

SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad

## SIT Digital Collections

---

Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection

SIT Study Abroad

---

Fall 2019

# Strategic Implications for the United States of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa

Alec Monnie  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Infrastructure Commons](#), [International Economics Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Transportation Commons](#), [Transportation Engineering Commons](#), and the [Transportation Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Monnie, Alec, "Strategic Implications for the United States of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa" (2019). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 3127.  
[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/3127](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3127)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

Strategic Implications for the United States of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa

By: Alec Monnie

Fall 2019

SIT International Studies and Multilateral Diplomacy  
Dr. Gyula Csurgai

College of Wooster  
Political Science

**Abstract**

The belt and road initiative is one of the most significant developments of the twenty-first century, which the United States will need to learn to adapt to. Much of the academic literature regarding the belt and road initiative mentions that Africa is a significant participant in this policy development, but fail to elaborate as to why that is, or what the implications for this are for the United States. This article expands upon the strategic significance of the African continent, and explains the implications thereof for the United States and China. This article argues that the belt and road initiative is not simply a financial endeavor, as Chinese leaders claim, nor is it simply an attempt to counter the geopolitical prowess of the United States, as critics argue. The reality is somewhere in-between. China stands to improve its internal stability through economic means from the initiative, and at the same time, seeks to secure access to trade routes, ports, and industries of strategic importance. This article argues that the United States should not reject the belt and road initiative outright, as it stands to benefit from many of the endeavors. Rather than aggressively countering and dismissing the belt and road initiative, the United States should provide a viable alternative to countries participating in the initiative so as not to lose access to points of strategic importance.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the professors in the SIT program for their assistance and accessibility in conducting research for this project. I would like to thank the experts that made themselves available to me for interviews. Without their insights I would not have been able to conduct such enriching research. I acknowledge Jesse Clarke. Lastly, I would like to thank my host family for making me feel so at home in Geneva.

**Table of Contents**

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>-Research Question</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>The Belt and Road Initiative in Africa</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>- Criticisms of the Belt and Road Initiative</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>- Support for the Belt and Road Initiative</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>-African Perspectives of the Belt and Road Initiative</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>-Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Analyzing the Strategic Importance of Africa</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>-What is of Importance to International Actors</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>-Geographic Significance of Africa</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>-Military Significance of East Africa</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>-Instability in East Africa</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>-Energy and Natural Resources</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>-Population Boom</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>A Path Forward: How the United States Should Respond to the BRI</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Abbreviation List</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Interactive Log</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Work Journal</b> .....	<b>32</b>

## **Introduction**

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the start of a new infrastructure development project called the “one belt one road initiative,” which would eventually be modified to simply “the belt and road initiative” (BRI) (Lai 2018). The so called “belt” in the BRI refers to land corridors connecting China with southeastern, southern, western, and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The “road” component of the BRI, also referred to as the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road, refers to sea routes that seek to link China to Africa, the aforementioned regions of Asia, and Europe (Lai 2018). The BRI seeks to invest approximately \$900 billion into infrastructure and energy projects in these regions in order to improve international stability, and to develop the western and northern regions of China. Most of the projects that comprise the BRI are found in central Asia, the Middle East, east and central Europe, and Africa. Though Chinese leaders claim that the initiative does not have the primary intention of enhancing the relative geopolitical position of China, the BRI remains controversial, primarily with critics from the West who state that China uses predatory lending techniques when establishing projects in order to gain leverage over vulnerable countries in order to enhance its geopolitical position, amongst many other criticisms (Jingnan 2019; Pompeo 2019).

## **Research Question**

Much academic literature exists regarding the BRI and its activities in central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, but there is a distinct lack of literature regarding the initiative in Africa. This lack of information must be addressed because of the ever-increasingly significant strategic role that Africa plays in international affairs. Currently, Africa finds itself in a strategically significant position because of its rapidly

growing population, potential for strong economic growth, geographic proximity to strategic trade routes and bodies of water, access to natural resources, and for its potential for conflict (Mohamedou 2019). In light of the lack of information regarding the BRI in Africa, this article first examines how the BRI has taken form in Africa. Then, perceptions of the BRI are examined from the perspective of critics and supporters of the initiative, in addition to the perceptions of those in Africa who are more directly impacted by the BRI. This article then analyzes the strategic importance of Africa by examining its geography, military significance, instability, natural resources, and population, and what that means for the United States. Finally, this article concludes by charting a path forward for the United States regarding how it should respond to the BRI in light of the information provided.

### **Literature Review**

There is a strong foundation of literature relating to BRI projects around the world. In spite of this, there is a distinct lack of academic literature regarding BRI projects in Africa, the strategic motivations for financing these projects, and the implications thereof. Thus, it is necessary to conduct further research upon this important issue.

Forje (2018) details the context through which China conducts relations with African countries by establishing the historical relations between the two. As Forje (2018) and Imhoof (2019) explain, Sino-African relations have dated back for millennia, but relations as they are understood now can be traced back to the 1950s when six African states established official relations with the newly formed People's Republic of China. Tukic (2018) and Forje (2018) explain that China has been heavily involved in

African infrastructure projects since the 1960s, and that levels of involvement in the continent have increased significantly since the 1990s. Now, according to Forje (2018) and Risberg (2019), this involvement has become a distinct component of the BRI.

Risberg (2019), Mobley (2019), and Wuthrow (2017) each succinctly detail the most common criticisms leveled against the BRI. They state that critics view the BRI as a vehicle through which China seeks to challenge the dominance of the United States in international affairs. These critics claim that China seeks to achieve dominance over the economies of vulnerable developing countries, typically through financing loans that the country will not be able to repay, so as to leverage this position of authority to make these countries support Chinese international endeavors. Further, critics claim, that the BRI seeks to give China access to alternate trade routes and ports that are not dominated by the United States so that these routes could not be used against China in the event of conflict. Finally, critics say that the BRI is a mode through which China legitimizes authoritarian forms of governance in the eyes of developing countries.

There exists substantial literature which explains the Chinese reasoning and defense for the BRI. Forje (2018) states that the Chinese view the BRI as a mechanism through which they will lift their historical African partners out of subjugation from other states by increasing levels of economic interdependence between countries. Wuthrow (2017) provides quotes from Chinese officials which refer to the BRI as an “express-train to wealth and prosperity,” and as “the project of the century” to highlight the perspectives from the Chinese government in regards to the BRI (Lai 2018).

### **Methodology**



To conduct research for this project, academic, peer-reviewed secondary sources were utilized. Several databases regarding Chinese and American levels of investment in Africa were utilized, too. Finally, interviews were conducted with officials with expertise relating to African relations, Chinese relations, Chinese business practices, and the BRI. These methods were selected so as to provide a more holistic basis off of which to conduct the research for this project. In regards to the ethics involved in the process of interviewing experts, interviewees were informed that no questions that were asked of them were obligatory to answer. Additionally, interviewees were told that they could opt out of the interview process at any time, or remain anonymous when cited, should they so choose. Finally, interviewees were told that they could receive and review a copy of this article to examine the ways in which they were cited so that they could be sure that they are comfortable with the ways in which they are referenced.

In regards to organizing and scheduling interviews, various methods were employed. The first interview that was conducted was with Dr. Mahmoud Mohamedou of the Graduate Institute in Geneva. Dr. Mohamedou conducted numerous lectures at the School for International Training (SIT) office. After one such lecture, Dr. Mohamedou was solicited by email to conduct an interview about BRI activities in Africa, to which he obliged. Dr. Mohamedou was selected because of his prior experience in which he served as the Foreign Minister of Mauritania, through which he was able to observe first-hand how China conducts foreign relations in Africa. The second interview was conducted with Dr. Rodolphe Imhoof, another lecturer at SIT who was solicited by email for an interview. Dr. Imhoof was selected because of his experience in the Swiss Foreign Service through which he gained valuable and relevant experience while working in

China. The third interview for this project was conducted with an expert on the BRI from a German development organization who wished to remain anonymous. The fourth and final interview for this project was conducted with Dr. Dominique Jolly, a professor at Webster University in Geneva. Dr. Jolly was selected for his expertise relating to the methods in which Chinese enterprises conduct business in developing countries.

In addition to these interviews, numerous experts on Chinese foreign policy and the BRI were contacted requesting an interview. Some of these experts came from the Graduate Institute in Geneva, the International Conference of the Red Cross, and the European Free Trade Association. These experts felt either that they did not have the specific expertise that was necessary to conduct an interview, or could not find the time to respond to the interview requests, and thus were not interviewed. The interviews that were conducted, though, were very relevant and helpful in providing a more holistic view of BRI activities in Africa, the motivations thereof, the strategic importance of Africa, and the methods in which China conducts foreign policy, generally.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative in Africa**

Through the BRI, China aims to increase access to and levels of interconnectedness with over 100 countries around the world (Mobley 2019). In Africa, 39 countries are listed as participants in the BRI (Risberg 2019). This heavy involvement of Africa in the BRI is generally reflective of Chinese relations in the continent, which have been extensive since the 1950s, and have increased significantly since the 1990s (Imhoof 2019). This can be observed through the examination of levels of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the continent in recent years. In 2011, China invested only \$16 billion in Africa. By 2016, Chinese FDI had risen to \$40 billion, making it the

fourth largest investor in Africa, reflecting the recognition of China of the strategic importance of Africa (Does China 2019).

The terms under which BRI deals are established are not financially as generous as would be received through financing from sources such as the World Bank, or International Monetary Fund, but developing governments prefer Chinese loans because they do not require the receiving governments to make adjustments regarding governing practices, and do not have restrictive requirements as to what the funding can be used for (Dollar 2019; Friend 2018; Jolly 2019). Between 2014-2018, China invested two-times as much in capital in Africa as the United States, reflecting a strong Chinese commitment to the development of the continent (Madden 2019). Some of the most significant projects undertaken as a part of the BRI in Africa have focused primarily on ensuring energy security in these countries (Jolly 2019). For example, the Ugandan government has borrowed \$1.4 billion for the creation of the Karuma hydropower station. Uganda must repay this loan within twenty years with a five-year grace period, and a fixed rate of 2% (Dollar 2019). The Cameroonian government has borrowed \$500 million from the Chinese government for the financing of its Memve'ele hydropower station. This loan must be repaid within sixteen years with a grace period of six years, with an interest rate of 3.1% in addition to the Euro Inter-Bank Offered Rate (Dollar 2019).

Other significant BRI projects in Africa have focused primarily upon enhancing the transportation systems of different African countries (Jolly 2019). The Kenyan government has borrowed \$5 billion from China to finance the construction of its rail lines, under the terms of a fifteen-year contract with a five-year grace period. The Kenyan and Chinese governments agreed to an interest rate of 3.6% in addition to the London

Inter-Bank Offered Rate (LIBOR) (Dollar 2019). The Ethiopian government received a \$1.3 billion loan to finance its Addis-Ababa-Djibouti railway. The terms of this loan dictate that the Ethiopian government must repay the loan within fifteen years, with a grace period of six-years, and an interest rate of 3% in addition to the LIBOR. The Nigerian government received a \$500 million loan from the Chinese government to finance its Abuja-Masaka light-rail line. The Nigerian government must repay this loan within twenty years, with a seven-year grace period, and a fixed interest rate of 2.5% (Dollar 2019). Other BRI projects have aimed to develop the manufacturing and industrial sectors of developing economies, as can be seen in Ethiopia (Jolly 2019; Anonymous Expert 2019). These projects have achieved varying degrees of success.

### **Criticisms of the Belt and Road Initiative**

Though BRI projects are generally popular in developing countries, the BRI itself remains quite controversial to many critics, especially those from the West (Dollar 2019). One of the primary criticisms leveled against the BRI is that it employs a form of “debt-trap diplomacy.” These critics believe that China intentionally provides loans to vulnerable governments that they know will be unable to repay these loans, with the intention of forcing these governments to support Chinese foreign pursuits. This is done in tandem with increasing levels of interconnectedness with and dependence upon China for the stability and prosperity of the economy of the vulnerable country so as to force this government to support Chinese international ambitions (Dollar 2019; Pompeo 2019). Some critics fear that the BRI could be a reflection of what they interpret to be a continuation of a long-term challenge to the legitimacy of the liberal economic order established by the United States following the Second World War (Nicolas 2016).

Another criticism of the BRI is that the process by which the Chinese government provides loans is very opaque, and primarily benefits Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE). Because much of the process in which China lends money to foreign governments is not transparent, corruption is able to flourish because bureaucrats who have “distorted economic and political incentives to ink more, rather than fewer, BRI deals” are in charge of the deal-making process, and are not able to be held accountable by external actors (Ferchen 2019). This creates an environment in which deals are signed that may be politically beneficial in the short-term for the government receiving the loan, but do not substantively improve the well-being of the country receiving the financing. And because of this lack of transparency, government leaders in developing countries may view the authoritarian method of governance in China as being superior to the liberal democratic principles advocated for by the West, and the United States in particular. This presents a very direct threat to American interests in countries participating in the BRI (Risberg 2019; Dollar 2019; Friend 2018).

A final criticism commonly leveled against the BRI is that it is primarily motivated by Chinese geopolitical ambitions. Critics of the BRI note that participating countries are typically found in regions of particular strategic importance. This can be seen from the energy focused projects in central Asia, to the creation of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, and to infrastructure projects in Africa aiming to ensure access to large amounts of untapped natural resources that will be crucial to China in the future (Schneidman 2019; Anonymous Expert 2019). These critics say that China agrees to finance projects in regions of strategic importance either with the goal of receiving increased levels of access to, or total control of the strategically important sector or

entity. Critics point to the example of China financing a loan to the Sri Lankan government to build its Hambantota Port to highlight this point. According to these critics, the Chinese government knew that the Sri Lankan government would be incapable of repaying the loan for the project, but still provided the loan so that they could extract a favorable lease of the port from the Sri Lankan government. China would thus receive access to a strategically important trade route that it would retain control of in the event of an international dispute (Abi-Habib 2018). Some of those critical of the BRI say that this is an extension of an increasingly revisionist China that is becoming more aggressive in international affairs (Nicolas 2016). In spite of such heavy criticism of the BRI, the project maintains some strong supporters.

### **Support for the Belt and Road Initiative**

Those in favor of the BRI state that its purpose is simply to assist developing countries improve their economies, because the Chinese believe that this is the best way to ensure international stability (Jingnan 2019; Forje 2018; Wuthrow 2017). Supporters claim that many of the criticisms leveled against the initiative are due to structural deficiencies in China that result from the fact that the BRI is an unprecedented development. In response to one of the most significant of the aforementioned criticisms of the BRI that says China uses predatory lending practices to try to gain financial leverage over vulnerable governments, supporters of the initiative state that this is not a motivation for the initiative, but is simply a byproduct of the inexperience of bureaucrats who are in charge of the implementation of the BRI (Xu 2019; Ferchen 2019).

In regards to criticisms that state that the BRI is simply a means through which China seeks to enhance its relative geopolitical standing, the response from supporters is

two-fold. First, if this were the case, then the ramifications thereof are still generally positive, as the BRI does not coerce participating states into changing governing structures that could put the government at risk. Even if there is risk that the Chinese government would coerce participating governments to act in its favor through the BRI, the initiative still helps to address critical gaps between infrastructure needs and funding, which are approximately \$87-112 billion in developing countries, annually (Yepes 2017; Risberg 2019; Rondos 2016; Nantulya 2019). Secondly, if China is simply seeking to enhance its geopolitical position through the BRI, this is something that any great power does, and China should not be forced to be the exception to this practice.

### **African Perspectives of the Belt and Road Initiative**

Perceptions of the BRI in Africa are generally positive, as is consistent with that of other developing countries taking part in the initiative (Dollar 2019; Anonymous Expert 2019). This is because the initiative helps to address such significant infrastructure needs that would otherwise not be funded, without requiring capitulations regarding governing practices and restrictions as to what the funding can be used for. Chinese financing allows countries in Africa to undertake more ambitious policies that develop their transportation infrastructure, and permit access to natural resources that most developing countries do not have the ability to tap into.

Though perceptions of the BRI in Africa are generally positive, these beliefs are not universal. Primarily because of aforementioned instances of China providing loans to governments who use the loans for short-term political goals, or for personal enrichment, some in African countries are wary of Chinese lending practices, and prefer to remain uninvolved in the initiative and seek alternative means to bridge the gap in infrastructure

funding that developing countries currently face (Nantulya 2019). There is speculation that countries such as Djibouti and Kenya, which are both highly indebted to China, may have to acquiesce access to their Chinese financed ports should they be unable to repay their debts, as has been observed in Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Nantulya 2019).

### **Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative**

In light of these differing perspectives regarding the motivations and intentions of the BRI, it is important to understand the initiative for what it really is. The BRI is not simply a vehicle through which China seeks to challenge and revise the liberal economic system that the United States has led since the 1940s, as many critics claim. Nor is the sole intention of the BRI to improve the economic situation of western and northern China and to develop the economies of countries that China has historical ties with, as Chinese officials claim (Mohamedou 2019). The reality of the BRI lies somewhere between these two motivations. In order to further understand the BRI, it is not beneficial to oversimplify this initiative by stating that its motivation must be one or the other.

Through the BRI, and increased engagement in Africa in general, China is in fact seeking to develop countries that are not able to fulfill their economic potential on their own. By doing so, China hopes to economically develop its western and northern regions that have historically lagged behind southern and eastern China (Huang 2008). The BRI is also a means through which China is able to export its excess goods, savings, and labor which would otherwise go unused to countries in need (Dollar 2019). This benefits the Chinese economy because it allows for a reallocation of resources and labor, which prevents large amounts of waste.



In addition to enhancing its internal stability through increased levels of economic interdependence, though, it is apparent that China is indeed trying to enhance its geopolitical capabilities through the BRI. Through the BRI, China is trying to position itself advantageously in countries in geographically significant locations. This can be observed through Chinese acquisitions of ports that are near strategic trade routes, and from the installation of military bases in countries that have been substantial beneficiaries of the BRI, such as Djibouti (Nantulya 2019; Meltzer 2017). Aside from African countries that find themselves in geographically significant locations, states in Africa that are rich in natural resources and energy supplies have seen some of the largest level of Chinese investments, such as Nigeria and Angola (Schneidman 2018).

### **Analyzing the Strategic Importance of Africa**

#### **What is of Importance to International Actors**

Before examining why in particular Africa is so strategically significant, it is first necessary to establish what characteristics of countries are typically determined to be of strategic importance in international affairs. According to Csurgai (2017; 2019), historically, some of the most important entities that states have exploited to enhance their relative geopolitical positions have been heavily utilized trade routes, and regions close to these trade routes. Often, in an effort to enhance their geopolitical position, states will establish military bases in these regions so as to prevent other countries from tampering with these routes in the event of a dispute (Blackwill 2016; Csurgai 2019). Having access to natural resources and energy supplies is another factor of critical importance to the security of states, and is a primary motivation in the strategic reasoning of countries (Csurgai 2019; Jolly 2019). Instability, and the relative size of the population

of a geographic region are the final characteristics of strategic significance that will be examined in this article.

### **Geographic Significance of Africa**

The African continent geographically finds itself in a strategically important location. On the west coast, Africa has access to the Atlantic Ocean. To the east, lie the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, the Suez Canal, and Red Sea (Vertin 2019). To the north, Africa has access to the Mediterranean Sea, and the Nile River. And to the south, Africa is host to the Port of Durban. The Port of Durban, found in South Africa, is the “busiest container terminal in Africa and the second busiest in the southern hemisphere following Melbourne, Australia” (South Africa 2019). Having access to these bodies of water gives African countries the ability to trade goods with relative ease, and is seen as being strategically important for the fact that these countries can determine what goods and vessels can pass through their ports and trade routes (Qi 2006). Because such a significant percentage of international trade is maritime in nature, having stable access to trade routes and bodies of water is of critical strategic importance for states, and countries in Africa are no exception to this rule (Erickson 2008).

The eastern region of Africa is one of particular significant geographic importance (Mohamedou 2019). As mentioned above, this region provides access to the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, Suez Canal, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Arguably, the point of most significant strategic importance in the region is the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This route connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, and is used as a passageway for many vessels to Europe, Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Every year, hundreds of billions of dollars-worth of trade pass through this twenty-mile-wide

waterway (Vertin 2019; Vertin 2019). Much of the trade that passes through this Strait consists of petroleum being shipped from the Persian Gulf. It is important to note that in spite of this strategic significance, there is only one country in east Africa that has any ports that operate substantially, and that is Djibouti (Rondos 2016). In 2015, China negotiated a deal with the Djiboutian government to create the Doraleh multi-purpose port, which sits adjacent to its new military base, which serves as the only overseas Chinese military base (Vertin 2019). This increased Chinese activity in the region, which is connected to the BRI, is a clear recognition on the part of the Chinese government as to the geographical importance of east Africa, and is intended to give China stable access to this important region, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait in particular.

### **Military Significance of East Africa**

The recognition of the geographic importance of the east African region has led to the installation of military bases in Djibouti from many world powers, including the United States, France, Italy, Japan, and very recently, China (Vertin 2019). The United States clearly recognizes the strategic importance of this region, and of Djibouti in particular, as can be noted by the fact that its only permanent military base in the entire continent of Africa is found in Djibouti (Martin 2018). Camp Lemonnier, a former French military base, is used by the United States in order to launch counterterror operations in neighboring Somalia, and as a way to ensure its access to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. The strategic importance of this region has been noticed by China, too, as can be seen by the fact that the only Chinese overseas military base is found in Djibouti, and is found in quite close proximity to its recently completed port near Djibouti City. China recognizes that their economy is dependent upon the trade that flows through the

Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and as such has decided to establish a military presence in the region so as to ensure its access to this important trade route. This is a key motivation as to why east Africa has been a primary participating region in the BRI.

### **Instability in East Africa**

Another factor of significant strategic importance in Africa is instability, and the resulting potential for conflict in eastern Africa. Eastern Africa is a quite volatile region that has been the focus of United States foreign policy for decades. Since the terror attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the methods through which the United States seeks to stabilize the region have evolved significantly from traditional peacebuilding missions. Since the attacks, the United States has been leading a more interventionist mission to eliminate what it sees as its largest threat, terrorism (Elmi 2010). The primary target of these operations has been Somalia, which has seen long-term military operations that have aimed to eliminate extremist threats since the early 1990s (Elmi 2010). At first, United States missions in Somalia were primarily ground operations, conducted by special operations units with the objective of capturing militants. Since the early 2010s, though, operations have shifted to emphasize the use of drone strikes to eliminate terrorists (Drone Strikes 2019). In spite of these missions, instability rests in this troubled country.

Aside from Somalia there is potential for conflict between other actors in the region, which has motivated China to increase BRI operations in the region. One particular example that demonstrates the potential for conflict in the region can be observed in interstate relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. For decades, Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a war which resulted in Eritrean independence in 1993, leaving Ethiopia landlocked, no longer having access to the strategically important Red Sea (Mengistu

2001). This reality leads to the possibility of future conflicts between the two states relating to access to this important trade route, which could be a significant motivation for China making eastern Africa a primary partner in the BRI.

### **Energy and Natural Resources**

The levels of natural resources and energy supplies that a state possesses must be considered when examining its strategic importance (Jolly 2019). The continent of Africa is extremely rich in untapped natural resources, which is a reason why China has prioritized countries that have the most resources in the BRI (Anonymous Expert 2019). The most strategically important natural resources that a state can possess include gold, diamond, uranium, and petroleum (Critical raw materials 2019). As can be observed from data from the *Centre for Sustainable Mineral Development* (2019), out of the top ten gold producing countries in the world, three are found in Africa. These are, Ghana, South Africa, and Sudan, producing 137,000 tons, 136,833 tons, and 107,300 tons each year, respectively. Out of the top seven diamond producing countries in the world, four are found in Africa. These are Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, and Angola, producing 22.9 million carats, 15.404 million carats, 96.85 million carats, and 94.4 million carats, respectively. Two of the top five uranium producing states are found in Africa. They are Namibia, and Niger, producing 4,843 tons, and 3,485 tons, respectively. Nigeria, Angola, and Algeria are three of the top twenty oil producing countries in the world, producing 95.3 million metric tons, 81.8 million metric tons, and 66.6 million metric tons annually. It is important to note that many of these countries, such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Sudan are important members of the BRI. The strategic importance of natural resources in African states is a primary motivation for the

Chinese to invest so much in the continent (Jolly 2019), and this must be taken into consideration when analyzing how the United States should respond to the BRI.

### **Population Boom**

Another characteristic of importance when determining the strategic significance of a country or region is its population. As the twenty-first century progresses, the region with the fastest-growing population will be Sub-Saharan Africa, which will see its population doubled by 2050 (United Nations 2019). Currently, the population of Africa is approximately 1.3 billion. According to the United Nations (2019) *World Population Prospects* database, in 2050, the population of Africa will be approximately 2.5 billion, and by 2100 will reach approximately 4.3 billion. Clearly, the simple fact that the population of Africa will comprise such a significant portion of the world population in the near future will make it a very important actor in international affairs. When one considers the challenges posed by issues such as migration, the relatively few number of employment opportunities that will be created in the continent, and the possibility of food shortages which will be exacerbated by complications associated with climate change, it is easy to see why Africa has become a central focus of the BRI, and why it should become a primary focus of United States foreign policy (Inter-Agency 2017; Brown, O. 2007).

### **A Path Forward: How the United States Should Respond to the BRI**

Should the United States hope to maintain its role as the guiding voice in international relations, it must thoroughly understand the BRI, and more generally, the ways in which China conducts foreign policy in developing countries. The United States should be wary of the BRI, but should not reject it outright, as it too stands to benefit

from parts of the initiative. For the United States to remain the most influential voice in international affairs, it must acknowledge the rise of China, and the ever-increasing role that it will play in international relations in the twenty-first century. It is no longer reasonable for the United States to expect to be *the* voice in international relations. As the economic power of China and its ability to influence actors continues to increase, the limitations of the United States will become more apparent.

The recognition of this reality does not suggest that the United States should become reclusive in international affairs. The United States should maintain an active role in the economic and political development of vulnerable countries, particularly in Africa. The United States should seek to cooperate with the European Union to contest expanded Chinese influence in regions of critical strategic importance, and should prioritize countries with access to important trade routes, and with large reserves of important natural resources, such as Djibouti, South Africa, and Nigeria. Of particular focus of the United States should be countries of strategic importance which are not already very financially dependent upon China. When the United States does contest Chinese influence though, it is important that it does not do so in an overly confrontational manner. This runs the risk of increasing the likelihood of conflict between China and the United States, and could tarnish relations between the United States and countries of strategic importance that would be caught in the middle of a spat between the two powers. The United States should also generally increase the amount of resources that it devotes towards the development of African economies.

If the United States does not take the ascension of Africa as a serious priority in its grand strategy, then it runs the risk of allowing China to become the dominant power

in the region, potentially cutting the United States off from a vast amount of natural resources, and from many strategic trade routes. The way in which the United States responds to the BRI should be reflective of how it responds to current, and future Chinese expansionism in general. The United States should cooperate with China on issues of importance, but should not permit China to gain dominance over countries, regions, or sectors of particular strategic importance. Overreaction to the projects that comprise the BRI will serve the interests of no actors, and will only overstretch the resources of the United States.

### **Conclusion**

The Chinese BRI is a \$900 billion infrastructure project that seeks to link the underdeveloped western and northern regions of China to the rest of the world. Most BRI projects seek to develop the infrastructural capabilities of developing countries so as to recreate the ancient silk road that was one of the main drivers of trade centuries ago. Supporters claim that the BRI is a simple mechanism through which China seeks to develop vulnerable economies, while critics tend to believe that it is a vehicle through which China seeks to enhance its geopolitical footing in the international system, and to spread its authoritarian governing model. The BRI focuses its resources primarily upon southern Asia, the Middle East, eastern Europe, and Africa. Projects in Africa have typically sought to develop rail systems between countries, ports, and to ensure the energy security of various states through the creation of hydropower plants. The BRI is the manifestation of decades of increased Chinese activity in Africa (Mohamedou 2019; Imhoof 2019). This increased activity poses a significant strategic challenge to the United



States, which risks losing access to strategic trade routes and natural resources of critical importance to its Chinese competitors, who fully recognize the potential of Africa.

The United States should neither overreact to the BRI by seeking to counter every project that China finances, nor should it continue its pattern of apathy towards African affairs. The financing of projects in African countries of particular strategic importance, whether they have access to an important trade route, or have a vast supply of untouched natural resources, should become a foreign policy priority of the United States. Further research upon the topic of the strategic implications of the BRI in Africa for the United States should examine the topic from a more localized perspective. Rather than examining the strategic implications of the BRI in Africa in general, further research should focus on specific countries that are important beneficiaries of the BRI in Africa. Countries of interest might be Angola or South Africa, which do not have extensive literature focusing upon them, to determine what specific course of action the United States should seek in each country so as to ensure it maintains its leading role in the international system.

**Abbreviation List**

Belt and Road Initiative- BRI

School for International Training- SIT

London Inter-Bank Offered Rate- LIBOR

Euro Inter-Bank Offered Rate- EURIBOR

State-owned enterprise- SOE

Foreign direct investment- FDI

### Bibliography

- Abi-Habid, M. (2018). How China got Sri Lanka to cough up a port. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>
- Anonymous Expert. (2019, November 15). Personal interview.
- Blackwill, R., and Harris, J. (2016). Geoeconomics in Chinese foreign policy. In War by other means. *Harvard University Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c84cr7.8>
- Brown, O., Hammill, A., and McLeman, R. (2007). Climate change as the 'new' security threat: Implications for Africa. *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 83. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4541915>
- Brown, T., Idoine, N., Raycraft, E., Hobbs, S., Shaw, R., Everett, P., Kresse, C., Deady, E., and Bide, T. (2019). World Mineral Production. *British Geographical Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/statistics/wms.cfc?method=searchWMS>
- Critical raw materials. (2019). *Centre for Sustainable Mineral Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/statistics/criticalRawMaterials.html>
- Csurgai, G. (2017). The increasing importance of geoeconomics in power rivalries in the twenty-first century. *Geopolitics*. Retrieved from <file:///E:/SIT%20FALL%202019%20Important%20documents/required%20readings%20Fall%202019/SPS%20readings/Module%205/1.%20Csurgai%20geoeconomics.pdf>
- Csurgai, G. (2019). Geopolitical analysis: A multidimensional approach to analyze power rivalries in international relations. *Dr. Gyula Csurgai*. Retrieved from <file:///E:/SIT%20FALL%202019%20Important%20documents/required%20readings%20Fall%202019/SPS%20readings/Module%201/1.%20Csurgai%20Geopolitical%20Analysis.pdf>
- Does China dominate global investment? (2019). *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. Retrieved from <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-foreign-direct-investment/>

- Dollar, D. (2019). Understanding China's belt and road infrastructure projects in Africa. *Brookings Institute*. Retrieved from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP\\_20190930\\_china\\_bri\\_dollar.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_bri_dollar.pdf)
- Drone Strikes: Somalia. (2019). *New America*. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/americas-counterterrorism-wars/somalia/>
- Ellis, R. (2005). U.S. national security implications of Chinese involvement in Latin America. *Strategic Studies Institute*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.ch/books?id=7PyXyhZ7MfoC&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=security+implications+involved+with+trade&source=bl&ots=DbrhRQUHQh&sig=ACfU3U1MDYUjzUhlCiFZXgxoYomG8PJr2g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj6ruCAzZnIAhXIsKQKHWdyAhcQ6AEwBnoECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=security%20implications%20involved%20with%20trade&f=false>
- Elmi, A. (2010). Understanding the US policy toward Somalia. In Understanding the Somalia conflagration. *Pluto Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183h0x7.10>
- Erickson, A. (2008). Assessing the new U.S. maritime strategy: A window into Chinese thinking. *Naval War College Review*, 61. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26396961>
- Ferchen, M., and Perera, A. (2019). Why unsustainable Chinese infrastructure deals are a two-way street. *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*. Retrieved from <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2019/07/23/why-unsustainable-chinese-infrastructure-deals-are-two-way-street-pub-79548>
- Forje, E. (2018). Unblocking Africa's underdevelopment through the one belt one road initiative. In Belt and road initiative. *Africa Institute of South Africa*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh8r0vm.9>
- Friend, J., and Thayer, B. (2018). Han-centrism provides strategic asymmetries for the United States. In How China sees the world. *University of Nebraska Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv80cchq.9>
- Gill, I., Lall, S., and Lebrand, M. (2019). Winners and losers along China's belt and road. *Brookings Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/06/21/winners-and-losers-along-chinas-belt-and-road/>

- Huang, C. (2008). China's renewed partnership with Africa: Implications for the United States. In *China into Africa*. *Brookings Institution Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wphrg.17>
- Imhoof, R. (2019, October 16). Personal interview.
- Inter-agency regional analysts network. (2017). East Africa and the Horn in 2022. *Institut de Relations Internationales et Strategiques*. Retrieved from <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/IARAN-East-Africa-to-2022-revised.pdf>
- Jingnan, L., and Jieqiong, J. (2019). Infographic: President Xi's quotes on the BRI. *China Global Television Network*. Retrieved from <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d774e32416a4d34457a6333566d54/index.html>
- Jolly, D. (2019, November 20). Personal interview.
- Lai, D., Sze, N., Chen, L., Rao, C., Yang, R., Xu, S., and Huang, K. (2018). Embracing the BRI ecosystem in 2018. *Deloitte*. Retrieved from [https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4406\\_Belt-and-road-initiative/4406\\_Embracing-the-BRI-ecosystem.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4406_Belt-and-road-initiative/4406_Embracing-the-BRI-ecosystem.pdf)
- Lei, W. (2019). Somalia expects more Chinese investment and exchanges. *China Global Television Network*. Retrieved from <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414f77456a4d34457a6333566d54/index.html>
- Madden, P. (2019). Figure of the week: Foreign direct investment in Africa. Brookings Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2019/10/09/figure-of-the-week-foreign-direct-investment-in-africa/>
- Martin, P. (2018). Could China squeeze the U.S. out of its only permanent military base in Africa? *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2018/12/14/could-china-squeeze-us-out-its-only-permanent-military-base-africa/>
- Meltzer, J. (2017). China's belt and road initiative: A view from the United States. Brookings Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative-a-view-from-the-united-states/>
- Mengistu, A. (2001). Uneasy peace. *Royal Institute of International Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40476528>

- Mobley, T. (2019). The belt and road initiative. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 13. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26760128>
- Mohamedou, M. (2019, October 15). Personal interview.
- Nantulya, P. (2019). Implications for Africa from China's one belt one road strategy. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Retrieved from <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/implications-for-africa-china-one-belt-one-road-strategy/>
- Nicolas, F., and Buchanan, D. (2016). China and the global economic order: A discreet yet undeniable contestation. French Centre for Research on Contemporary China. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44090427>.
- Pompeo, M. (2019). The China challenge. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/the-china-challenge/>
- Qi, X., Erickson, A., and Goldstein, Lyle. (2006). Maritime geostrategy and the development of the Chinese navy in the early twenty-first century. U.S. Naval War College Press, 59. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26396769>
- Risberg, P. (2019). The give and take of BRI in Africa. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/give-and-take-bri-africa>
- Rondos, A. (2016). The Horn of Africa: Its strategic importance for Europe, the gulf states, and beyond. *Centre for International Relations and Sustainable Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2016--issue-no-6/the-horn-of-africa---its-strategic-importance-for-europe-the-gulf-states-and-beyond>
- Schneidman, W., and Wiegert, J. (2018). Competing in Africa: China, the European Union, and the United States. *Brookings Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/04/16/competing-in-africa-china-the-european-union-and-the-united-states/>
- South Africa – Port and Logistics. (2019). *International Trade Administration*. Retrieved from <https://www.export.gov/article?id=South-Africa-Port-and-Logistics>

- Tukic, N. (2018). One belt one road linked transnational infrastructure and resources in eastern and southern Africa. In Belt and road initiative. *Africa Institute of South Africa*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh8r0vm.12>
- United Nations. (2019). World population prospects 2019. *United Nations Population Division*. Retrieved from <https://population.un.org/wpp/>
- Vertin, Z. (2019). Red sea blueprints. *Brookings Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/12/red-sea-blueprints/>
- Vertin, Z. (2019). Red sea rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the new geopolitics of the Red sea. *Brookings Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/red-sea-rivalries/>
- Wuthnow, J. (2017). Chinese perspectives on the belt and road initiative. *National Defense University*. Retrieved from <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/ChinaPerspectives-12-1.pdf>
- Xu, S., and Chen, L. (2019). China's belt and road initiative. *Deloitte*. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/asia-pacific/china-belt-and-road-initiative-update.html>
- Yepes, T., and Lufumpa, C. (2017). The state of infrastructure in East Africa. In *Infrastructure in Africa*. *Bristol University Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1t88xmm.18>