

Chinese Mega Projects in Kenya: Public Controversies around Infrastructure and Debt in East Africa's Regional Hub

Karoline Eickhoff

China is investing in large-scale infrastructure projects across Africa. Several borrowing countries are facing debt crises, causing public controversies around the relationship between external investments and public debt. In Kenya, China has financed and built several “mega projects”, in line with the government’s preference for fast delivery on public infrastructure. While the economic viability of the newly constructed assets remains to be seen, debates on the risks and benefits of Chinese investments and public debt are in full swing, in Kenya and among its development partners. 2022 is not only an important election year but also a peak period of debt repayments to the country’s various lenders. In this political climate, Chinese mega projects are either portrayed as symbols of independence and modernity, manifestations of usurpation, or colossal losing deals. The different views on China discussed in this paper provide insights into the direction in which Kenya is moving in international relations.

In May 2022, the newly constructed Nairobi Expressway is about to start operations. Cutting across Nairobi’s city centre, the highway has been eagerly anticipated by many who hope for an end to Nairobi’s notorious traffic congestion. Operated as a revenue-generating public-private partnership, the KES 87.9 billion (USD 764 million) highway is presented as taking Kenya-China cooperation to the next level. On 8 May, the highway was the setting for this year’s Nairobi city marathon.

However, the new Chinese built and operated highway has not evaded criticism. Most recently, public discontent was sparked by the use of the Mandarin language on signboards by the Chinese contractor during the operative testing phase, as well as the government’s increase of the toll fees before the road even opened – to cushion the Chinese investors against exchange losses, as the Kenyan shilling is weakening.

Mega projects such as the Nairobi Expressway are prone to trigger public controversies. As “imagined futures”, they receive a lot of political and public attention, while their long-term risks and benefits can only be speculated about.¹

Kenyan political leaders are by and large positive about Chinese infrastructure investments in the country – especially since the 2018 reconciliatory “hand-shake” between President Uhuru Kenyatta and his then political opponent Raila Odinga. On the other hand, an opinion poll suggests that 87% of the citizens believe that the government of Kenya (GoK) borrowed too much money from China, and a large majority (92%) are aware that those loans must be repaid.²

As Kenya is the largest economy in the East African Community and a regional transport and technology hub, various actors have stakes in how Chinese investments are represented in the country. This is also the case for external actors like the European Union (EU) and its member states, which recently committed to a “renewed partnership” with African countries. This paper contrasts three framings that domestic and external actors frequently draw upon in political and public discourses on infrastructure and debt, as labels that convey either an optimistic or a sceptical reading of Chinese investments.³ Emphasising the anticipated risks or benefits, proponents of these framings seek to influence policies and public opinion – for Kenya to turn East or West.

The Nairobi Expressway

The 27 km Nairobi Expressway connects the city of Mlolongo at the eastern outskirts of Nairobi through the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and Nairobi’s city centre with the neighbourhood of Westlands. The Expressway is financed and constructed through a public–private partnership between the Kenya National Highways Authority and the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), a state-owned engineering contracting company. Moja Expressway, a subsidiary of the CRBC, will operate the tolling stations of the highway for the next 27 years to recover the costs of the construction.

Kenya–China Relations

Since its independence from British colonial rule in 1963, Kenya has significantly diversified its international relations from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), and other European countries to encompass (more or less) new partners, including China, India, Brazil, and Israel. Several high-ranking state representatives visited Kenya in recent months to substantiate their country’s relationship with Kenya, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, China’s Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi, and EU High Representative Josep Borrell, who called Kenya “a beacon of stability in a very much troubled region of the Horn of Africa”. Its capital, Nairobi, hosts the regional offices of various international organisations working on development, peace, and security in the Horn of Africa. Kenya is an increasingly attractive partner in the region, not only for China.

¹ Müller-Mahn, Detlef, Kennedy Mkutu, and Eric Kioko. 2021. “Megaprojects—mega failures? The politics of aspiration and the transformation of rural Kenya,” *The European Journal of Development Research* 33: 1069–1090.

² Afrobarometer. 2021. “Africans welcome China’s influence but maintain democratic aspirations”. Afrobarometer, Dispatch 489.

³ The political framings presented in this paper are informed by interviews conducted in Nairobi between 28 February and 25 March 2022, and desk research.

As part of its “Look East” policy, Kenya’s relations with China have intensified continuously under the presidencies of Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002), Mwai Kibaki (2002–2013), and currently Uhuru Kenyatta.⁴ While Kenya-China relations encompass various fields – including trade, information technology, military cooperation, and cultural programmes – most public attention is on China-sponsored mega projects, including roads, bridges, seaports, and railways. Starting with the approval of the construction of the 50 km Thika Super-highway in Nairobi in 2007, flagship projects include the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor regional project, where construction is ongoing. Most of these projects are implemented by state-backed Chinese companies and (co-)financed through Chinese loans. Kenya’s estimated debt to China stood at USD 6.95 billion, representing close to 20% of Kenya’s external debt (USD 36.9 billion, as of December 2021).⁵ China is also Kenya’s biggest trading partner, and trade is extremely asymmetric: In 2021, China’s exports to Kenya amounted to USD 3.9 billion, while Kenya exported products worth USD 131 million to China.⁶

The growing importance of China is reflected in public opinion. A 2019/2021 Afrobarometer poll found that the majority of Kenyans perceived China as economically and politically influential (some/a lot of influence: 72%).⁷ More than half of the respondents had a positive outlook on China’s influence, with China ranking second only to the US as the preferred development model (US: 42%, China: 23%).

This reflects a wider trend on the continent. Citizens across several countries in Africa feel generally positive about China. However, according to Afrobarometer, assessments of China’s positive influence in Kenya decreased between 2014 and 2021 by 11 percentage points. Another poll conducted by Ipsos in 2018 found that 25% of respondents thought that Kenya needed good relations with China, while a similar number identified China as the biggest threat to Kenya’s economic and political development.⁸

The Standard Gauge Railway

The SGR connects Nairobi with the port town Mombasa on the Kenyan coast and the town of Naivasha in the Great Rift Valley. Constructed by the CRBC, Kenya received a loan of Sh324 billion (USD 3.2 billion) from China Exim Bank – the largest item in Kenya’s external debt. SGR operations started in 2017. The SGR project has been criticised for its opaque contractual arrangements and repayment terms. Moreover, the economic viability of the project has been questioned. The railway continues to be operated partly by the Chinese contractor AfriStar, which is owned by the CRBC. Railway operations and maintenance are supposed to be fully handed over to the Kenya Railways Cooperation in May 2022.

⁴ Makinda, Samuel M. 2020. “The Rise of China in Kenya’s Foreign Relations.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, edited by Cheeseman, Nic, Karuti Kanyinga and Gabrielle Lynch, 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Note that publicly available data on China’s international lending is limited. Available figures are often estimates that may not fully capture all debt flows and stocks.

⁶ Olander, Eric. 2022. “Calls growing louder in Kenya to balance lopsided trade with China.” *The China Africa Project*, 25 February 2022.

⁷ Afrobarometer. 2021. “Africans welcome China’s influence but maintain democratic aspirations”.

⁸ Ipsos. 2018. “SPEC Barometer, 1st QTR 2018, Third Media Release.” Ipsos Public Affairs, 4 September 2018.

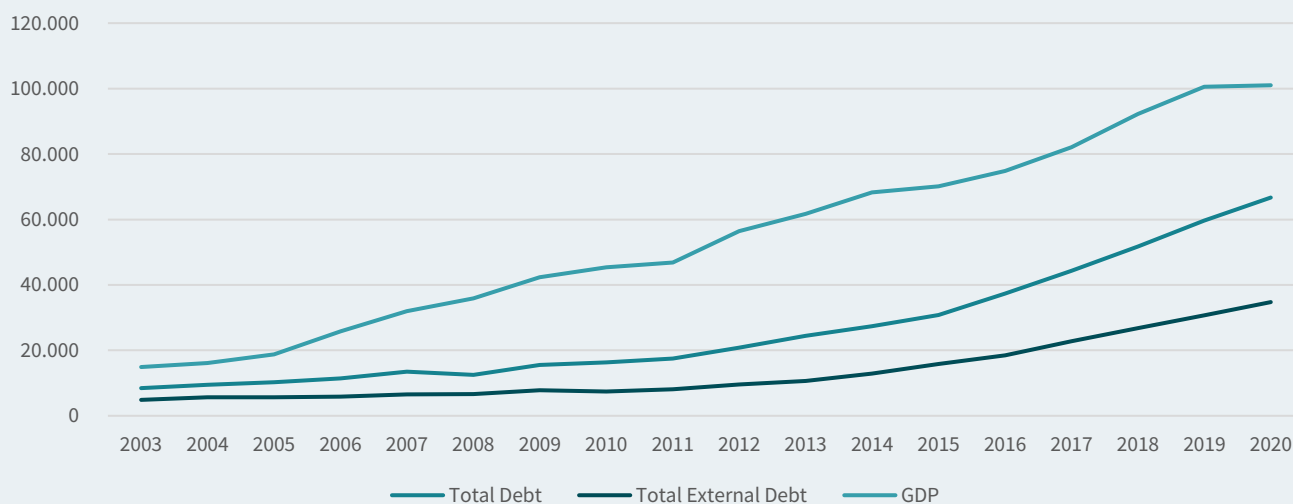
Political Framing

The partly ambivalent results of the perception polls reflect that public opinion is divided over China's influence in Kenya. Opinions are informed by the diverse experiences that citizens have with China, ranging from Chinese media broadcasting on high-level diplomacy and the CRBC's business operations to everyday encounters with Chinese shopkeepers and small-scale traders. Against this backdrop, different "framings" have emerged which feature in public discourses on Kenya-China relations.

The Debt Trap

One prominent reading of China's role in Africa portrays Chinese infrastructure investments as potential "debt traps" for African countries. This framing frequently features in media reporting on China-Africa relations – most prominently in the US, Europe, and India, as well as in policy discourses in these countries. For example, US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen recently called Chinese lending practices "predatory", resulting in "unsustainable debt and influence on countries". World Bank President David Malpass singled out China's role in some developing countries' debt crises, expressing concerns about the non-disclosure clauses in Chinese lending agreements. The framing is also common in Kenyan public discourse: A study suggests that "China" and "the Chinese", are referred to, at times, almost synonymously with loans, debt, and local corruption.⁹

Proponents of the "debt trap" framing emphasise the uneven character of the relationship between China and African partner countries, pointing to China's suspected hidden agenda on the continent. According to this framing, this imbalance of power is intentionally brought about through "aggressive" Chinese investments as China aims to dominate African markets, exert political influence, and exploit the continent's resources. Proponents of this reading emphasise the anticipated risks of the relationship, for instance regarding supposed collaterals.



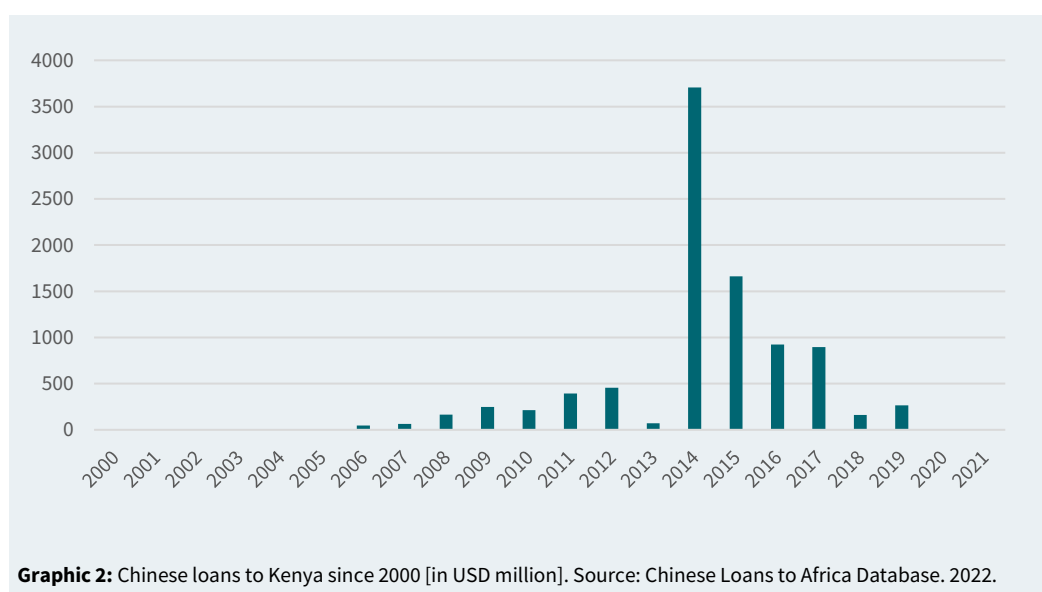
Graphic 1: Kenyan debt in relation to GDP, 2003-2020 [in USD million]. Source: Central Bank of Kenya, IMF.

⁹ Wangui Kimari. 2021. "Under Construction": Everyday Anxieties and the Proliferating Social Meanings of China in Kenya," *Africa*, 91 (1): 135.

African countries are portrayed to be at risk of losing critical infrastructure to China or even their sovereignty if they default on their debt servicing obligations. Recent debates focussed on Uganda’s airport Entebbe and Kenya’s key seaport in Mombasa. In both cases, however, evidence is lacking, while rumours about their status as collaterals persist. Cliff Mboya, Africa Editor and Consultant for the China Africa Project, explains this persistency by suggesting that this reading of China-Africa relations is politically loaded: Questioning its basic assumptions would often be interpreted as taking China’s side.¹⁰

Kenya’s public debt is indeed a subject of concern. The overall debt-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio stands at close to 70%. This means that the level of debt has almost reached the GoK’s own set ceiling for borrowing entitlements. According to Kenya’s Business Daily newspaper, debt servicing has recently become the biggest expenditure item in Kenya’s national budget. Multilateral financial institutions have raised concerns over potential debt distress in Kenya, also because of a shift from concessional to commercial loans during the last decade. While the African Development Bank assessed Kenya’s debt situation in February 2022 as sustainable, it also found that risks to Kenya’s debt sustainability have increased.¹¹

Chinese loans for Kenya’s flagship infrastructure projects have contributed to the debt burden. And Chinese creditors have proven reluctant to negotiate debt servicing suspensions. Yet, Kenya’s debt is composed of external (multilateral, bilateral, and commercial) loans and loans from the domestic market. China’s share of Kenya’s overall debt stands at an estimated 10.6% (as of March 2021). In 2022, Chinese loans to Kenya have again dropped significantly, as China has reportedly started to move away from large infrastructure investments in Africa compared to previous years.¹² Kenyan media outlets recently reported that Japan overtook China as Kenya’s largest bilateral creditor, in terms of new financial commitments, while the World Bank overtook China as Kenya’s largest external lender.



¹⁰ China Africa Research Initiative. 2022. “Can China seize Kenya’s port? The case of Kenya’s Standard Gauge Railway.” John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, virtual event, 14 April 2022.

¹¹ African Development Bank. 2022. “Policy Note - Public Debt Dynamics in Kenya”, 6.

¹² Sun, Yun. 2021. “FOCAC 2021: China’s retrenchment from Africa?” Brookings, 6 December 2021.

Multilateral loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), though favourable in terms of low interest rates and long grace periods, come with conditions for reforming national policies. Starting in the 1980s, IMF conditional loans required the GoK to implement structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). While some of those SAPs contributed to improving Kenya's macro-economic stability, others were experienced by citizens as having adverse effects on the Kenyan economy, for example in the agricultural sector, and as hampering access to social services, including education and health. Therefore, those IMF restructuring measures were largely perceived as anti-poor, instead of targeting the wealthy.

And they are not a matter of the past. In coordination with the IMF, the GoK has initiated a fiscal consolidation plan in 2021 to lower the country's debt distress, comprising revenue mobilisation and spending rationalisation measures. The IMF recently expressed satisfaction with the GoK's performance under the programme.

In light of Kenya's mixed experience with externally-initiated economic reforms, these recent IMF requests have raised concerns among some public finance experts and civil society actors. According to a Kenyan development finance expert, those austerity measures are "no less aggressive" than Chinese lending practices. They come at a time when Kenya continues to grapple with economic hardships aggravated by the Covid-19 crisis, compounded by an ongoing drought in the Horn of Africa and a weakening shilling.

African Agency

In contrast to the "debt trap" framing, Kenyan political leaders and their Chinese counterparts often apply an "African agency" reading to the bilateral relationship that highlights the benefits of the cooperation.¹³ Agency is about an actor's scope for decision-making and the ability to set an agenda in the pursuit of their interests. The reading sits well with the GoK's aspirations for a business-friendly climate and win-win partnerships. During Wang Yi's visit in Mombasa in January 2022, President Kenyatta argued that his country's relationship with China "is not a partnership based on China telling us what we need. It is a partnership of friends working together to meet Kenya's social-economic agenda". In fact, most politicians from the government and the opposition publicly appreciate China's contributions to the country's infrastructure development so far. What is more, this reading of the relationship resonates well with the public: Investments in public infrastructure are valued, though they are far from being the citizens' top priorities, which are management of the economy, creating jobs, and fighting corruption.¹⁴

The African agency reading emphasises African states' negotiation capital in their relations with external partners, and China in particular. Indeed, evidence suggests that the nature of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects is to a significant extent determined by host countries' laws, regulations, and interests.¹⁵

¹³ For an example of the mutual benefit/win-win narrative on the Chinese side, see: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 2021. "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals".

¹⁴ Afrobarometer. 2022. "Kenyans see government failing on their top priorities – the economy and corruption, Afrobarometer survey shows." Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi, 25 March 2022.

¹⁵ Jones, Lee and Shahar Hameiri. 2020. "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-trap Diplomacy'" Chatham House, August 2020.

Kenya Vision 2030

The Kenya Vision 2030 is a development blueprint that aims to transform Kenya into a middle-income country and increase overall quality of living. Launched in 2008 by President Mwai Kibaki, the strategy comprises economic, social, and political pillars. National and regional flagship infrastructure projects feature prominently – some say to the detriment of the strategy’s social development measures, such as creating employment and affordable housing.

In Kenya, China has aligned its BRI projects with national strategies, most prominently the government’s Vision 2030. China’s speedy delivery of visible infrastructure is appreciated by the government. In the lead-up to the general elections in August 2022, large-scale infrastructure projects are increasingly portrayed as President Kenyatta’s legacy to the country. Public debt is considered as a necessary side-effect of the development model Kenya is pursuing. The same applies for the shift from concessional “development” loans to regular market loans. Competitive dynamics between external partners, including China, are said to stimulate healthy competition, reducing one-sided dependencies and increasing financing options. Patrick Muthengi Maluki from the Institute for Diplomacy and International Studies of the University of Nairobi suggests that Kenya-China relations carry the message that the country’s international relations are no longer determined by ideology. He emphasises that the colonial past is still fresh on many Africans’ minds, suggesting to the EU that “there has to be give and take, not restrictions and conditions”. This reading has not gone unnoticed among Kenya’s development partners. As a staff member of a European institution based in Nairobi put it, “We have to figure out our business case.”

Yet, while the African agency reading has public support, Chinese mega projects are by and large brokered by political elites. Here, many citizens see the crux of the matter. The GoK enjoys limited citizens’ trust when it comes to the handling of public funds. Chinese infrastructure projects are frequently accompanied by rumours about public-sector corruption. Chinese loans are perceived to feed into the system through suspected “kick-backs” and “facilitation fees”. What is more, many citizens expect limited personal benefits from those projects, while having to carry the debt burden in the form of rising taxes, increasing costs of living, and potential cutbacks on social services. Civil society initiatives have spoken out against these developments. With the GoK agreeing to the Chinese lending terms, citizens do not see much scope for re-negotiations. Public protest is directed instead at the GoK and multilateral donors that co-shape the GoK’s debt management and fiscal consolidation plan. In April 2021, more than 230,000 Kenyans signed a petition urging the IMF to stop lending to Kenya, stating concerns over government mismanagement, suspected corruption, and the growing debt burden.¹⁶ In August 2021, civil society organisations expressed concerns over the risks of SAPs for Kenya, calling for “meaningful public participation in the budget processes” and for “citizens to hold parliament accountable”.¹⁷ Those public initiatives highlight the flipside of the “African agency” framing. The agency of government officials in Kenya-China relations is not necessarily seen to be in line with the interest of the wider public.

¹⁶ Mureithi, Carlos. 2021. “Kenyans are furious with the IMF over billions more in loans.” Quartz Africa, 3 May 2021.

¹⁷ Okoa Uchumi Campaign. 2021. “Communique on Kenya’s public debt – lessons from structural adjustment programs: What way forward for Kenya?” The Institute for Social Accountability, 27 August 2021.

Imperial Legacies

A third framing portrays large-scale infrastructure projects as manifestations of imperial legacies in Kenya. This reading is postulated by some African scholars, analysts, and activists. As opposed to the “debt trap” framing that focusses on China’s suspected hidden agenda and the “African agency” framing that gives prominence to Kenya’s scope for agenda-setting, the “imperial legacies” framing centres on Kenya’s history of external intervention and trajectories of (neo-)colonialism in Kenya’s relations with external partners.

Proponents of this reading argue that all forms of externally designed, planned, and operated connectivity architectures shape decisions on the circulation of goods, people, and capital that remain in the hands of externals. They highlight the similarities of external interventions, although the actors aim to distinguish themselves from one another. As Kenyan journalist and activist John Githongo notes: “The relationship between Africa and China is complicated. Indeed, relations with *all* great powers are complex and difficult for developing countries.”¹⁸ The reading suggests that imperial legacies become evident in how African governments and their various development partners justify the need for infrastructural investments in deficit-oriented terms of Africa’s “untapped potential” and unrealised opportunities for growth. For instance, African countries are at times portrayed as empty spaces, where one retreating external power leaves a “vacuum” that is filled by other external actors. This thinking enables “imperial invitations”: The Chinese built, financed, and operated SGR railway displays similarities with the railway built during British colonial times, though Kenyan leaders and their Chinese counterparts portray the project as a departure from colonial legacies and a pathway to greater independence.¹⁹

In the political sphere, the imperial legacies framing has limited traction. Overall, the GoK is positive about its various development partnerships. Imperial legacies are invoked exceptionally, for example to criticise European former colonial powers. In 2012, President Kenyatta and his Deputy, William Ruto, decried domination and manipulation by “rich and powerful” nations during their trials at the International Criminal Court (ICC) over charges of inciting violence following the 2007 elections. Their resort to “neo-colonist” interferences was triggered by several state officials from the UK and US as well as representatives of European embassies indicating that their governments would have difficulties working with political leaders indicted by the ICC. In contrast, Kenyan government officials appreciated China for its non-interference policies and for supporting a bid led by the African Union to postpone the cases against Kenyatta and Ruto while they were in office.

However, in public discourse, also China’s engagement is frequently compared to previous colonial practices, despite its rhetorical claims to the contrary. Examples include China’s suspected agenda of grabbing natural resources as well as cases of racist discrimination and exploitative labour practices by Chinese companies, often in the context of infrastructure projects.²⁰ The GoK’s lukewarm reactions to reports of these incidents have been met with domestic criticism. For example, Juliet Okoth, lecturer of International Law at the University of Nairobi, observes: “It could be that the Kenyan authorities are determined to tread carefully in their dealings with their development partners, and

¹⁸ Githongo, John. 2021. “East or West? What Africans Think of China and America.” *The Elephant*, 10 May 2021.

¹⁹ Kimari, Wangui and Henrik Ernstson. 2020. “Imperial Remains and Imperial Invitations: Centering Race Within the Contemporary Large-Scale Infrastructures of East Africa.” In *Antipode* 52 (3): 825-846.

²⁰ For an example, see: Mutua, Makau. 2019. “Why China remains greatest threat to Kenya’s sovereignty” *The Standard*, 3 March 2019.

particularly the Chinese. But they are doing it at the expense of the dignity of their own people.”²¹

Criticism is also directed at the GoK’s public policy planning on large-scale infrastructures. According to journalist Patrick Gathara, the way the Nairobi Expressway was



The Nairobi Expressway under construction in 2021. Photo: © picture alliance / REUTERS | Thomas Mukoya

planned reveals colonial trajectories of segregating the rich from the poor in public spaces. He called on the government to “rethink its colonialist approach to urban design”.²² His and similar views were widely shared on social media.

Public criticism of the project was also stirred by the eviction of residents of informal settlements for the construction and the highway’s limited benefits for Nairobi’s public transport users.²³ Those are core concerns raised by proponents of the imperial legacies framing: Kenya’s colonial history is marked by segregation, land grabbing, and forced evictions, fuelling today’s conflicts over land rights, resettlement schemes, and compensations. Similar dynamics have been observed in the Kenyan wildlife conservation sector.

Overall, despite the framing’s limited permeation of the political sphere, the frequent references to imperial legacies in public discourse underscore that Chinese mega projects are looked at in critical terms by parts of the Kenyan public, not only regarding their economic viability but also regarding the level of external influence and control that mega projects entail in light of the country’s colonial past.

Results and Recommendations

Infrastructure and debt are much-debated issues in many African countries, not only in Kenya. Controversies in Kenya reflect the growing sense of competition between China and Africa’s development partners from the US and Europe: Actors from the different camps seek to influence public opinion by portraying Chinese investments either as a threat or an opportunity for the continent. On the domestic side, policy actors seek to increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis external partners by invoking African agency. Civil society actors chip in with criticism about the country’s external partnerships which is not limited to China: Other development partners and the GoK itself come under scrutiny as well on matters of undue external interference and a lack of government accountability. The result is a diversity of voices and opinions on whether African countries and societies should turn to China, the US, Europe – or neither. The jury is still out.

As policy-makers in European capitals shape their “renewed partnership” with African countries, they should consider the following points:

²¹ Okoth, Juliet. 2018. “China, Kenya relations and the question of racial discrimination.” *The Conversation*, 12 October 2018.

²² Gathara, Patrick. 2019. “Nairobi should rethink its colonialist approach to urban design.” *Bloomberg*, 11 November 2019.

²³ Adoyo, Laji. 2021. “Nairobi’s new expressway may ease traffic woes – but mostly for the wealthy.” *The Conversation*, 2 November 2021.

1. The “debt trap” remains a persistent discursive tool, despite mounting evidence refuting its basic claims, such as the existence of collaterals. However, perspectives on China are significantly more diverse in Kenya, where different readings of the relationship circulate, and politicians and citizens have direct encounters with Chinese actors in various fields. If policy-makers predominantly rely on single-sided readings of China in Africa – a dynamic that could be reinforced by the current climate of increasing global power competition – they risk disconnecting from political and public discourses in Kenya and other countries in the region, and basing foreign policy decisions on incomplete information and misconceptions.
2. Several large-scale infrastructure investment schemes have been launched in recent years as alternatives to China’s BRI. They include the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative, the US-led “Build Back Better World (B3W)” initiative, and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor conceived by Japan and India. Yet, those initiatives have received scant attention in Kenya and the region so far, as their added value to what China built remains unclear. What is more, there are widespread perceptions in the region that those initiatives are driven by a “countering China” approach rather than being genuinely driven by the region’s development priorities. Therefore, for those initiatives to gain traction, they should be closely coordinated with regional stakeholders – including development economists and urban planning experts – and integrated with the existing infrastructure, regardless of who built it.
3. The “imperial legacies” reading plays a minor role in policy discourse, despite its – often subliminal – significance in public discourses. In a climate of growing global power competition, European actors are particularly prone to mistake criticism of China for points in favour of European development actors, though the criticism may well be directed at external interference in general. Therefore, policy-makers should demonstrate that they apply comparable criteria to large-scale external interventions – regardless of whether a project is implemented by European, Chinese, or other actors. A consistent approach may help to curb perceptions of European double standards.

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Megatrends Afrika

is a joint project of SWP, DIE and IfW.

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ISSN 2747-4119

DOI 10.18449/2022MTA-PB04



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