

Actors, Agency, and Localization: The Making of an African Belt and Road Initiative

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ABSTRACT Whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is being praised or criticized, the focus often is on the perceptions of it in African countries rather than how it is conceptualized in those countries and by continental entities such as the African Union (AU). As a result, there is no understanding of the collective African conceptualization of the BRI and how that conceptualization shapes the continent's engagement with China and, in turn, the perceptions of the BRI. By employing the intentionality, instrumentalist, and geopolitical approaches, this study analyzes Africa's conceptualization of the BRI as a global project through the lens of strategic utility, intentionality, and geopolitical positioning, which can be summarized as "strategic globalism."

Since its inception in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded beyond Asia to include 53 African countries. Because Africa is burdened by an infrastructure funding gap of as much as USD \$108 billion per year, the BRI provides a significant injection of funding for infrastructure development. In 2023 alone, BRI infrastructure projects in Africa amounted to more than USD \$21.7 billion—making China the single biggest bilateral infrastructure financier on the continent (De Kluiver, 2024). However, with the United States and some European powers labeling the BRI as a predatory lending project trapping African countries into debt and expanding China's influence on the continent, an examination of how the BRI is conceptualized by African leaders at a continental level is needed. Partly, this is because whether the BRI is being praised or criticized, the focus often is on the perceptions of it in African countries rather than how it is conceptualized in those countries and by continental entities such as the African Union (AU) (García Herrero and Schindowski 2023). As a result, there is no understanding of the collective African conceptualization of the BRI and how that conceptualization shapes the continent's engagement with China and, in turn, the perceptions of the BRI.

To explore how the BRI is conceptualized by the AU, it is critical to understand how external actors influence the developmental trajectory of the continent. In general, developmental

policies in Africa often are dependent on financing from external-development partners, which suggests that African countries lack the autonomy to formulate and finance their own strategies. Nonetheless, this lack of autonomy in policy making in most African countries does not reflect the absence of agency by ruling elites on the continent. These ruling political elites, "by virtue of positions they occupy in government, have the authority to make, enforce, and ensure implementation of their domestic and foreign policies" (Hodzi 2018, 193). Based on their role as middlemen between their populations and the outside world, ruling elites are key actors in determining which external policies can be implemented in their country as well as strategically localizing externally developed policies to suit their domestic and international objectives. It also is these ruling elites—particularly the presidents—who constitute the bi-annual summits of the AU and among whom the AU's rotational chair, who acts as the head of the AU, is selected. Accordingly, the AU chairperson is strategic because he or she represents the continent at international forums such as the G7 and G20 summits and the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) where he or she exercises agency in setting the agenda and representing the interests of the AU. In this study, agency therefore is understood as "both the act of holding specific interests and goals as well as the capacity that actors possess to set agendas, negotiate, and act in accordance with their specific interests and goals" (Links 2021, 115).

This background about the role of ruling elites vis-à-vis external actors in the making and implementation of developmental policies and strategies on the African continent is relevant to an examination of the BRI conceptualization by AU chairpersons. Accordingly, this study examines how the BRI was conceptualized by two of those chairpersons—Paul Kagame (2018–2019) and Cyril Ramaphosa (2020–2021)—and how their interpretations of the BRI shape the continent’s engagement with China. The two leaders were selected because Kagame’s tenure coincided with the 2018 FOCAC at which 37 African countries and the AU signed memorandums of understanding (MoAs) with China to jointly develop the BRI in Africa. In addition, Kagame led the drive to reform the financing structure of the AU to make it less dependent on external donors. Conversely, Ramaphosa used his tenure (2020–2021) and his country’s clout as a member of the BRICS (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and an observer at G7 meetings to assert Africa’s autonomy as an actor in global affairs. Therefore, the significance of these two chairpersons stems from their role in projecting Africa as an autonomous continent able to set its own developmental agenda and determine the terms under which it engages external actors. Although their views are not entirely representative of the AU member states, which conduct their bilateral relations autonomously, they provide insight to general perceptions of the BRI in the AU.

By acknowledging that Africa is not a monolith, this article focuses on the general understanding of the BRI as expressed in statements and speeches by the two former AU chairpersons. Between the two, they made six statements and speeches during their tenure that referred to the AU’s cooperation with China on the BRI. Kagame made four statements relative to the BRI and on broad AU–China engagement. To make sense of the how the statements were used by the two chairpersons to create meaning for understanding the BRI, discourse analysis was used. It concurred with the three analytical approaches used in this article: intentionality, instrumentalist, and geopolitical approaches. Combined, discourse analysis and these three approaches make sense of how the BRI was conceptualized and the effect that this has had on the reception of the BRI in Africa. Unlike constructivist and realist approaches that focus on Africa’s ideational and material factors in determining its role in global affairs, these three approaches provide a comprehensive way of analyzing how AU chairpersons conceptualize the BRI. In contrast to individual presidents of African countries, AU chairpersons have only a one-year term to set an agenda and achieve their objectives; therefore, they focus more on quick wins. This urgency within a one-year term is understood effectively through the intentionality, instrumentalist, and geopolitical approaches. In other words, the three approaches provide a basis for analyzing the conceptualization of the BRI as a global project through the lens of strategic utility, intentionality, and geopolitical positioning, which can be summarized as “strategic globalism.”

APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE “AMBIVALENT” BRI

Since its launch in 2013, the BRI has evoked contrasting views and opinions among policy makers, scholars, and the media

because it is a “fluid—an ever-evolving concept that has changed considerably since it was first announced” (Calabrese 2019). Chinese President Xi Jinping described it as a project of the century and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) labeled it a systematic project. As defined by the World Bank (2019, xi), the BRI is an “open arrangement in which all countries are welcome to participate”—that is, a form of global infrastructure-development policy that provides a blueprint for reducing infrastructure gaps.

In contrast to these optimistic views about the BRI, several US senators labeled it a predatory infrastructure-financing initiative aimed at advancing Beijing’s state-led authoritarian developmental model and extending its influence in developing countries (Perdue et al. 2018). Rex Tillerson (2017), a former US Secretary of State, complained that through the BRI, China challenges “the rules-based order and subverts the sovereignty of neighboring countries and disadvantages the US and our friends.” More recently, while launching a rival Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, President Joe Biden (2021) insinuated that the BRI was a source of strategic threat to the liberal global order and to the interests of the G7 countries in developing countries.

Based on this background, different actors describe the BRI as a project, concept, open arrangement, initiative, program, and to some extent an ideology—that is, a new form of global development anchored on China’s national values and priorities. These contrasting views about the nature, objectives, and impact of the BRI add to its ambivalence and fluidity. There is an assumption that, in Africa, the BRI is perceived as an opportunity for Africa to gain the infrastructure that it desperately needs. However, there is a dearth of analysis about how those actors perceive the BRI and what they seek to transfer to their own localities and for what reasons. For example, is it an infrastructure-financing instrument, an institution, a policy, or an ideology? To unpack African perceptions of the BRI, the next section discusses the intentionality, instrumentality, and geopolitical approaches.

Intentionality Approach: The BRI as a Concept

As stated by Kagame during his 2018–2019 tenure as AU chairperson, the BRI is “a very good *concept* where each country involved finds a place for its own development in areas like industrialization, infrastructure, and green economy.... We will continue to play our own role to make sure we contribute to the overall development framework” (*People’s Daily* 2018). In addition to Kagame, scholars including Zhao (2020, 320) suggested that the BRI is “an organizing concept of Chinese diplomacy.” Rolland (2018) described it as an “organizing concept of Xi’s vision for China as a rising global power with unique national characteristics...[that] sets the general long-term direction for China and seeks to mobilize and coordinate the use of all available national resources (political, economic, diplomatic, military, and ideological) to pursue internal (economic development, social stability) and external (foreign policy, national security) objectives in an integrated way.”

Kagame (2018), Rolland (2018), and Zhao (2020) concurred that the BRI is an organizing concept that presents a plan or a framework for achieving set objectives. However, whereas

Rolland and Zhao focused on how the BRI is a useful concept for China to achieve its own domestic and international interests, Kagame focused on the concept that it can be tailored by African countries to achieve their own objectives. He maintained that the BRI, like any other concept, provides space for Africans to conceptualize it according to their own objectives and to determine the role they can play to implement the BRI in their countries. Therefore, to Kagame, more than being a tool for China to achieve its geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions, the BRI empowers African actors to achieve their own developmental needs. Accordingly, it is a fluid and evolving concept that is adaptable to different contexts beyond China.

The intentionality approach, which links agency with intentionality, provides a nuanced understanding of Kagame's take on the BRI as a "good concept." Broadly, intentionality means "pursuing courses of action (which can include inaction) to further one's interests" (Links 2021, 130). As noted by Wight (2006), it is this intentionality that anchors the agency of actors because without intention, their actions and power will be inconsequential devoid of purpose. Based on the intentionality approach, Kagame was advocating that (1) African countries reconceptualize the BRI to suit their own developmental conditions; and (2) each country should decide the role it wants to play in the BRI, which suggests that the roles are not predefined for African countries by China. The implication is that actors in Africa must exercise agency in reconceptualizing the BRI to meet their developmental strategies, find their own place in the BRI, and determine how they want to achieve their overall developmental objectives. The intentionality is that they are not only reconceptualizing the BRI and mapping their role in it but also doing so to achieve their own development, whether through industrialization, green economy, or infrastructure. It therefore is the African actors who determine which aspects of the BRI are applicable, how they can be implemented, and to what extent they can be implemented in their countries.

determine what place they occupy in the BRI depending on their interests. As stated by Ryder (2017), African countries need to develop "a strategic management plan." Kagame therefore envisioned the BRI as a developmental framework that has multiple stakeholders and in which each stakeholder contributes to the overall developmental objectives.

In summary, four main implications regard the BRI as a concept. First, it enables ruling elites and other actors in Africa to claim policy autonomy and determine how the BRI can be used to achieve their own objectives. Second, because the BRI is viewed as an evolving concept, African actors can redefine, conceptualize, and operationalize it to suit their own developmental strategies. This is unique to the BRI because initiatives developed by the West are mostly immutable, with little or no space for adaptation to local contexts. Third, it enables African actors to determine the benefits that they want from the BRI. Thus, as noted by Kagame, each country has a responsibility to find its own place. Therefore, the places are not predetermined but are left for each state to exercise agency in determining which benefits they should receive considering their domestic needs, whether political, economic, or social. Fourth, the concept gives African actors the opportunity to determine the values that connect them to the BRI. As stated by Kagame, "No matter the distance, we are driven by the same aspirations: development and stability. We should do what we can to make sure the world we live in is taken good care of" (*People's Daily* 2018). These values therefore are epitomized by the fluid and adaptable nature of the BRI as a concept. Thus, according to Kagame, the BRI can be domesticated by African actors (Ndzendze and Monyae 2019, 47). It is this "boundless" domestication of the BRI that may provide space for African elites to harness it to achieve their own personal objectives of perpetuating their regimes, subjugating political opposition, and enhancing their performative legitimacy.

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Based on Kagame's view of the BRI, its reconceptualization and adaptation requires actors in Africa to exercise agency in initiating discussions with China about how the BRI can be applied in their countries. There is scope for that because, as stated by the NDRC, "the Belt and Road Initiative is a systematic project, which should be jointly built through consultation to meet the interests of all, and efforts should be made to integrate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road" (National Development and Reform Commission et al. 2015). Although it is not clear whether all countries have platforms and institutions set up to engage with China on BRI issues, it is important that Kagame placed the responsibility on African actors to initiate discussions with China to

Instrumentalist Approach: The BRI as a Source of Support for Infrastructure Development

The African Development Bank (2019, 18) estimates that Africa's "infrastructure needs are \$130 billion to \$170 billion a year, with a financing gap of \$68 billion to \$108 billion." Ibrahim Mayaki (n.d.), the Chief Executive Officer of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, argued that "Africa still faces infrastructure shortcomings across all sectors, in terms of both access and quality." Improving connectivity within Africa and between the continent and its external trading partners is a long-term priority for the AU. Agenda 2063, the AU's policy blueprint, prioritizes infrastructure development and connectivity as keys to unlocking Africa's economic growth and

development. Similarly, “interconnectivity of infrastructure development is the core of the BRI” (Lisinge 2020, 426).

With limited capacity to mobilize infrastructure financing within the continent, several initiatives have been launched with support from external partners. For example, the Infrastructure Consortium for Africa (ICA) was launched in 2005 at the G8 Gleneagles Summit to promote investment in infrastructure in Africa, from both public and private sources. In addition, the emergence of non-Western economies including India and China has opened new opportunities for infrastructure financing on the continent. Nevertheless, Africa cannot meet its infrastructure developmental targets, even with the support of external actors; therefore, the BRI is viewed as one of several financing sources for infrastructure development in Africa.

Unlike Kagame, who considered the BRI as a concept that could be tailored to suit each African country’s developmental objectives, Ramaphosa limited the scope of the BRI to the form of a financing model for Africa’s infrastructure development. As chairperson of the AU from 2020 to 2021, Ramaphosa regarded the BRI as a new financing instrument for Africa’s infrastructure-developmental projects; therefore, he sought to strengthen the link between the BRI and the AU’s Agenda 2063 to finance the continent’s infrastructure, industrialization, and economic development. Previously, at the 2018 FOCAC meeting in Beijing, Ramaphosa (2018) stated that “Africa is looking forward to continuing Chinese support in pursuing the objectives and priorities outlined in the African Union’s Agenda 2063.”

In aligning the BRI with Africa’s infrastructure developmental objectives, Ramaphosa strategically pressured China to fulfil Xi Jinping’s promise to ensure complementarity between the BRI and the AU’s Agenda 2063 to achieve the AU’s aspiration for “world-class, integrative infrastructure that criss-crosses the continent” (African Union 2015, 4) during his tenure. In 2018, Xi Jinping had urged Africa and China to “seize the opportunity created by complementarity between our respective development strategies and the major opportunities presented by the Belt and Road Initiative” (Xinhua News Agency 2018b). The same was reiterated in the FOCAC’s Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021), which stated that (1) China and Africa will “jointly advance Belt and Road cooperation”; (2) “the two sides will take the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity to strengthen multidimensional, wide-ranging, and in-depth cooperation for mutual benefits and common development”; (3) they will “leverage the strengths of the Forum and support China and Africa in jointly building the Belt and Road”; (4) China will “create new financing models and improve the terms and conditions of the credit to support China–Africa Belt and Road cooperation”; and (5) African countries welcomed the “Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road.”

In addition to infrastructure development, the China–Africa Belt and Road cooperation includes (1) science and technology to build Africa’s capacity in science, technology, and innovation through trainings and exchanges between Chinese and African think tanks, governments, industries,

and academic institutions; (2) security assistance programs, including in areas of law and order, UN peacekeeping missions, and combating terrorism and piracy; and (3) international cooperation to improve the existing international legal system.

The instrumentalist approach captures the ability of actors to leverage support from external actors to achieve their own objectives. This approach encompasses Ramaphosa’s view of the BRI as a financial instrument that has the same options as the ICA and other infrastructure-development financing models from other countries, including India, Japan, the European Union (EU), and the United States—but without political conditionalities to keep African leaders accountable. This approach informs US proposals that the most-developed democratic states must provide alternative sources of financing for development in Africa to counter China’s BRI, which the United States regards as detrimental to debt sustainability and observance of good governance, democracy, and respect for human rights in Africa. Ramaphosa’s (2018) instrumentalist view of the BRI as a source of financial support for Africa’s Agenda 2063 objectives is representative of the majority view of ruling elites in Africa. They consider the BRI to be nothing more than an infrastructure-development project, for which their only role is to source funding to meet their infrastructure needs.

The implication of regarding the BRI as another source of financing is that African actors may not derive any policy lessons or transfer any policies, the same way that a borrower would not have any reason for policy learning and transfer from a lender. This reduces African countries to recipients of financing and developmental programs planned elsewhere without their input; thus, Africa remains subservient to the interests of the Chinese government as it implements the BRI projects. In that sense, the BRI is not distinct from Africa’s previous engagements with Beijing, so there is a limited attempt to rearticulate its role. Because there is no imperative to learn, there are no institutions that have been set up by the AU to learn or transfer any policies or institutions linked to the BRI. Accordingly, any policy transfer or institutional learning by the AU from the BRI will be accidental rather than designed. This is particularly interesting because the AU has been struggling with planning, financing, and implementing continental infrastructure-development projects on the continent (Hodzi and Komba 2020).

Geopolitical Approach: The BRI as a Source of Conflict

As the struggle for global dominance between China and the United States intensifies, Africa is reemerging as the battleground for what some scholars have termed a new “scramble” for Africa (Harms 2019). The United States, especially under the Biden administration, was concerned that the BRI is part of China’s grand strategy to achieve great-power status and challenge the hegemony of the United States. During Biden’s administration, Bernie Sanders (2021) argued that in Washington, there is a “dangerous new consensus on China” fanned by bipartisan “views [of] the US–China relationship as a zero-sum economic and military struggle.” This bipartisan consensus on China as a threat to US dominance was revealed by 16 US senators who wrote a letter to the Secretary of State and the

Secretary of the Treasury arguing that the BRI's objective was to bring about a China-centered economic order. They recommended that the United States must oppose bailouts from the International Monetary Fund for countries that accepted "predatory Chinese infrastructure financing," contending that "it is imperative that the United States counters China's attempts to hold other countries financially hostage and force ransoms that further its geostrategic goals" (Perdue et al. 2018). This aligns with the realist perspective of "the BRI as a power grab by Beijing for global hegemony, fueled by its vast wealth that draws developing nations into Beijing's grip" (Zhao 2020, 319). Arguably, the goal of Biden's B3W initiative was to offer an alternative infrastructure-development program to developing countries and counter China's growing influence through the BRI.

In the ensuing US–China competition for global influence, Africa often is portrayed by political leaders and the Western media as passive and ineffectual, thereby needing guidance and protection. According to *Reuters*, Biden told reporters that "I suggested we should have, essentially, a similar initiative, pulling from the democratic states, helping those communities around the world that, in fact, need help" (Renshaw 2021). These sentiments were echoed by opposition political leaders in some African countries (who often are beneficiaries of the US democracy-promotion initiatives) and mostly arose as generalized criticism of China's engagement in Africa. For instance, providing testimony to the US Senate's Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Policy of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Joseph Mutizwa (a renowned Zimbabwean business executive) argued that if Zimbabwe failed to secure financial support from the United States and the EU, "Zimbabwe will consider making a strong attempt to access this [BRI] large pool of investment funds even if this entails mortgaging a substantial share of its natural resources to achieve this" (Committee on Foreign Relations 2018, 36). The impression is that, "taken together, the BRI's different components serve Beijing's vision for regional integration under its helm...[therefore, the BRI is] as an instrument at the service of the PRC's [Peoples Republic of China] vision for itself as the uncontested leading power in the region in the coming decades. As such, it is a grand strategy" (Rolland 2018). In response to the criticism, Xi Jinping stated that "the initiative is neither the Marshall Plan after World War II nor an intrigue of China. The initiative is aimed at achieving policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people connectivity; building a new platform for international cooperation; and creating new drivers of shared development to benefit more countries and people" (Xinhua News Agency 2018a).

Global-power rivalry for influence in Africa, however, is not a new phenomenon. From the colonial exploits of European powers to the Cold War and the current China–US rivalry, ruling elites in Africa mastered the art of playing global powers against each other to their advantage. To illustrate this, unless they are not invited, African leaders attend summits held by Turkey, Brazil, the United States, France, Japan, South Korea, and Russia with the same enthusiasm as they attend the triennial FOCAC summit. Professing nonalignment, as they

did during the Cold War, these ruling elites are "experts in appearing to emulate ideologies of their patrons in order to coax out further material support" (Corkin 2013, 3). China recognizes this; therefore, Yan (2015) argued that "for China, we need good relationships more urgently than we need economic development. We let them benefit economically and, in turn, we get good political relationships. We should 'purchase' the relationships." Rex Tillerson, a former US Secretary of State, recognized that China was buying "friendship" from developing countries at a cost with which the United States could not compete. Even President Biden acknowledged this fact when he announced the B3W initiative as a counter to China's BRI. His focus was on sustainability, transparency, good governance, and democracy—normative values rather than financial resources—emphasizing normative deficiencies of the BRI. The implication of this struggle is that the leverage and agency of elites in Africa has experienced a major boost.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the BRI as a concept implies that it is a framework that can be tailored to suit the African context that, in turn, provides ruling elites in Africa with policy autonomy and agency to determine the role that their country should play in the BRI. This allows space for the adaptation of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, principles, and ideas that underpin the BRI. Partly, this is because "the BRI is Beijing-directed," it is "not necessarily Beijing-controlled" (Van Staden, Alden, and Wu 2018, 23). The successful transfer of the BRI in Africa will "depend on how recipient developing economies, particularly Africa, utilize China's investor interest for their own sustainable development" (Johnston 2016, 1). In this scenario, the onus is on African actors and governments to use Chinese investment (the BRI or otherwise) to further their domestic and regional goals. This implicitly assumes a degree of agency on the part of African actors.

Understanding the BRI as financial support or funding for Africa's infrastructure-development needs reduces it to just another financing tool. The AU considers the BRI as an infrastructure-financing instrument; thus, for the AU, the BRI is no different than other infrastructure-financing instruments and initiatives. In that sense, there is little or no attempt to draw any lessons because the focus is on how they can use the BRI to finance continental infrastructure projects. What might be explored further is whether African actors have learned from past infrastructure-development programs—that is, why previous infrastructure projects have not been successful and how the situation has not yet improved. Is it because African states have focused only on actual construction projects (e.g., roads, highways, and railways) rather than how to accomplish those goals? This explains why—even after signing the MoU with China—there is still no clarity on what exactly the AU will transfer into its own context.

Similarly, understanding the BRI as a source of geopolitical competition between the United States and China reduces Africa to "a pony on the chess board" of the two powers. Thus, Africa either will play the two powers against one another to derive maximum benefit from both or align with one of the

two powers. In that sense, it will be imperative for African states to demonstrate policy learning from either the United States or China. As it stands, if the B3W initiative is successful, principles such as democracy, good governance, and transparency will reemerge as important markers of commitment to the US liberal economic order rather than to the authoritarian order of China. From statements by Xi Jinping, the BRI is aimed at “foster[ing] a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation, and we should forge partnerships of dialogue with no confrontation and of friendship rather than alliance. All countries should respect each other’s sovereignty, dignity, and territorial integrity; each other’s development paths and social systems; and each other’s core interests and major concerns” (Xi 2017). These statements reflect the precarious position of Africa as the United States and China intensify their global-power rivalry over dominance of the developing world.

In summary, the making of an African BRI is dependent on the perceptions that ruling elites in African countries have about it. Partly, this is because the “BRI involvements [in Africa] are a function of their ruling elites’ respective legitimization–optimization efforts. These elites pursue multiple narratives and approaches of inner justification, supplementing and optimizing them in ways that enable the elites to consolidate and broaden their authority at home” (Kuik 2021, 138). The implication is that the understanding of the BRI—both its implementation and its transfer of any aspects of the initiative to Africa—is dependent on these ruling elites, who are dominant in China–Africa engagements and therefore key actors in integrating “the PRC leadership’s ambitious plans for cooperation into their own developmental frameworks” (Schneider 2021, 25) to achieve their own domestic and international objectives. How ruling elites understand the BRI, therefore, is crucial to how aspects of it can be transferred to Africa.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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