

Is China-Africa Cooperation under China's "Belt and Road" Initiative a "Neo-colonialism"?——Case of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway

Shi Li^{1, a, *}

¹Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, the United Kingdom

^adoublelee666@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: China-Africa relations and the One Belt and One Road Initiative attract world-wide attention. Africa has become China's second largest overseas project contracting land and fourth largest foreign investment destination as China-Africa bilateral trade becomes increasingly frequent. However, the further development of China-Africa relations has aroused suspicion and accusations by some of the Western countries. Reports of China's neo-colonialism in Africa have spread from western politicians and mainstream media to government officials in Africa. It occurs China's diplomacy towards African countries face more challenges and pressures. In this paper, it will be exploring the question of whether China-Africa cooperation under the BRI is a "neo-colonialism". To start with, this paper will initially detail existing academic debates, based on the concept of neocolonialism and China-Africa relations thus to explain the question of whether China's economic cooperation in Africa is a "neo-colonialism". Meanwhile, the evaluation of the case of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway about construction background and problems will be illustrated to refute the arguments of Chinese neocolonialism proposed by Western media. Finally, on this basis, it will come up with a relatively rational conclusion to prove that China's cooperation in Africa is not neo-colonialism.

Keywords: China-africa relations, the One Belt and One Road Initiative, bilateral cooperation

1. Introduction

The One Belt and One Road Initiative comprises the Silk Road Economic Belt as well as the Maritime Silk Road [1]. The maritime trade route centered on Nairobi. Kenya's capital city meanwhile covers most African countries. China has conducted in-depth trade, investment and technology with African countries through this particular maritime trade route to support the development of African countries. Over the past several years, China-Africa bilateral trade has become increasingly frequent, and Africa has become China's second largest overseas project contracting land and fourth largest foreign investment destination[2]. However, the further development of China-Africa relations has aroused suspicion and accusations by some of the Western countries. U. S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson criticized that China enforcing African countries to rely on imports, harnessing corrupt transactions to endanger natural resources and the environment. He mentioned that Chinese investment in Africa could benefit Africa's infrastructure development, but Chinese action has led to increased debt and reduced employment opportunities in African countries[3]. Reports of China's neo-colonialism in Africa have spread from western politicians and mainstream media to government officials in Africa. It occurs China's diplomacy towards African countries face more challenges and pressures. In this essay, it will be exploring the question of whether China-Africa cooperation under the BRI is a "neo-colonialism".

To start with, the first following paragraph will present a literature review and related theories on China-Africa cooperation. Then this essay will detail existing academic debates, based on the concept of neocolonialism and China-Africa relations thus to explain the question of whether China's economic cooperation in Africa is a "neo-colonialism". Furthermore, the evaluation of the case of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway about construction background and problems will be illustrated in the next paragraph to refute the arguments of Chinese neocolonialism proposed by Western media. Finally, on this basis, it will come up with a relatively rational conclusion to prove that China's cooperation in Africa is not neo-colonialism.

2. Literature review

This paper refers to the concept of neocolonialism in Nkrumah's book "Neocolonialism, which is "The Last Stage of Imperialism" and presents the characteristics of neocolonialism. Next, the paper also applies the theory of international cooperation, namely Huntington's "clash of civilizations." Author believes that at the global level, the main conflicts in global politics will occur between countries and groups of different cultures. He sees civilization not only as a variable in international relations, but also as the primary cause of international conflict. China-Africa civilization exchanges will promote the continuous deepening of China-Africa cooperation ^[4]. Meanwhile, it also uses the "civilization conflict theory" to explain the root cause of problems in the construction of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway and the fundamental problem can be regard as the cultural differences between China and Africa. Apart from this, it applies the "asymmetric information" theory to explain the reasons of the differences in ideas among Chinese and African people ^[5]. Due to the differences in religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds between Chinese and African civilization, it has also caused certain obstacles to the construction of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway.

3. The concept of neocolonialism

The concept of neocolonialism originated in the 1950s and it appeared after the disintegration of the old colonial system. After World War II, the imperialist countries did not abandon colonialism. In order to maintain their interests in the original colonies, they adopted new methods to implement the new colonialism. ^[6] An important feature of neo-colonialism is that imperialist countries are forced to change the previous way of direct colonial rule and adopt a new way of colonial rule through the agents they choose. The research of the former President of Ghana is one of the prominent representatives. In the book "New Colonialism: The Final Stage of Imperialism," Nkrumah argues that the essence of neocolonialism is that the colonial countries under its control are only politically independent while the economy is dependent. As a result of the implementation of neocolonialism, foreign capital was developed through exploitation of underdeveloped regions, resulting in continued underdevelopment in Africa. Colonized countries do not have the ability to develop their own economic autonomy. In terms of national defense and domestic security, these countries have to rely on the former imperialist countries. Their economic systems, like the original colonial era, are mostly linked to the economic and financial systems of the former colonial powers. Due to the fact that neocolonialism is entirely for the benefit of developed countries, countless "assistance" programs have failed. ^[7] Unequal international trade between developed and developing countries is a distinct feature of neocolonialism. Developed capitalist countries tried to control the prices of international commodities to obtain surplus value in Africa. For example, Ghana and Nigeria's cocoa production tripled from 1964 to 1965 compared to 1954-1955. However, the total revenue they received fell from 125 million pounds to 114 million pounds ^[8]. This unequal international trade has put Africa in an underdeveloped state and thus made Western countries more affluent. The rise of the dependency theory represented by Gonde Frank and Samir Amin reflected the essence of neocolonialism to a certain extent. ^[8]

4. Different views on whether China promotes "neo-colonialism" in Africa

The British magazine "The Economist" refers to China's aid to Africa as "neo-colonialism". ^[9] However, the fact is that it is the non-economic purpose of aid provided by developed capitalist countries to Africa, which has led to a large number of corruptions and interference in internal affairs, and it has been widely criticized. A Zambian scholar Dambisa Moyo ^[10] points out that the assistance of the western countries has trapped African countries in the vicious circle of assistance. Foreign aid—supporting corrupt government—hindering the implementation of laws and regulations—opaque institutions, reduced investment—slowing economic growth—reducing employment opportunities, increasing poverty—more aid. However, China and Africa require needs and expectations on each side. As a matter of fact, many Western scholars proposed that international multilateral organizations such as World Bank dominated by developed capitalist countries' assistance to developing countries was an imperialist action. ^[11] It seems that forcing recipient countries to accept these conditions is to boost their economies, in fact it makes recipient countries rely on foreign capital for a long time and loses their basic economic sovereignty.

China's cooperation with Africa has been described as a behavior similar to neocolonialism, especially in the import of raw materials such as oil, and China has indeed begun to occupy a large

share of African exports.^[12] However, the difference between this fact and neocolonialism needs to be answered in terms of theory and practice. Neo-colonialism is a continuation of colonialism. Understanding the essence of colonialism can define whether China's behavior in Africa is colonialism. The emergence of the concept of neocolonialism is specific. It refers to the strategy adopted by Western countries to indirectly control the original colonial countries in order to maintain and protect their interests after the collapse of the colonial system. Looking back at history, the plundering of Africa by colonial powers caused serious consequences. Economically, colonial countries only preserve their own interests and do not develop the infrastructure construction within Africa. Their main purpose is to create exportable profits meanwhile support their colonies throughout taxation on trade and agricultural production. The consequence is that it makes African economies fully dependent on colonial nations through the imposition of trade agreements. Therefore, plunder and inequality are the essence of colonialism and neo-colonialism. However, China's trade with Africa is an equal trade based on international rules, which is fundamentally different from colonialism. On the other hand, neocolonialism is closely related to capitalism, Rosa Luxembourg stated in the "capital accumulation theory" that capitalism is an economic form that cannot exist on its own, and it needs other economies as a transmission.^[13] The end result of the capitalist system is that developed capitalist countries will inevitably promote new and old colonialism to backward countries and carry out economic plunder. However, as a socialist country, China has never colonized anyone, and China-Africa cooperation is based entirely on the principles of sovereign equality and willingness. As China imports oil from Africa, it has also driven the development of Africa's economy and infrastructure. At the same time, China has offered reasonable assistance and help for Africa to establish a complete oil industry system. Therefore, behind the prosperity of China-Africa oil trade is the improvement of Africa's independent development capacity. Apart from this, as China transfer competitive Chinese-made commodities to Africa, it improves the qualities of lives for African people. It is the ultimate result of China-Africa cooperation, and it also refutes that Chinese investment in Africa is not neocolonialism.

5. The evaluation of the case of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway

Mombasa–Nairobi Railway is an typical project under "Belt and Road" initiative, and it is also the first landmark project of China-Kenya partnership. From previous single technical assistance to nowadays knowledge sharing and technology transfer, China has helped Africa to achieve their own development through their own efforts. It has a total length of 472 kilometers, starting from Mombasa, the largest port in East Africa in the east, and Nairobi, the capital in the west. The railway passes through the plateau area, low, middle and mountainous areas, and high plains in turn. It is Kenya's largest infrastructure project^[14]. Meanwhile, it is the first East African trunk railway to adopt Chinese standards, Chinese technology and Chinese design. During construction, it created 46, 000 jobs for Kenya, and Kenya's logistics costs were reduced by 40% after completion^[15]. Since the construction of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway, China and Kenya have realized all-round cooperation in politics, economy, public safety, education and other aspects, and established a new model for China-Africa cooperation.

In terms of economic cooperation, the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway has created more than 46, 000 jobs for the local area. Its direct and indirect investment has reached up to 1 billion US dollars^[16], and Kenya's local economic development has been promoted as a result. In terms of public safety cooperation, there are Chinese and Kenyan security officers along the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway station. The public safety system is composed of the professional security team; the armed forces of the Kenyan government and local security companies jointly create a public safety management system for it. As a result, the system presents a new model for public safety in Kenya and other African countries. In terms of railway education cooperation, for training high skilled professionals, China has established a complete railway expertise education system for Kenya. The project has trained a total of more than 45, 000 local employees. China Railway Corporation has cooperated with more than 1, 000 local business partners and a large number of young Kenyans have gone to China in order to study railway operations^[17]. At the same time, the railway has activated the East African business circle, which has promoted the development of East African economy. Since the opening of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway, customer flows have been increasing. China no longer solely supports Africa through financial and technical support but help Africa to develop itself through all-round cooperation. The construction of the railway not only promoted the economic development of African countries; the Kenyan railway education, the training system and the public safety management system have also gradually improved. China and Africa have reached all-round international cooperation in political, economic, social development and security aspects. The Mombasa–Nairobi Railway has also become a

model of China-Africa friendly cooperation in the new era.

With the construction of the Mombasa–Nairobi railway, China and Africa also encountered problems in cooperation. In international cooperation, each country formulates foreign policies based on its interests. In order to ensure the realization of common interests, countries need to alter their foreign policies thus to make them compatible with the policies of partner countries. China is the largest developing country and Africa is the most concentrated continent of developing countries. During the process of China-Africa cooperation, some problems also appeared, such as the asymmetry of information between countries, conflicts between different civilizations etc.

The first is the difficulty of communication. Samuel Huntington proposed in the "clash of civilizations" that the communication problems within Western civilization and Confucian civilization are one of the more typical civilization conflicts. The African continent is deeply influenced by Western civilization due to its long history of being colonized by Western countries, while Confucian civilization is deeply rooted in China. Due to the differences in time concepts between the two parties, how to manage Kenyan workers is one of the issues that need to be faced and resolved during the construction of the railway^[18]. Many Kenyans cannot adapt to the "Chinese rhythm". Since Africa still specialized on the traditional agricultural economy and society, the grasp of time is relatively rough, and delay in construction has become a normal phenomenon. Therefore, in the railway construction process, problems often occur due to the differences in the work efficiency of the employees.

The second issue is skeptical report spreading in the Western media. In the early stages of the construction of the railway, several reports in the Western media that criticized China's participation in Africa's infrastructure construction. These inconformity reports lead to the tarnish of China's image in African countries. Another problem is Institutional differences. Due to political democratization and economic privatization in Africa, the problems faced in China-Africa cooperation mainly come from national corruption, government accountability institution and political instability. For example, "land acquisition" was one of the difficult problems in Kenya^[19]. A considerable portion of the ownership of the land along the Mombasa–Nairobi Mongolia Railway is indeterminate, and it is difficult to identify the landowner. Because of the privatization of land in Kenya, the efficiency of government to handle affairs is low. Therefore, these factors have brought greater difficulty and uncertainty to land acquisition.

The above problems are caused by cultural, institutional differences, and lack of communication between the two parties. In order to solve these problems, the following measures should be taken. The first is talent training, especially to train cross-cultural exchange professionals. Cultivating intercultural communication talents are conducive to strengthening exchanges culture knowledge and technology between two countries. Next is media propaganda, promoting a positive image of China-Africa cooperation. At the same time, two sides should establish media cooperation so that Africans can comprehend Chinese policy implications and the real situation of China-Africa cooperation. The consequence is that it can help China and Africa to reduce trade policy conflict and understand each other. The analysis of the background and problems of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway construction proved that the project is a new model of China-Africa cooperation. With the smooth opening of the Mongolia-Nepal railway, the builders refuted the "new colonialism" of the Western media with practical actions.

6. Conclusion

China-Africa cooperation is a sound economic cooperation relationship but not neo-colonialism as reported by Western media. China, as the largest developing country, joined the African market that brings great opportunities both in promoting the economic and trade development of Africa under the cooperation opportunity of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Besides, it prevents the long-term monopoly power from other western countries pressured on Africa. The China-Africa cooperation model under the BRI shows that China is not plundering African resources, and the ultimate goal is to achieve common development with neighboring countries. The cooperation relationship between two countries is also based on the principles of fair and trusted international cooperation. Railway construction such as the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway has solved sort of infrastructure problems in the economic development of African countries and improved the level of manufacturing technology and management system. In addition, the transfer of professional technology and cheap commodities to African countries has reduced trade costs meanwhile provide convenience for citizen and create virtuous competition among industries. As a result, African countries are able to integrate into the economic globalization system rapidly. Hence, the China-Africa cooperation model based on the BRI is

essentially different from neo-colonialism.

References

- [1] Ferdinand, P. (2016). *Westward ho-the China dream and 'one belt, one road': Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping*. *International Affairs*, 92(4), pp. 941-957.
- [2] Biggeri, M. and Sanfilippo, M. (2009). *Understanding China's move into Africa: an empirical analysis*. *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, 7(1), pp. 31-54.
- [3] Ford, K. (2018). *Tillerson slams China's approach to Africa*. [online] BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-43307461> [Accessed 4 Jan. 2020].
- [4] Huntington, S. (1993). *The Clash of Civilizations?*. *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), p. 22.
- [5] Booth, A. and Cressy, R. (2009). *Strikes With Asymmetric Information: Theory And Evidence**. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 52(3), pp. 269-291.
- [6] Graf, W. and Barongo, Y. (1981). *Neocolonialism and African Politics: A Survey of the Impact of Neocolonialism on African Political Behaviour*. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 15(3), p. 600.
- [7] Tiger, L. and Nkrumah, K. (1966). *Neo-Colonialism. The Last Stage of Imperialism*. *International Journal*, 22(1), p. 161.
- [8] Lumumba-Kasongo, T. (2011). *China-Africa Relations: A Neo-Imperialism or a Neo-Colonialism? A Reflection**. *African and Asian Studies*, 10(2-3), pp. 234-266.
- [9] Agri, B. (2009). *Outsourcing's third wave*. [online] *The Economist*. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/node/13692889/all-comments> [Accessed 4 Jan. 2020].
- [10] Badger, K. (2011). *AFRICAN AID": FROM WEST TO EAST & BACK AGAIN*. *Academia. edu*. Keely Badger. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/40102894/_AFRICAN_AID_FROM_WEST_TO_EAST_and_BACK_AGAIN (Accessed: January 31, 2023).
- [11] Prince, H. (2016). *Book Review: The Political Economy of Development: The World Bank, Neoliberalism and Development Research*. *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 49(2), pp. 313-315.
- [12] Park, B. and Lee, K. (2006). *Natural Resources, Governance, and Economic Growth in Africa*. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- [13] Chowdhury, K. (2018). *Rosa Luxemburg's the Accumulation of Capital, Postcolonial Theory, and The Problem of Present Day Imperialisms*. *New Formations*, 94(94), pp. 142-160.
- [14] Villarnovo Lopez Begleiter, A. (2019) *The Dragon Stretches its Wings: Assessing the Geopolitical and Economic Implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan and Kenya*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333189328_The_Dragon_Stretches_its_Wings_Assessing_the_Geopolitical_and_Economic_Implications_of_China's_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_in_Pakistan_and_Kenya (Accessed: January 31, 2023).
- [15] Chung, C. (2019). *China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative: Strategic and Economic Implications for East Africa*. *China and the World*, 02(02), p. 1950011.
- [16] Valente, M. and Crane, A. (2010). *Public Responsibility and Private Enterprise in Developing Countries*. *California Management Review*, 52(3), pp. 52-78.
- [17] Rana, K. (2019). *Book Review: Understanding China's New Diplomacy: Silk Roads and Bullet Trains* by Gerald Chan. *China Report*, 55(2), pp. 172-173.
- [18] Connor, A. (2010). *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese development project changed lives and livelihoods in Tanzania*, by Jamie Monson. *African Affairs*, 109(435), pp. 348-349.
- [19] Diergarten, Y. (2019). *Indigenous or Out of Scope? Large-scale Land Acquisitions in Developing Countries*, *International Human Rights Law and the Current Deficiencies in Land Rights Protection*. *Human Rights Law Review*, 19(1), pp. 37-52.