these relationships, considering that China's partner countries are not passive actors or mere commodity suppliers to Beijing's needs. This study seeks to confront the narratives often promoted by U.S. and European leadership, as well as Western public opinion, about China's relationship with African countries (Karkare et al., 2020; Tull, 2009). These perspectives often characterize Beijing as a predator power, wishing to exploit Africa to fulfill its master plan to rule the international system.¹⁶ Our study suggests that this is a misleading interpretation.

Countries like Kenya and Ethiopia have their own interests during negotiations, as well as solid institutions capable of designing and implementing development projects. Furthermore, they maintain historical relationships with China, especially in the cases selected for this study. Therefore, there is a win-win relationship, in which the African countries secure investments and loans to advance their own development agendas, thus characterizing an example of a non-Western development model. Conversely, China is able to enhance its presence in strategic regions of the African continent, like the Horn of Africa, and guarantee resources necessary for its own development goals (Kragelund and Carmody, 2016).

The central point is that these African countries have agency in their negotiations with Chinese actors. Thus, Addis Ababa and Nairobi bring their specific agendas and interests to the table, guided by their own needs, capabilities, and decision-making processes. Consistent with the arguments advanced by Procópio (2019) and Mohan and Lampert (2013), we explicitly reject hegemonic interpretations of China's role in Africa and instead conceptualize China-Africa relations as asymmetric yet interdependent relationships. In the next section, this paper moves China's foreign policy to the background to take a closer look at internal dynamics of Kenya and Ethiopia.

4 THE ETHIOPIAN AND KENYAN CASES

As previously pointed out, Kenya and Ethiopia were selected as case studies for several reasons, including their economic scale – both rank among the ten largest economies in Africa (IMF, 2025) – and their prominence in China-Africa investment dynamics – the two nations consistently figured among the continent's leading recipients of Chinese FDI in the period 2010-2023 (China Africa Research Initiative, 2025). These characteristics make them especially suitable for examining the evolution of Chinese FDI flows and stock in Africa, as shown in the following charts.

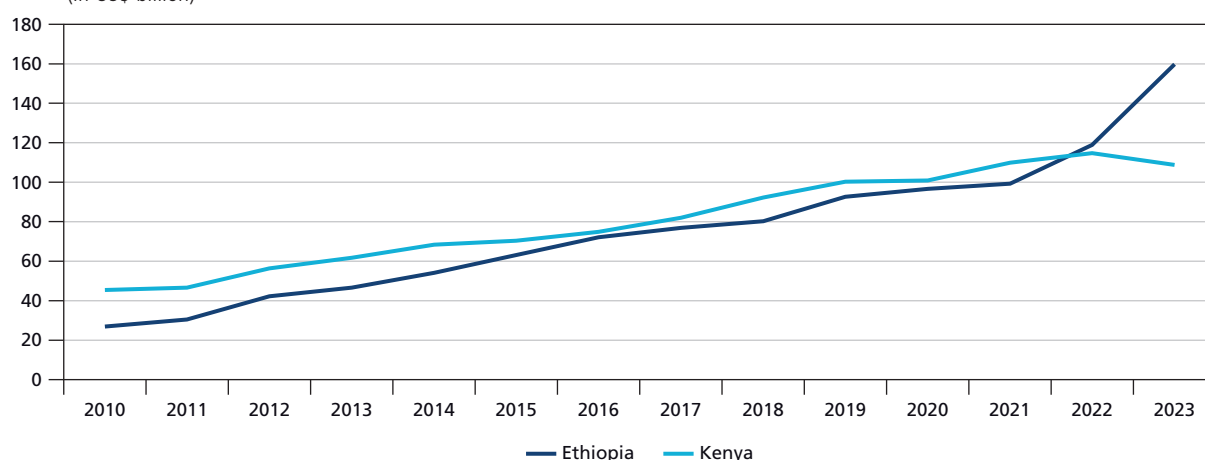
16. In 2018, the U.S. National Security Advisor John R. Bolton explicitly described China's engagement in Africa as "predatory actions" and a component of Beijing's broader plan for global dominance. In his speech at the Heritage Foundation, Bolton (2018) argued that Chinese investments relied on "bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes", portraying the Belt and Road Initiative as an instrument of geopolitical expansion rather than development cooperation.

Beyond these factors, there remains a notable lack of academic engagement in investigating African societal interests within Chinese investment projects. As we hypothesize that Sino-African relations rely on an interdependence motif, a vital question remains: if these relations are mutually beneficial, to what extent have Kenya and Ethiopia gained from them? To address this question, the research focuses on major Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in both nations, specifically Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) and the Mombasa and Lamu ports, as well as Ethiopia's Addis Ababa railway system and Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway. The article analyzes the underlying negotiation processes, the current status of these initiatives, and their potential social-economic impacts.

FIGURE 2

GDP of Ethiopia and Kenya, at current prices (2010-2023)

(In US\$ billion)

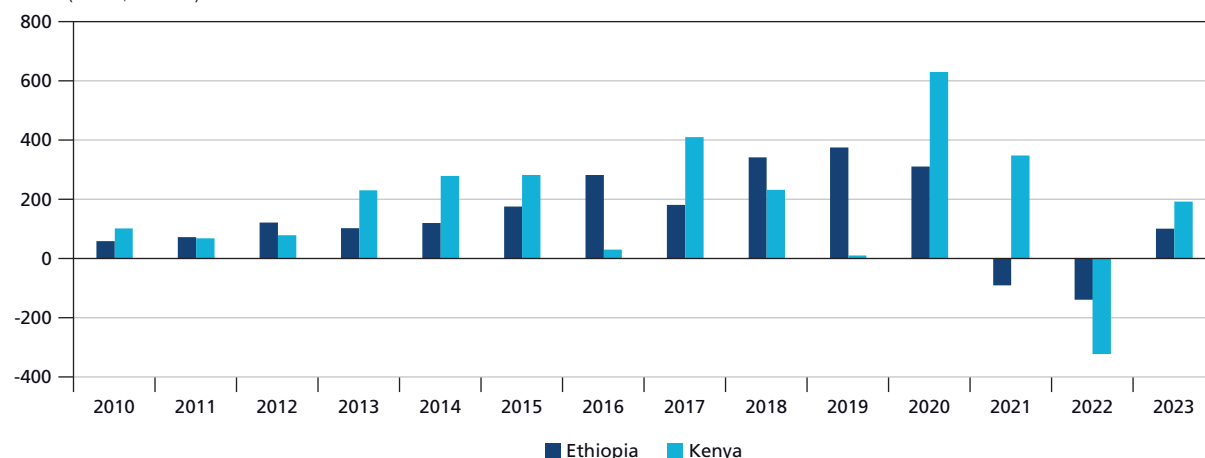


Source: IMF (2025).

FIGURE 3

Annual Chinese FDI flow to Kenya and Ethiopia (2010-2023)

(In US\$ million)

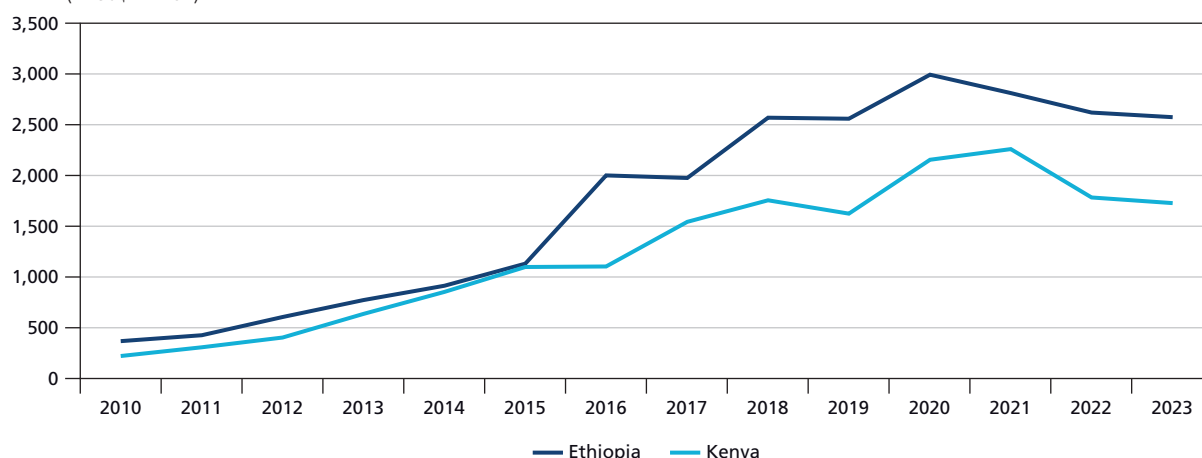


Source: China Africa Research Initiative (2025).

FIGURE 4

Evolution of Chinese FDI stock to Kenya and Ethiopia (2010-2023)

(In US\$ million)



Source: China Africa Research Initiative (2025).

4.1 The Sino-Kenyan partnership

Kenya and China officially established bilateral relations shortly after Kenyan independence in December 1963; months later, Wang Yutien was appointed as China's first ambassador to the African country (Kenya..., 2003; Chege, 2008). In these early years of bilateral ties, the left wing of the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) party – led by then KANU vice president and Minister for Home Affairs Jaramogi Oginga Odinga – attempted to align Kenya's postcolonial direction with China's revolutionary agenda but faced resistance from both conservative factions within the party and entrenched capitalist interests. Moreover, interference from Western intelligence actors further marginalized the pro-China bloc, to the point that Kenya-China relations waned after 1967, remaining limited until the late 1970s, following the deaths of both Mao Zedong and Kenya's president Jomo Kenyatta (Chege, 2008).

Since the restoration of diplomatic ties in 1978 (Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs of Kenya, 2025), the relationship has been steady and amicable, with frequent high-level diplomatic visits between nations. However, despite early aid and assistance, economic trade remained limited throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. This situation began to change only in the 2000s, with China's renewed engagement across the African continent. This revival directly affected Kenya's development agenda. For instance, in 2015, the MSRI was focused on three African countries: Egypt, Kenya, and Djibouti (Farooq et al., 2018).

In this new century, Sino-Kenyan trade has grown and become more robust. Although the trade balance still favors China, the Kenyan government defines its relations with the Asian nation as a strategic and mutually beneficial relationship (Kenya..., 2024). Within the framework of the principles guiding Chinese foreign policy towards African countries (State Council Information Office of People's Republic of China, 2021a, 2021b), Sino-Kenyan relations constitute a partnership focused on the integrated development of infrastructure and industrial

sectors, alongside cultural exchanges and assistance initiatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025).¹⁷

Reportedly, the Kenyan government welcomed the establishment of this type of partnership, officialized in 2017, considering it as a strategic step aligned with its long-term development objectives (Xinhua, 2018). Notably, in 2008, Nairobi launched Kenya Vision 2030, an ambitious development blueprint aimed at transforming Kenya into a newly industrialized, middle-income economy by 2030 (Procopio, 2019; Farooq et al., 2018; Embassy of the Republic of Kenya in Rome, 2025). In this context, the high-level partnership with China, especially through collaboration in the infrastructure sector, has been positioned over the last decade as a pivotal mechanism to achieve these goals.

China has become one of Kenya's largest trade partners and its primary creditor over the past decade (Guguyu, 2019). Moreover, between 2012 and 2013, China emerged as the leading source of Kenya's cumulative FDI (Raghavan, 2013; Zhao and Zhao, 2013). According to the Johns Hopkins China-Africa Research Initiative (SAIS-CARI), China's imports from Kenya have grown continuously since 2010, reaching a peak of US\$ 269 million in 2022. Meanwhile, from 2010 to 2015, China's exports to Kenya increased steadily, peaking at US\$ 5.914 billion in 2015, before declining to US\$ 4.984 billion in 2019 (China Africa Research Initiative, 2025). However, after this decline – partly linked to the completion of major sections of the SGR (Guguyu, 2019) – Chinese exports to Kenya resumed growth, reaching US\$ 5.410 billion in 2020 and continuing to rise until hitting a new peak of US\$ 8.249 billion in 2022. Although they decreased slightly to US\$ 7.879 billion in 2023, the overall trend indicates a strong recovery and the continued expansion of bilateral trade.

TABLE 3

China-Kenya Trade (2010-2023)

(In US\$ million)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
China's imports from Kenya	39	59	52	52	77	98	97	166	174	181	151	226	269	227
China's exports to Kenya	1,786	2,368	2,788	3,217	4,930	5,914	5,587	5,034	5,204	4,984	5,410	6,732	8,249	7,879

Source: China Africa Research Initiative (2025).

Authors' elaboration.

17. This paper highlights a contrast between China's approach to SSC with Kenya and the development cooperation practices of Western countries. For instance, in the case of the Nairobi–Mombasa Expressway, the U.S. company Bechtel refused to accommodate the Kenyan government's request to revise the project's financial model. Instead, Bechtel insisted on maintaining the original contract terms, exemplifying a more rigid and unilateral stance that reflects the persistence of hierarchical dynamics in Western-led cooperation (Andeso, 2022).

As previously mentioned, Sino-Kenyan cooperation spans multiple sectors. Nevertheless, despite the trend toward diversification, a relevant share of the resulting Chinese investments has been directed toward large-scale infrastructure projects aligned with Kenya's Vision 2030, most notably the SGR and the development of the Mombasa and Lamu ports. These initiatives are notably relevant for both countries. As the largest infrastructure project in Kenya since independence (in the case of SGR) and a vital means to connecting the country internally and externally (in the case of the ports), these projects have as common features their grandiosity and their capacity to strengthen national political and economic power, as well as Sino-Kenyan trade.

Conceived in the early 2000s, SGR was formally announced in 2008 (Kibaki..., 2008; Otele, 2021) as a flagship project to expand and modernize the country's railway network, which had previously relied on the colonial-era Metre Gauge Railway (MGR). The SGR is designed to bolster regional integration as a central component of the Northern Corridor – a multimodal trade route established under the Northern Corridor Transit and Transport Agreement (NCTTA). Originally signed in 1985 and revised in 2007, the NCTTA facilitates transit trade among Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and, since 2012, South Sudan (NCTTCA, 2025a). Through various transport modes – including roads, railways, pipelines and inland waterways – the corridor connects the port of Mombasa to several landlocked countries in the Great Lakes Region – namely Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Uganda.

FIGURE 5

Northern Corridor infrastructure map



Source: NCTTCA and CPCS Transcom Limited (2022).

FIGURE 6

Proposed Kenyan SGR Network

Source: Zhu, Mwangi and Hu (2023).

Within the framework of the Northern Corridor railway project, Kenya became responsible for the Mombasa-Malaba section of the Mombasa-Nairobi-Malaba-Kampala SGR (Habitat Planners, 2016). To implement the project, Kenya divided it into two phases, with Phase 2 further subdivided into three sub-phases (NCTTCA, 2025b).

- 1) Phase 1 (472 km): Mombasa – Nairobi.
- 2) Phase 2 (490 km): Nairobi – Kisumu – Malaba.
 - Phase 2A (120 km): Nairobi – Naivasha.
 - Phase 2B (262 km): Naivasha – Narok – Bomet – Nyamira – Kisumu.
 - Phase 2C (107 km): Kisumu – Yala – Mumias – Malaba.

On June 26, 2012, the Kenya Railways Corporation (KRC), a state-owned enterprise, approved the feasibility study and preliminary design for Phase 1 of the SGR, which had been prepared by the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), a subsidiary of the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). Subsequently, on July 11 and October 4, 2012, KRC and CRBC signed two Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC) contracts totaling nearly US\$ 3.6 billion. A similar procedure was followed for Phase 2A of the project, with a contract signed on September 19, 2015, amounting to approximately US\$ 1.482 billion (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

Following the completion of each planning and commercial contract phase, the Government of Kenya signed financing agreements with the Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank), totaling US\$ 3.6 billion for Phase 1 (Nairobi–Mombasa section) and US\$ 1.5 billion for Phase 2A (Nairobi–Naivasha line), respectively (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). An analysis of the loan arrangements reveals some variation. While some loans complied with both the 2014 OECD criteria for concessional financing¹⁸ and Kenya's external debt borrowing policy¹⁹ – reflecting preferential terms compared to market-based loans – others, although structured under 2014 OECD criteria for concessional financing, did not qualify as concessional under Kenya's external debt borrowing policy (AidData, 2025a, 2025b; Kenya National Assembly, 2014).

As noted earlier, Phase 1 of the SGR was formalized through two distinct loan agreements between China Eximbank and the Government of Kenya, both signed on May 11, 2014 (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014a, 2014b; AidData, 2025a). The first loan was a buyer's credit loan (BCL) worth approximately US\$ 2 billion, provided on the following terms: a 5.25-year grace period, a 5-year disbursement period, and a 15-year maturity. The financial costs included an interest rate of 6-month Libor²⁰ plus 3.6% margin, a 1% default interest rate, a 0.75% commitment fee, a 0.75% management fee, plus insurance costs (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014a; AidData, 2025a). According to the AidData Research Lab, this loan had an effective interest rate of 3.923% and a grant element (OECD grant-equivalent) of 31.74%. This indicates that while the loan met the criteria for a concessional loan under 2014 OECD standards, it fell slightly short of Kenya's 35% threshold (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014a; AidData, 2025a, 2025b; Kenya National Assembly, 2014).

The second Phase 1 loan agreement between China Eximbank and the Government of Kenya was a preferential buyer's credit (PBC) worth US\$ 1.6 billion. It was provided on the following terms: a 2% interest rate, a 0% default interest rate, a 7-year grace period, a 20-year maturity period, a 0.25% commitment fee, and a 0.25% management fee. Under this agreement, AidData registered a grant element of 52.3% according to OECD standards, making the PBC loan concessional under both the 2014 OECD and Kenyan standards (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014b; AidData, 2025b; Kenya National Assembly, 2014).

Finally, on December 3, 2015, China Eximbank and the Government of the Republic of Kenya signed a BCL worth US\$ 1.39 billion for Phase 2A of the SGR. The BCL carried the following borrowing terms: a 20-year maturity, a 5-year grace period, an interest rate of 6-month LIBOR plus a 3% margin, a 0.5% management fee, a 0.5% commitment fee, and a 1% default interest rate. According to AidData, the effective interest rate was 3.764%, while the grant element of the loan reached 36.63% (AidData, 2025c). The Phase 2A BCL is particularly interesting because it appears

18. As noted previously, until 2017, DAC rules required a minimum grant element of 25% for a loan to qualify as ODA (OECD, [s. d.]).

19. According to the "Report of the Kenyan Departmental Committee on Transport, Public Works and Housing on the Statement Sought by Hon. Hezron Awiti, MP, on the Tendering and Construction of the Standard Gauge Railway from Mombasa to Malaba", the minimum grant element required for a loan to be considered concessional under the government's external debt borrowing policy in 2014 was 35% (Kenyan National Assembly, 2014).

20. Libor (London Interbank Offered Rate) was a global benchmark interest rate used by banks. Established in 1986, it was widely employed as a reference for various financial products worldwide. Due to a rate-manipulation scandal and the lack of actual underlying loans used to calculate it, Libor was gradually phased out between 2021 and 2023, being replaced by alternative reference rates.

to combine elements from both previous Phase I loans – one highly concessional and the other less so. Nevertheless, under the 2015 OECD and Kenyan standards, the Phase 2A loan still qualified as concessional (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2015; AidData, 2025c; Kenya National Assembly, 2014).

These loans covered about 90% and 85% of the total investment for each respective phase, with the Kenyan government financing the remainder (Government of the Republic of Kenya and Export-Import Bank of China, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). As previously arranged by commercial contracts, the construction and implementation of Phases 1 and 2A were carried out by the CRBC, the same company responsible for the project's design.

Officially named the Nairobi–Mombasa Madaraka Express – in honor of Kenya's Independence Day –, the first phase of the SGR was constructed between December 2014 and January 2018, with its official launch occurring in May 2017. In 2017 KRC contracted AfriStar, a subsidiary of CRBC, to manage operations and maintenance of the SGR under a 10-year contract, which included rights over the ticketing system and related software and hardware, with a clause for review after five years. However, in 2020, the Kenyan government negotiated with AfriStar on a gradual takeover of operations and maintenance, initially scheduled for completion by May 2022. This transition began in July 2020, with some functions handed over starting in March 2021. Since then, the full handover date has been postponed twice. KRC now expects to assume complete control by December 2025 (Otieno, 2021; Moturi, 2025).

Although subject to controversy regarding its capacity to improve Kenya's transportation network – stemming from allegations of overpricing and some degree of underutilization – the railway can still be regarded as a successful ongoing cooperation project. This assessment is supported by the transfer of Chinese technologies and equipment, a 1.5% contribution to Kenya's GDP growth, and the creation of 46,000 direct and indirect jobs during the initial phases of the projects (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a). Subsequent assessments suggest an expansion of these impacts, with employment reaching approximately 74,000 jobs and more than 2,500 Kenyan nationals receiving technical training (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

The Mombasa-Nairobi section was the first modern railway built in Kenya in 100 years (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a), but it was not the only development. By the time of its launch, construction of the Nairobi-Naivasha section had already begun. This phase was completed in August 2019, with 120 kilometers of the SGR's second phase fully built by CRBC. Its inauguration further improved Kenya's transportation network and trade logistics. With this section, Kenya now has more than 600 kilometers of modern railways, an operation that created 26,000 jobs along the line during its construction, accounting for nearly the entire local workforce in the area (CRBC, 2018). Notably, the Chinese enterprise agreed with one of the few Kenyan requests upon signing the construction contract: work cooperating with local material suppliers and companies (China Communications Construction Company, 2022). This arrangement generated substantial indirect employment effects at the local level.

Currently, SGR provides passenger and cargo services from Mombasa to Naivasha. However, reports continue to show the underutilization of the railway. Admittedly, since its conception, the railway project has faced mixed opinions both within and outside Kenya (Otele, 2021). Critics have questioned the feasibility studies and sustainability plans (Otele, 2021), pointing to allegations of

corruption, especially after China decided to halt funding for the remaining sections (Shindu, 2019). However, Kenyan authorities and various experts maintain that this project, financed under the auspices of BRI, remains deeply relevant to Kenya's development since it is the first step toward closing the infrastructure gap in the country and across Africa (Githaiga and Bing, 2019; Mahandara, 2024). Beyond the purely financial dimension, Githaiga and Bing (2019, p. 231) argue that the railway has produced other, less tangible benefits, such as offering a faster, safer, cleaner, more affordable, and more reliable mode of transport for Kenya.

Along with the infrastructure perspective, there is the connectivity aspect. Prior to the SGR, Kenya relied on the Metre-Gauge Railway – a largely defunct railway dating back to the British colonial era. Travel between the coastal city of Mombasa on the Indian Ocean and the capital Nairobi typically required nine hours by road. However, with the SGR, it takes only four and a half hours, for both passenger and freight services (BRI..., 2024). This railway is part of a broader economic vision: by linking the country's interior to the Port of Mombasa, it can strengthen trade by connecting Kenya with Asia and Europe.

Yet, rail networks are only one type of Sino-Kenyan cooperation in the African State. Between 2011 and 2014, Kenya secured via China the technical expertise necessary to guarantee the feasibility of major maritime infrastructure projects. In these instances, the African nation did not seek Chinese financing but rather established construction partnerships. These agreements involved the construction of a new berth on the Port of Mombasa, the largest seaport in East Africa and a vital hub for Kenya and neighboring landlocked countries, as well as a project to construct the first three berths of Kenya's second major port, the Lamu Port.

The CRBC secured the contract for the construction of Berth No. 19 and its yard at the Port of Mombasa, completing Kenya's first new port expansion project since 1984 in under three years (CRBC, 2025). Finished in 2013, the project was funded by the Kenyan government under a contract worth US\$ 66.74 million, and it was CRBC's first port infrastructure project in the African country. Objectively, the new facility expanded the annual capacity of the Port of Mombasa by about 200,000 TEU (Kenya Ports Authority, 2014). This initial deal established a robust foundation for cooperation, paving the way for the future development of the East African region's primary trade gateway.

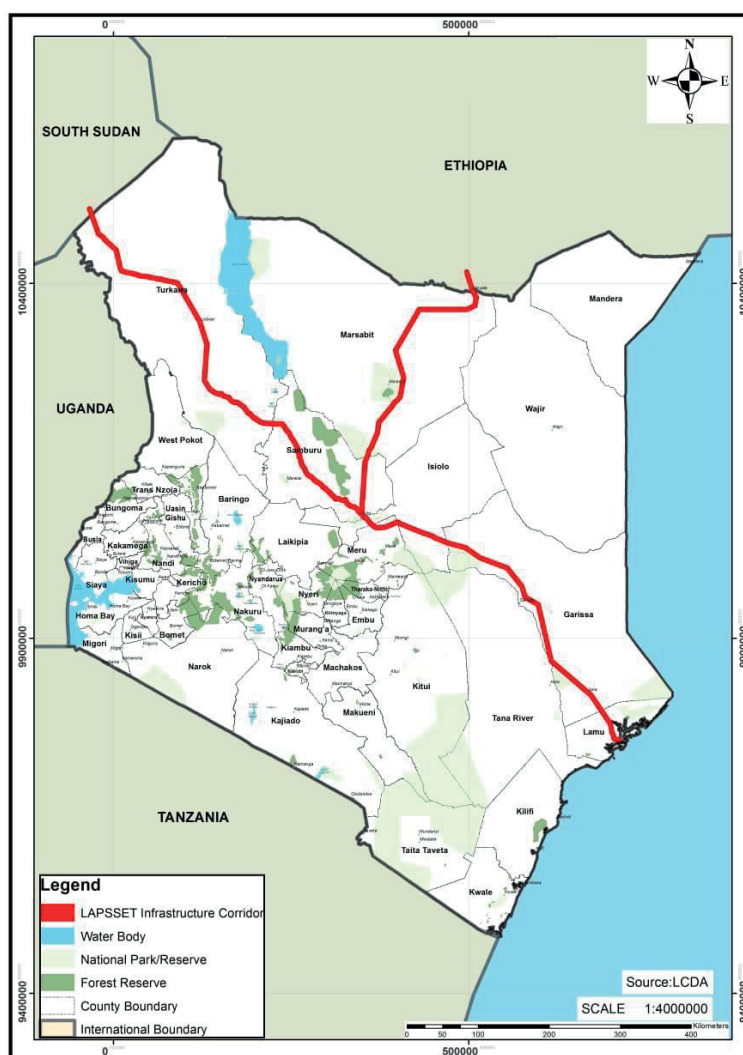
In 2019, the Mombasa Port and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) signed a contract to develop a new oil terminal to replace the existing port's facility. The US\$ 353 million offshore Kipevu Oil Terminal II, located in Mombasa, is the largest facility of its kind in Africa. Funded by the Kenya Ports Authority and constructed by CCCC under the BRI, the terminal was completed in 2022. According to official sources, the terminal is supported by subsea and onshore pipeline infrastructure connecting it to national storage and refining centers, featuring berths capable of accommodating up to three vessels of 170,000 DWT each. Furthermore, this development has increased the port's capacity to handle transit petroleum products from 35,000 to 100,000 metric tons, significantly enhancing Mombasa's efficiency and capacity as a regional energy hub (SH40..., 2022; New..., 2022; Kenya Ports Authority, 2025).

Regarding the construction of Lamu Port, it serves as the anchor project for the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor Program (LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority, 2025). The LAPSSET Corridor Program – also known as Lamu Corridor – serves a dual strategic purpose in Kenya's national and regional development agendas.

Domestically, it aims to reduce the country's over-dependence on the Port of Mombasa by opening up the underdeveloped northern frontier and creating a second major transport and logistics corridor centered around Lamu (Kenya Ports Authority, [s. d.]). Regionally, the program has been positioned as a catalyst for integration across Eastern and Central Africa, forming part of the envisioned Equatorial Land Bridge. This transcontinental linkage was envisioned to stretch from Lamu on the Indian Ocean to Douala, in Cameroon, on the Atlantic coast, facilitating the movement of oil, minerals, and goods (LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority, 2024).

According to LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority, once fully realized, the corridor will rival the Suez Canal in its capacity to connect major global trade routes and reshape commercial flows between the two oceans and is expected to add 2 to 3 percent to Kenya's GDP growth (LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority, 2024; Jorgic, 2013). However, despite these optimistic projections, critics have labeled LAPSSET a "vanity project," arguing that the substantial funds allocated would have been better spent upgrading Kenya's existing infrastructure (Kenyans..., 2021).

FIGURE 7
LAPSSET Corridor map



Source: LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority (2019).

In addition to being the flagship project of the LAPSSET Corridor Program, the Lamu Port represents the largest initiative under the program realized through a partnership between China and Kenya. In 2014, under the auspices of President Uhuru Kenyatta, the Kenya Ports Authority awarded a US\$ 478.9 million contract to CCCC to construct the first three of the port's planned 32 berths. Construction started in December 2016 and the inauguration of the first berth occurred in May 2021, raising traders' hope and confidence in business (Kenyans..., 2021). Like the broader LAPSSET initiative, the port is part of the bid of Kenya Vision 2030 to become an important trade hub in East Africa. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that the full results of the Lamu construction remain to be seen as the works are not yet finished.

4.2 The Sino-Ethiopian partnership

As the second-most populous country in Africa, Ethiopia has a rich history. Having successfully resisted Italian invasion in the early twentieth century, the country remains the only nation in the African continent that was never colonized. This history of resistance, rooted in a long imperial tradition that lasted until 1974, constituted a strategic point of appeal for China under Communist Party rule, as it resonated with the Party's emphasis on anti-imperialist solidarity and the projection of influence across post-colonial states. Consequently, it was not a massive surprise when China and the Ethiopian Empire established formal diplomatic relations in 1970. However, their cooperation only intensified after Ethiopia became a republic (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). Notwithstanding, the Ethiopian government maintained a closer alignment with the USSR until the latter's collapse in the early 1990s (Cheru, 2016).

In the 1990s, Ethiopia emerged as a vocal critic of the Washington Consensus and its neoliberal impositions on Global South countries. Consequently, Addis Ababa sought to diversify its international partnerships, moving beyond traditional Western allies. Within this context, ties between Ethiopia and China became more solid, as Beijing was perceived as a possible partner for Ethiopia's development agenda. Between 1998 and 2010, the two nations strengthened their rapprochement by establishing the Joint Ethiopia-China Commission (JECC), responsible for coordinating technical and economic cooperation, and by jointly formulating the Growth and Transformation Plan I (GTP) (Cheru, 2016), a program designed to promote infrastructure investments as part of Ethiopia's broader goal to achieve middle-income status by 2025.

Building on this rapprochement and decades of bilateral relations, China has become Ethiopia's largest trading partner and a significant investor (Chakrabarty, 2016; Ethiopian..., 2025). Chinese exports to Ethiopia increased from US\$ 1.209 billion in 2010 to US\$ 2.588 billion in 2023. In the same period, Chinese imports from Ethiopia rose from US\$ 273 million to US\$ 435 million, reaching a peak of US\$ 489 million in 2014 (China Africa Research Initiative, 2025). This partnership encompasses cooperation initiatives such as aid assistance, capital goods investments, manufacturing production, and the establishment of factories. However, it is the expenses and loans directed toward large-scale infrastructure projects – such as the first modern light rail system in the Horn of Africa,

built in Addis Ababa, and the Addis–Djibouti railway – that best illustrate the scale of China’s presence in Ethiopia.²¹

TABLE 4

China-Ethiopia Trade (2010-2023)
(In US\$ million)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
China’s imports from Ethiopia	273	292	309	315	489	380	419	357	345	343	338	366	453	435
China’s exports to Ethiopia	1,209	885	1,529	1,868	2,922	13,763	3,214	2,664	2,537	2,322	2,233	2,290	2,216	2,588

Source: China Africa Research Initiative (2025).

Authors’ elaboration.

Under the first Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP I), the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit system (AALRT) was conceived, in the early 21st century, as the first light rail network in both East and Sub-Saharan Africa. A core objective was to contribute, alongside other large-scale infrastructure projects, to the development of a nationwide railway system. Following a period of negotiations, the Ethiopian Railways Corporation (ERC) and China Railway Group Limited Company (CREC) signed a US\$ 475 million commercial contract for the project’s design and construction on September 3, 2009. In 2011, China Eximbank signed a loan agreement with ERC – a state-owned enterprise – to finance 85% of the total cost, with the Ethiopian government covering the remaining 15%. The borrowing terms included an interest rate of 6-month LIBOR plus a 2.6% margin, a 3-year grace period, and a 23-year maturity, backed by a sovereign guarantee from the Government of Ethiopia (AidData, 2025d). According to AidData (2025d), the all-in interest rate was 2.998% (based on the June 2011 6-month LIBOR of 0.398%), while the grant element reached 41.54%. This classified the arrangement as a concessional loan under the OECD standards of the time.

Construction of the two-line light rail system began in April 2013, created 13,000 jobs, and was completed in 2015. The 34.4-kilometer network was initially operated by the Shenzhen Metro Group and China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) until 2020, when ERC assumed full control over the railway system operation. The transport system was designed to serve an average of 300,000 passengers per day, operating 41 trains across 39 stations, thus making a significant contribution to urban mobility and economic development in Addis Ababa, a city with nearly six million inhabitants (Tarrosy and Vörös, 2018b; Ethiopian Railway Corporation, [s. d.]; Ethiopian Ministry of Transport & Logistics, 2020).

Since its inauguration, AALRT ridership has exhibited substantial fluctuation: annual ridership increased from 30.1 million passengers in 2015/2016 to 39.6 million in 2018/2019, marking a 31.8% growth, before declining to 29.5 million in 2019/2020 as a result of the

21. In contrast to Chinese-Ethiopian cooperation, U.S. engagement has been shaped primarily by humanitarian and developmental assistance rather than infrastructure investment. Between 2020 and 2023, USAID provided an estimated USD 3.6 billion in humanitarian support, while U.S. bilateral assistance reached USD 1.93 billion in Fiscal Year 2022, largely focused on food security, health, and climate-related shocks. Trade relations remain modest and concentrated in specific sectors, with U.S. exports dominated by aircraft and Ethiopian exports by coffee, garments, and leather. Moreover, Ethiopia lost eligibility under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2022 due to human rights concerns, underscoring the conditionalities often attached to Western aid—unlike China’s infrastructure financing, which has not been contingent upon governance reforms (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

COVID-19 pandemic (Ethiopian Ministry of Transport & Logistics, 2020). A similar pattern can be observed in daily ridership figures: during the first 14 months of operation, the system carried an average of 105,000–110,000 passengers per day, peaking at 153,000, but numbers later dropped with the onset of the pandemic. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Transport & Logistics, during the GTP II period (2015/16–2019/20), the average daily ridership stood at approximately 94,000 passengers, only 31.4% of the initial project target (Ethiopian Ministry of Transport & Logistics, 2020). More recently, ridership appears to have further declined to an average of 56,000–60,000 passengers per day, a reduction largely attributed to limited maintenance capacity and shortages of spare equipment, rather than to a lack of public demand for the service. By 2023, only 18 of the 41 trains were operational, highlighting the domestic institutional and technical challenges the ERC faces in ensuring adequate upkeep and sustainable operation of the system (Tikuye, 2023).

Despite these setbacks, the AALRT remains a landmark infrastructure project in Ethiopia, representing a modern, environmentally friendly, and efficient transport solution. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Transport & Logistics, the electric-powered light railway has contributed significantly to reducing the city's carbon footprint: the railway service operation was able to reduce 29.7 thousand kg of CO₂ equivalent in 2019/20 (Ethiopian Ministry of Transport & Logistics, 2020). Despite its current operational limitations, the AALRT has the potential to enhance mobility patterns, urban accessibility, and stimulate local economic activity, while representing a key milestone in Ethiopia's broader efforts to modernize transport infrastructure and improve connectivity across Addis Ababa's main economic corridors.

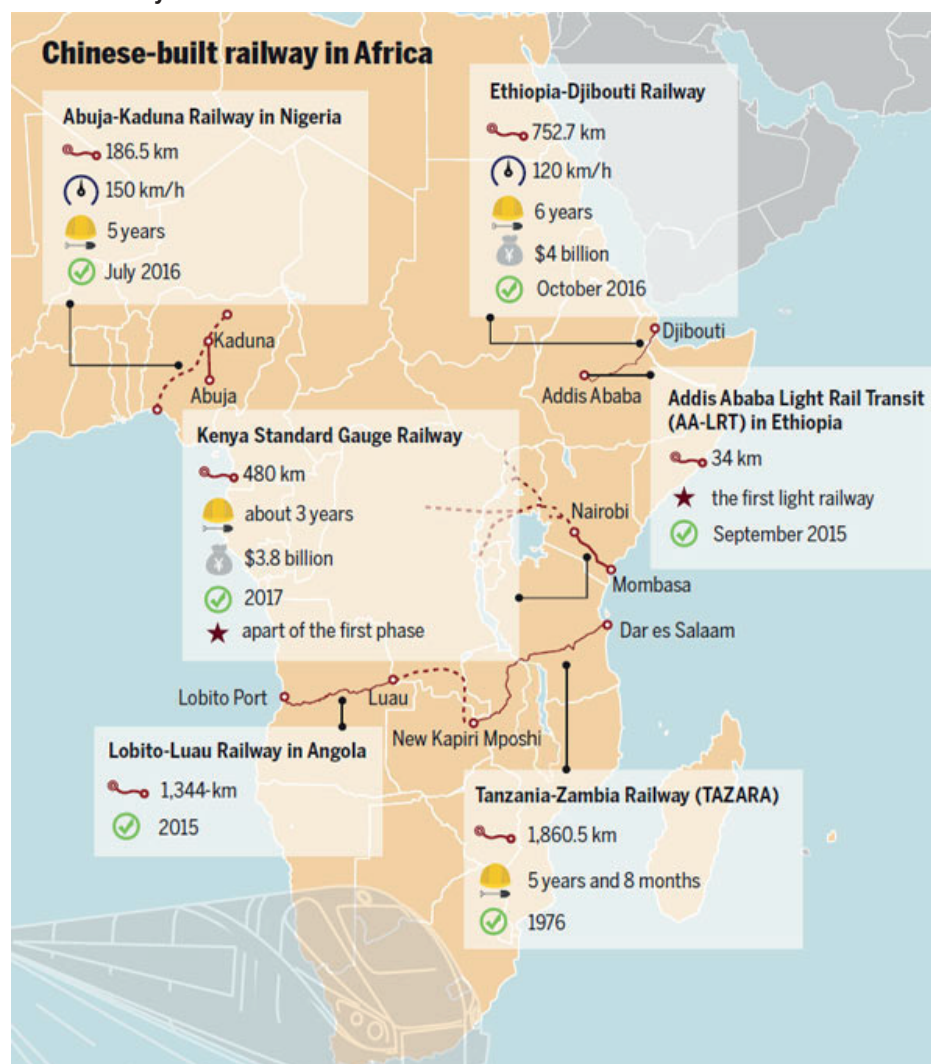
Over the last decade, the other major transportation project under the GTP was the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway. Serving now as the first station of the New National Railway Network in Ethiopia, this three-section project had a central objective: to connect the landlocked country to the maritime trade routes of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea through Djibouti's Port of Doraleh (Tarrosy and Vörös, 2018a). Implementation began in 2011 after the ERC awarded contracts for the Ethiopian segments to two Chinese state-owned companies: the China Railway Group (CREC) for the Sebeta-Mieso section and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) for the Mieso-Dewele section.

Within the financial framework of the US\$ 4.273 billion railway project, the Ethiopian government sought a public–private partnership (PPP) with the China EximBank in 2013. Under this arrangement, China EximBank provided US\$ 2.49 billion to finance the Ethiopian segments of the railway, with the Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC) acting as the domestic counterpart and co-financier. A significant portion of this package included financing approximately 85% of a US\$ 259 million commercial contract between the China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) and the ERC. Signed in March 2013, this specific arrangement supported the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway Rolling Stock Supply Project, which provided the essential locomotives and wagons required to operationalize the line.²² The conditions of the three tranches are summarized in table 5.

22. The purpose of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway Rolling Stock Supply Project was to acquire 5 electric locomotives, 6 diesel locomotives, 30 railway passenger cars and 1,100 railway freight cars for the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway (AidData, 2025e).

FIGURE 8

Chinese-built railway in Africa



Source: Pan and Morangi (2016).

TABLE 5

Comparative table – loan conditions of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway¹

Tranche	Value (US\$ millions)	Contractor	Maturity	Grace period	Interest rate	Grant element ²	Share of project cost covered
Sebeta–Adama–Meiso Section	1,289.03	CREC	15 years	6 years	LIBOR + 3% (3.42%)	35.72%	70% (US\$ 1.841 billion contract)
Meiso–Dewanle Section	981.26	CCECC	15 years	6 years	LIBOR + 3% (3.42%)	35.72%	70% (US\$ 1.402 billion contract)
Rolling Stock Supply Project	220.47	NORINCO	15 years	6 years	LIBOR + 3% (3.42%)	35.72%	85% (US\$ 259 million contract)

Source: AidData (2025e, 2025f, 2025g).

Authors' elaboration.

Notes: ¹ It is important to note that around September 4, 2018, China Eximbank and the Government of Ethiopia restructured the US\$ 2.49 billion buyer's credit loan agreement signed in 2013. Under the terms of the restructuring agreement, the maturity of the loan was reportedly extended by an additional twenty years (from 15 years to 35 years) and the grace period of the loan was reportedly extended by an additional 4 years (from 6 years to 10 years) (AidData, 2025h, 2025i, 2025j).

² Under 2015 OECD criteria for concessional financing, the loan can be considered a concessional one.

The construction of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway took almost 6 years and employed 20,000 Ethiopians. By 2014, the project had reached 50% completion, and track laying commenced in May 2015. The railway was partially completed in 2016, with passenger services officially launched on October 4 of that year. A formal ceremony held on January 1, 2018, marked the start of the railway's full commercial operations.

Between December 2015 and July 2016, a consortium comprising the China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) signed the Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway Operation and Management Agreement. This agreement established that the Chinese consortium would manage and operate the line for an initial five-year period. Around the same period, the Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC) and the Société Djiboutienne de Chemin de Fer (SDCF) created a joint venture – the Ethio-Djibouti Standard Gauge Railway Company (EDR), with ownership stakes of 75% and 25%, respectively. The EDR was tasked with managing the line, maintaining all infrastructure and equipment, and operating freight and passenger services from 2024 onward, following a gradual handover supported by two additional years of technical assistance from the Chinese consortium (AidData, 2025e).

Designed to replace old colonial gauge lines and to enhance transportation infrastructure within Ethiopia and across Africa, the two systems have already demonstrated some positive effects, although their depth and sustainability remain subjects for future analysis. While the light railway diminished traffic in Addis Ababa, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railroad provides a modern, robust, and low-carbon corridor that connect the country with a nearby outlet to the sea, thus facilitating trade with other countries and continents. Nevertheless, both railway systems have sparked significant controversy. Together, they represented investments exceeding US\$ 5 billion, with approximately US\$ 3 billion – equivalent to nearly 10% of 2011's Ethiopia GDP – sourced through Chinese loan commitments. On one hand, this illustrates how the Ethiopian government was able to convince China to make sensitive investments in sectors not supported by the West (Mawdsley, 2019). On the other hand, the projects have been met with mixed reactions throughout every phase, from draft to construction.

Concerns about the environment, sustainable development, and feasibility were in the spotlight in the early stages of both the Addis Ababa light railway system and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway projects. Following completion, criticism has shifted toward their short-term commercial viability. Currently, both networks are operating below designed capacity and, consequently, are incurring operational losses (Tarrosy and Vörös, 2018a, 2018b; AidData, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f). Other complications, such as the lack of necessary spare material, ideal maintenance, and infrastructure near the lines were still arising in 2023, affecting the proper operation of the systems (AidData, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f, 2025g). Consequently, local media have voiced skepticism regarding the actual benefits related to these big projects.

Both Ethiopia and Kenya have faced challenges in fulfilling short-term financial commitments to China. Between 2011 and 2018, Ethiopia and Kenya borrowed, respectively, US\$ 11 billion and US\$ 8.3 billion from Chinese creditors (Acker and Brautigam, 2021). Currently, China is their largest bilateral creditor, accounting for one-third of Ethiopia's total external debt (Calabrese, Huang and Nadin, 2021) and one-third of Kenya's 2021-22 external debt service obligations (Herbling, 2021). Under debt distress, both nations have, in recent years, negotiated – with some success – debt relief and suspension through Chinese bilateral channels, the IMF, and the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) (Acker and Brautigam, 2021; Preston, 2022; Miriri, 2024; Strohecker and George, 2025).

Notably, Beijing has shown particular openness to renegotiating debt terms with both countries. In Ethiopia's case, Beijing agreed in 2018 to restructure the three tranches of loans that financed the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway. More recently, Kenya and China reached an agreement to restructure the East African country's loan portfolio by converting an estimated US\$ 3.5 billion of outstanding debt from U.S. dollars into Chinese yuan (Olander, 2025). Following this precedent, Ethiopia has also initiated talks to convert part of its US\$ 5.38 billion debt into yuan-denominated loans, a measure that not only eases repayment pressures but also advances China's broader strategy to internationalize its currency, demonstrating Beijing's willingness to prioritize strategic and geopolitical objectives over short-term financial returns (Hill and Tadesse, 2025).

Regarding the projects, while the COVID-19 pandemic and global economic downturn caused repayment setbacks, the infrastructure initiatives analyzed in this paper have largely persisted, indicating that all participating countries remain committed to fostering mutually beneficial collaboration. Since the first FOCAC in 2000, member states have worked to build a renewed South-South strategic alliance based on core principles: political equality, mutual trust, win-win economic cooperation, and cultural exchange.

The analysis of the projects reveals a deep commitment to these FOCAC principles. By supporting massive infrastructure projects with fewer conditionalities – contrasting with the traditional North-South model – China demonstrates a priority for building an autonomous cooperation policy. By improving and modernizing African infrastructure, especially in the transportation sector, the African countries and China are developing a form SSC that aims for structural transformations in the international system. Therefore, rather than making broad assumptions about the Sino-African cooperation model, it is more sensible to evaluate the long-term impacts of these projects.

5 CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, there was no intention to focus the investigation on evaluating the material profits or losses of each infrastructure project mentioned. Instead, the goal was to analyze the relationship between China and two African actors to better understand the essence of China's ties with Kenya and Ethiopia – specifically, whether these relationships are mutually beneficial and whether the African countries exercise agency in their negotiations with a more developed Global South partner. Additionally, this study sought to explore whether the experiences of Kenya and Ethiopia could offer insights to inspire innovative approaches in Brazil-China relations, as well as in Brazil's engagement with other Global South countries, highlighting ways to collaborate with external partners while simultaneously advancing domestic development priorities.

At the same time, while conducting this investigation, it was essential to situate these partnerships within broader debates and perceptions of China's role in the Global South. The study recognizes that there are individuals in the academic sphere and mainstream media who consider China an enemy of the West and its values. Moreover, they believe that the traditional powers are losing political and economic space in the African continent. Thus, the aforementioned partnerships are designed by Beijing to achieve hegemonic status in the international system. Nevertheless, this paper does not endorse this view.

In its partnerships with African nations, Beijing has emphasized principles such as win-win cooperation, non-intervention, and solidarity. By demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the

structural challenges facing the Global South, China has positioned itself in a strategically advantageous role, particularly when compared to the traditional offerings of the Global North. Furthermore, these cooperation ties are forged by the demands of the African countries' development plans, such as Kenya Vision 2030 and Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plan. Actors like Kenya and Ethiopia exercise significant agency in their foreign policy agendas, actively engaging in these arrangements with China to fulfill specific domestic interests.

Therefore, Nairobi and Addis Ababa can benefit from Chinese support for their development plans. This shift has prompted the Global North to adapt its own aid models to compete with SSC, especially the Chinese model. This situation favors aid receivers by increasing their bargaining power. At the same time, developed countries are rethinking their aid agendas, with economic growth and financial development becoming more prominent in their partnerships (Mawdsley, 2018). However, some issues must be pointed out.

Chinese engagement in the African continent is not homogeneous. It involves a diverse array of actors, including private and state-owned enterprises and banks, regional organizations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and subnational entities. This complex group of institutions operates with diverse interests, goals, and functionalities. Therefore, China's presence in Africa should be understood according to these specific features rather than as a monolithic, State-centered actor. Analogously, African actors must be analyzed as an assemblage of various social and political groups with distinct interests.

In recent years, the debt of African countries to Chinese entities has attracted significant attention in the debate on China-Africa relations, particularly concerning loan repayments. For instance, SAIS-CARI reported 43 Chinese loans to Kenya totaling US\$ 9.2 billion by the end of 2020, with US\$ 6.1 billion allocated to transportation projects – a figure second only to Angola. From Kenya's perspective, the Chinese projects led to a rise in public debt as a share of GDP from 39% in 2013 to 66% in 2020, with an increasing reliance on more costly commercial sources (Kell, 2025). Consequently, Chinese foreign practice is becoming more pragmatic, with debt relief and renegotiation becoming increasingly important tools to maintain some partnerships (Alden e Jiang, 2019).

While much remains to be explored in Sino-African relations, China has undeniably become a central partner in the continent's development. Its focus on infrastructure has shifted the international development cooperation landscape significantly. A recent example of China's growing influence is Ethiopia's accession to the BRICS group, a move reportedly driven (in part) by Chinese interest and diplomatic pressure. Ethiopia, in turn, has demonstrated a strong motivation to access the NDB, underscoring how China's partnerships extend beyond bilateral ties to influence broader multilateral dynamics across the Global South.

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