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China at Europe's Southern Doorstep: will China's Belt and Road Initiatives Change the Democratic Landscape that the EU has been Developing in Africa?

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships that China maintains with states in and around the Horn of Africa region. In these relationships, China's new global project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is used to understand the social, political, and economic outcome of countries that opt to partner with the Asian power. Using Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda as separate case studies, the positives and negatives of cooperation become easier understand. The results vary, as the political and economic stability varies in each country, as does cooperation with China predates the BRI's 2013 start date. The results present that of the possible benefits as China offers a reasonable and attractive alternative to the aid and agreements posited by liberal democracies. Yet, while China offers economic growth and limited security, it finds difficulty in appealing to the locals and workers. Hence, this paper shows that China's overall approach is self-centered and economic driven, which opposes the priorities that the European Union has been attempting establish with its southern neighbors. However, while the Chinese do not export authoritarian practices or self-interest in its partners, it does little to reinforce the democratic institutions in Africa. Instead the BRI seems like a political tool in proving that economic development and political stability are independent of democratic strength.

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Belt and Road Initiative

Background

Within the last two decades, the meteoric rise of China's economy and global prominence has led western powers to consider potential new threats from the authoritarian regime. The United States and some transatlantic allies, such as France and the United Kingdom (UK), have far greater stakes in the region due to their historical ties to South East Asia and specific economic interests which come (Lind 2019). For other European countries, especially those within the European Union, the stakes of allowing for a domineering China in the Pacific do not seem to outweigh the benefits of abstaining from such concerns. In fact, member states that have more to gain from the economic prosperity of China, are more likely to get in the way of condemnations and plans to undo the East Asian country's actions. The actions in question include aggressive protectionist policies and frequent theft in intellectual properties from western patents (Lind 2019). Transatlantic leaders consider these to be just as big of a concern for security in the west, just as much as any real potential military threat that China poses. In Europe, China persists to be a wedge between member states in the discussion on China, with partners of the Asian powerhouse citing lucrative investments and mutual trade benefits. The issue is greater than the fear of any economic insecurity or uncertainty that comes with an unchecked, rising China, or its rapidly modernizing military.

What has become more apparent is that China's soft power, or that its brand is becoming far too influential, or perhaps outpacing any visible transition towards more democratic practices. Concerns that China becoming involved in global development is certainly a matter of discussion in Europe, as the former becomes more invested in economic regions that are shared by the latter. The regions, in this case, Include Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and even Eastern European countries. Chinese Investment comes in the form of the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, which is intended to be an infrastructure and economic development program in partnering countries to make trade areas more accessible to China. This initiative is heavy-handed in construction-based development, and opening transportation gateways on both land and sea. In contrast, the European Union's presence in neighborhood countries and other third countries is considerably more robust, with mission goals that coincide with the organization's own tenets and values. One should note that the EU offers economic aid and cooperation to third countries with the intent to promote the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, and in some cases, even has security personnel operating on location to maintain peace in high-risk areas. The EU further sets itself apart from China by becoming more involved with policy implementation in partner countries. Despite this, the way China has chosen to become involved with its global partners does not discount the mutually beneficial outcomes that the BRI will have for both parties.

Of course, this paper is not about comparing the attractiveness or effectiveness of the EU's foreign development programs and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Instead, I question if Europe should be concerned with an encroaching China in various partnering regions. As mentioned previously, there are already signs that the discussion on responding to Chinese political actions has caused notable wedging among a strong number of EU member states, with

11 countries being a part of China's recent "17+1" initiative (formerly 16+1), an effort to promote business and economic investment between China and Central and Eastern Europe (Lind 2019). Other member states countries have also fallen under the fold of Chinese partnership in the form of the RBI, such as Italy, Poland, and even Germany. Let it be clear, however, that any concerns over these partnerships are not held out of opposition to a non-western country becoming a potential superpower, or because of a competitive economic threat that China holds over many western markets. Instead, much of the charging equates to two fears, the first being that what China values and deems as acceptable in terms of social policy and economic competition will spread to other countries developing countries with weaker democratic institutions. The other is that those who find themselves more aligned with China will find it difficult to condemn or sanction them. The latter of these two instances, however, is not driving force behind this study.

A well-written report could be made about the potential consequences of the Belt and Road Initiatives in affecting the European Union's global development plans. The results have already been discussed by numerous scholars, citing Chinese military positioning in Africa and the Middle East, and deteriorating European cohesion has serious implications (Kilman and Grace 2018, 9-10). Kilman and Grace consider these consequences immediate dangers and are essentially "tell-tale" of what has already occurred and is much easier to grasp for western leaders and policymakers. Both scholars also note the BRI's worrisome interference in development and governance within partnering countries. They believe that China's own authoritarian behavior and general relaxation towards corruption outside its own control could reflect or perhaps rub off on its individual partners. Consider that even in choosing potential partners, China does not have reservations against working with obstinate undemocratic countries like the EU does; "many of the countries involved in the Belt and Road feature high levels of corruption and low levels of democracy" (Kilman and Grace, 12). And unlike the European Union, China does not try to offset social and political policies within the partner countries to retain the attractiveness of their deals. Despite this, Beijing is still willing to reinforce its support for authoritarian regimes that are affiliated BRI; a case made evident in the Maldives when they "…supported President Abdulla Yameen after his declaration of a state of emergency and jailing of judges and opposition politicians"(Kilman and Grace, 12). This effect brings about what other scholars refer to as the "illiberal regional security order," where democracy and individual freedoms are ignored in favor of "…social and economic stability" (Ratner and Greenberg, 3). Even then, deviation towards illiberalism is not the sole problem that the EU is concerned with as the attractiveness of low cost of social/political for economic development could undermine Europe's own development programs.

Introduction

In acknowledging that there is a distinct problem in the form of encroaching illiberalism in states outside of the EU, this paper will focus on not just the issue of individual rights, but also the BRI's effect of causing regression in other goals set by the European Union for its global efforts. For example, one should ask: how does China's method of international development affect the quality of life for the foreign individual? How does this affect climate change in the country? We ask these questions to assist in determining if there is an observable cost or a negative to the seemingly immediate benefits of BRI. We consider these questions with a lack of congruency between them, as not all are necessarily applicable to each case. In recognizing what could potentially be affected by the program, it is necessary to attempt to measure and quantify the changes in non-member states that are both China and the EU have a mutual interest in developing. Both parties have extensive influence and operations across the world, and as already mentioned above, China has partnerships with many European member states. While this is an issue apparent to political cohesion within the EU, the main concern should be oriented at countries that are more susceptible to regression in democratic practices, like poorer African countries, or historically authoritarian Middle Eastern Countries.

Methods

For this problem question, a small set of case studies were observed and measured in several easily accessible indexes to conduct a cross-case study analysis. The topic question should be relegated to one region, or at least on one continent; in this case, the study was conducted in four different countries in Africa. The area in specific should be within the Horn of Africa, which includes Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. These are all countries that enjoy both aid from the European Union and have either transportation or energy development projects with China. These countries are considered a part of China's "Road" portion of the initiative, due to the lack of a suitable mainland route. Road instead refers to the development of new sea routes from China to the west, and as of now, they consider all of Africa or anything that is not Europe or Asia to be a part of this expanse. Europe's development policies will not be reviewed, or at least this study will not go into detail on European involvement. Acknowledgment that there is a mutual connection between European and Chinese participation is sufficient for the case study.

The variables for each case study are constant; however, the extent to which information is provided for each country is limited. The variables in question are also diversified but were considered as questions, as they were presented in the introduction of this paper. The questions were posed to be separate, but are intended to reflect a joint assessment of potential consequences for partnership with China. With these variables, there is a potential for results that reflect the positive outcomes of the projects. The results will be considered positive if there is no substantial change in towards negative consequences, or if the data leans towards more positive-leaning outcomes. In any of those two cases, the hypothesis that BRI has negative social and political implications should thus be rejected for that country or case study. Given that each country has different levels of funding and bilateral agreements between themselves and China, the outcome of data will not be congruent with one another. Additionally, histories and backgrounds of each case study will be undeniably different, with some having already had weakening or strengthening environmental and democratic institutions. In-depth comparisons between different countries would be unnecessary and, instead, simply show the extent of the program in all states.

How the data is gathered had specific stipulations that may be unique to each case study, as some countries had signed up for the BRI at different periods in time starting 2013. Two sets of data were compared for each variable, one being a recorded data from a time frame closest to before a case studies agreement to join the BRI, and the other being the most recent available data. In addition, some assessments of the variables such as the environment or workers' safety, may not be quantifiable, but instead are recorded as qualitative information on notable changes, or report.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia was one of the first countries in Northern Africa to sign on and partner with Beijing to deepen an economy between the two. Since 2012, China has been instrumental in building up the transportation infrastructure and industry sectors of the country. Its most notable project is the Ethiopian-Djibouti railway system, which finished as recent as 2016. Chinese banks breathed \$3.4 billion into the projector, 70% of the \$4 billion project price tag (Railway-technology 2016). In 2013 the Economist's Democracy Index showed that Ethiopia was considered an authoritarian regime and had a civil liberties score of 4.4 and an electoral process score of 0.0 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2013) Since 2019, the Ethiopian government had actually increased in its pluralism and political process on slightly, by 0.43 points (Economist Intelligence Unit 2019). The index for political processes includes an assessment and aggregate based on party opposition and fairness. In 2013, the score for Ethiopia was so low, because the ruling party had managed to flip any remaining opposition seat, which included opposition from five separate parties. In the span of the last six years, there had been a slight resurgence in opposition presence. The civil liberty score dropped significantly; however, in 2019 to 2.65. In 2018, the Human Rights Watch had recorded that the Ethiopian government was starting to reform its illiberal practices.

Currently, the position that Ethiopia is in with China is tricky, to say the least. The country has a substantial reliance on foreign direct investment (FDI), making it challenging to overcome their debt relief crisis. Ethiopia is also China's second-largest African debtor (\$13 million borrowed as of 2017) right behind Angola (Faleg 2019). Half of the country's personal debt is owed to China alone, and its exports have been failing within the past years. Understanding that, while China has been among the most willing and excessive in their investments, they are also slowly placing themselves in a political and domineering position in Ethiopia. China has since looked at Ethiopia with similar lenses as they do with Uganda, which is explored later in this paper. This lens sees that China utilizes African resources to facilitate its economic boom, while also offshoring labor to these countries for low-cost production, and thus eliminating middle interaction between US tariff laws (Ursu and Van Den Berg 2018).

While Chinese involvement in Ethiopian economic development and in the rest of the Horn of Africa is based on cheaper labor for China, it also gives the Asian power a chance to offload "ideological" development in Africa which would show that China's soft power is capable of achieving "…economic development and political stability can be achieved in the absence of strong democratic principles" (Ursu and Van Den Berg 2018). This model strengthens China's commitment to the Horn of Africa, as it strengthens their political agenda in their forum with the United Nations and the rest of the developing world. It is then significant that China remains fruitfully present in this region, almost as if Ethiopia and its neighbors are a presentation to a class full of future partners. China's special interest is potentially an issue of shared security space for both the United States and the European Union. It appears that China has used its economic position and assets in the region as a basis to become more invested in securing what they perceive as vital to their interests. Since cooperation has ramped up with Ethiopia, China has demonstrated its security capabilities by holding operations in South Sudan and engaging in anti-piracy missions off the coasts of Ethiopia (Ursu and Van Den Berg 2018). While the EU should be concerned with China's explicit desire to prove their politicization agenda viable for developing countries, some may question the consequences of having China become involved in security. China's involvement should provide more assistance in combatting violence and terrorism in the area, but it would undermine the cooperative efforts of the European Union's own member states. Both parties' goals would not be the same, and their methods of engagement would likely hamper their own initiatives. One could also argue that these operations provide more military influence over Africa for China, fueling their political agenda that they are attempting to champion.

Kenya

In 2014, Premier Li Keqiang signed a cooperation agreement with the Kenyan government to create the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, which would could the two cities. The project cost was reported to be around $3.2 billion to construct, a similar package to the Ethiopian package (BBC 2017). The project was supposedly successful, as it had produced over 45,000 jobs and brought in a need for railway experts, thus stimulating some career profession. Chinese analysts claim that the project had also added 1.5% to Kenya's GDP. Kenya is among one of the more liberal case studies in the grouping, and in 2013 its score in the political process and civil liberties were 4.33 and 5.29, respectively. In 2019 these scores shifted to 3.5 and 4.41, following the government's attacks on and subsequent failure to protect journalists and critics that openly speak out on elections, politicians, and corruption that year. Kenya's attack on its own press mimics what has been a heavily criticized issue in China's censorship campaign. One cannot presume that the Kenyan government had decided to engage in these activities because of its newly established economic relationship with China. Keeping in mind that Kenya has been considered a hybrid regime for many, yet it has not been on the level of authoritarian behavior akin to Ethiopia's.

While a renewed cooperation agreement has occurred within the last decade, trade cooperation between China and Kenya began in the mid-1960s. Chinese foreign direct investment had since been steadily channeled into the county for years to come. Now that investment has manifested more into public and private projects, some economists and anthropologists have considered that a rise in neocolonialism and ethnocentrism between the two countries (Kamoche and Siebers 2015). These scholars consider the negative shift in the relationship as a reflection of European colonialism, in which ethnic and racial bias plays a role in solidifying Chinese dominance over labor and planning. Kamoche and Siebers surmise that foreign investors are inclined to harm labor markets in Africa by the use of this tactic, as per example they "…may disregard local knowledge, or consider local skills as inadequate and inappropriate for their advanced technology and insist on bringing their own workers in addition to expatriate managers"((Kamoche and Siebers 2015). The problem is often well known in local communities, especially for local managers, but they feel limited in their ability to speak out against the neglect of local knowledge and skills. It is possible that the ethnocentric labor practices produces frustration for local managers, and thus contributes to inefficiency in the area. It is then apparent that labor, of all things related to the two countries, is the least fair and warrants close observation. Yet while half of the employees working in Chinese firms in Kenya tend to be Kenyan, and their treatment is by these firms is fair…at first. Kenyan employees overall express dissatisfaction with working with their Chinese employers.

Kenyan staff has expressed that there is a lack of fairness between lower-level employees and Chinese firms, while managers typically enjoy their position have come to a different revelation. In the case of the lower-level staff, they claim that the Chinese engage in a "bait and switch" tactic to draw in local support for their projects. They claim that:

> "Kenyans don't like working for Chinese. The pay is no good. Overtime is not attractive. They're too mean. [they] pay well when they first come, but as they take root, they tend to reduce the pay. That is not very good. They come as visitors and try to endear themselves to the locals, and over time they tend to change although legally they're not allowed to do that" (Kamoche and Siebers 2015).

To some, these seem like valid grievances, but to others, this may be a cause of separate cultures interacting with one another in settings that don't mix well. However, this point becomes moot when local managers admit that "glass ceilings" do exist in Kenyan-Chinese work environments. Whereas the managers will claim to be happy with their position, they display dissatisfaction with their inability to climb the "ladder of success" so to speak. Other questionable practices include hiring Chinese when local competence is available (Kamoche and Siebers 2015). The fact that Chinese firms choose to neglect certain local options over others would suggest a not so widely talked about form of discrimination or at least a strong case for Chinese preference in foreign labor areas.

What we should be asking is, why does it persist if there is a recognized problem? But the answer is that China's trade and cooperation position as the country's second-largest partner has, and their willingness to invest with little regard for political instability in Kenya, leaves little room to say "no." Once they have been drawn into the benefits of China's cooperation efforts, there is not much that these workers can do, as the companies would likely then be filled with more expatriated labor from China.

Sudan

As of 2018, Sudan was one of the latest countries to begin cooperation with China. Sudan's development projects were more oriented towards energy production. Beijing has been aiming to develop energy industries in various developing countries; however, companies that have been set up are also primarily operated or maintained by Chinese workers. Agriculture and

Sudan's eastern ports were also developed and improved. In a more eco-friendly development, China has invested in Sudan's green energy sectors, namely wind, solar, and hydropower. The Sudanese government had also announced a desire to develop its own nuclear-powered facility for peaceful use with China (Xinhuanet 2018). Sudan, like Ethiopia, was considered an authoritarian regime in 2013, and this has not changed within the last seven years, unfortunately. In 2013 the political score was at 0.0, and that had not changed in 2019. The civil liberties score in 2013 was 1.47, but in 2019 the rating was lowered to 1.18. As a case study, it is evident that Sudan does not present itself as a strong candidate, given that its democratic index was already low to begin, but the results still show that there has been a regression, however, so little.

Sudan, like Ethiopia, has gained China's interest in security, which is mostly motivated by the protection of their Sudanese energy resources. As this security approach was outlined in the Ethiopian section of this paper, which sees that China exerts its global security influence, the Sudanese section shall highlight China's contrast from Europe's security initiatives. While China has established positive intentions in providing security in Sudan, the subject of that security is less about human safety and more about protecting Chinese interests (DUCHÂTEL 2014). Chinese investments, in this case, alludes to upstream and midstream security of energy, in other words, exploration, and production respectfully. Observing Chinese success, or lack of attacks on security installations suggests that they face little resistance from politically unstable regions, such as Sudan, or South Sudan, despite not having political experience in these regions. Look between the lines of this success, and one can find that China's position of avoiding the human security aspect of there missions has allowed a local perception to view China's safeguarding of energy as "economic in nature" (DUCHÂTEL 2014). If China is not involved in the political or human development of Sudan, then this could give legroom for the European Union to fill in the void for these tasks. However, just as was established with Ethiopia, the attractiveness of China's limited political involvement in providing economic and security aid to Africa would allow governments to develop without strong democratic alignment.

Uganda

In 2018, Uganda joined China's BRI cooperation, after signing a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation. A notable construction by the Ugandan-Chinese was the Isimba Hydropower Plant, which created 3,000 jobs for workers, of which 80% were Ugandan (Belt and Road News 2019). Ugandan President Museveni was optimistic following its construction, citing serious issues to maintaining electricity in the country, with energy having been fueled by harmful diesel fuel. With a more reliable, stable, and greener fuel source, the government has hopes to continue Chinese cooperation by building up its industrial sector to focus on maintaining a strong agricultural market in the region. Uganda is the most politically democratically stable country of the four regional case studies; however, that is not saying much. The countries government was considered a hybrid regime as of 2013, just like Kenya's. Uganda had the highest score of all the other – 5.67 in the political process and 6.18 in civil liberties. In 2019 the downward trend continued on in Uganda as both scores reduced to 4..33 and 5.88, respectively. The score change is lower, but it is not significant as the other changes.

Chinese interest in Uganda is mostly built around investing in Uganda's recently discovered oil reserves, which are said to number at 6.6 billion barrels of untapped fuel ((Fowdy 2020). The investment in Ugandan oil is supposedly an attempt for China to speed up the BRI development in the country and help the African partner open its way to swifter progress. Oil securement, while not a sustainable avenue for growth, has also been supported by Europe, the United States, African firms, and now Chinese banks and drilling companies. In comparison, the hydropower plant, which is currently being constructed with the financial and labor assistance of China's banks and workers, had long been shelved by other foreign investors. Uganda had faced a number of challenges regarding being able to obtain foreign investment; mainly, there was an interest in improving the sustainable development of the country's energy sector. However, these challenges, such as political instability in the region, and a lack of certainty on the profitability of hydroelectric energy (Gore 2017). In his book, Gore states that African countries both stable and not, will have trouble finding advocacy from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mostly because it does not "fit," or instead these focused campaigns may be considered a wasted investment if they are unable to assists the organizations' global campaign or message (2017, p.128). Investors have also been wary of invest in Uganda's hydro-powered facilities due to ongoing climate change in the country, which is brought on by its existing polluted environment. This makes the region overall, a hard sell for some investor, leaving the door open for China, as a helping hand, who has seemingly no reservations against the challenges present in Uganda.

China's willingness to invest in Uganda has been thought to have been driven by their desire to engage in questionable diplomacy such as "debt-trapping." As described before, this would mean that China's attitude towards investment comes at a desire to solidify diplomatic and economic dominance over a country, regardless of the financial stipulation that occurs. Although, Chinese investors are potentially motivated to bestow credit on Ugandan firms due to their inclination to disregard regulations and practices that are internationally not welcomed. Looking at the forestry industry in Uganda; China has become one of the country's top partners and investors in the growth and processing. However, specific tactics have been questionable, such as Chinese companies shipping in lumber from other African countries to the process and sell as Ugandan wood (IIED 2017). There are also cases of overly competitive pricing for products in Uganda and illegal harvesting. Overall the government does not appear to have a good enough understanding of industries led by Chinese companies, which typically work independently of the local population and use their own tools.

In regards to the hydroelectric power and Ugandan oil industry, it could be right to assume that Chinese investors are not concerned with the implications of smaller issues that do not affect the grand outcome at least. As it stands, the Ugandans have been put in an unusual position regarding investment and development in their sustainable energies and development. The country is more inclined than not to accept offers to revitalize a stagnant dam industry, which provides a cheaper alternative for fuels that have been known to cause pollution to the air and result in deforestation. Currently, the lack of accessibility to electricity for most of Uganda's population is not solely based on the limits of infrastructure but is also limited by the expensiveness of sustainable energy. Should China succeed in facilitating Uganda's water-power sector, then it would possibly become a cheaper alternative to wood and charcoal burning, which have been at the root of the countries pollution challenges for years. This does not mean, however, that China is focused on maintaining a clean environment for Uganda, as their history to engage in undesirable practices is a telling sign of their disregard for Uganda's perception.

Conclusion

It is evident from these cases that China has a multi-goal oriented and has several varying outcomes on each country. The various effects that Chinese cooperation has on these countries are typically subject to their preexisting political situations. For Uganda and Kenya, two the more democratic and politically stable countries in the region are in less of a weak position in dealing with Chinese dominance than the others. While an economic partnership with the Chinese is essential for this developing region of Africa, and while China has not explicitly positioned itself to interfere with the politics of these countries, it is the lack of conditions that make their presence harmful for liberal democracies such as the EU and the US. It is also the disregard of them for being more involved in environmental and social issues, which makes Chinese partnership potentially dangerous. While Chinese investors have solved challenges of being able to find foreign investors for risky projects, this often means that China is handed an advantage through offering economic assistance that some of these countries are unable to pay off. This is the case with Ethiopia, who will continue to debtor country to China's FDIs. For the labor force in these countries, it seems that Chinese labor and equipment is favored over readily available local resources. Workers tend to express the feeling of being tricked by early Chinese generosity in payment and job positions, but then find that their ability to be promoted is limited for Chinese employees. It would seem that while yes, China provides jobs capital and jobs that would otherwise not be there for these countries, they have no real interest in improving the individual freedoms that the European Union has set to promote in Africa.

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