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Author: Lungani Hlongwa (NYCU, Taiwan)   **Series Editor**: Professor F. Vreÿ (SIGLA)

China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative: Security Implications for Africa

Background

The Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) is the sea dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is China's vision of transcontinental economic integration through trade. With the MSRI, China intends to connect itself via the sea to dozens of countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe in order to boost economic growth for itself and other countries involved. To facilitate connectivity, China has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure such as seaports, railways, and highways in dozens of countries along the MSRI. For most of these countries—and for Africa in particular—the infrastructure that China is providing is sorely needed to boost economic development. Despite the optimism surrounding the economic benefits of the MSRI, this brief argues that there are real security challenges presented by the Initiative that Africa cannot ignore. The brief highlights only three security challenges operating upon the vulnerabilities of Africa, particularly those states that have direct connections with the MSRI. Specifically, these security challenges emanate from the increased militarization of place, the further opening of natural resource deposits, and the breaching of cyber sovereignty—all of which are embedded in the MSRI.

Discussion

The MSRI—and the BRI at large—has received wide scholarly attention since it was announced in 2013 by Chinese president Xi Jinping. Most scholarship on the MSRI generally falls within two streams of research. The first stream, dominated by Western scholars, tends to be more critical of the Initiative pointing out, for example, how China's foreign lending increases sovereign debt in countries along the MSRI. Many scholars in this stream of research argue that the MSRI is an attempt by China to reshape the international order and establish itself as a key player in the global political economy. Japan has responded to China's MSRI by launching its own Asia-centric infrastructural construction programme known as the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI). Thus far, India—one of China's most suspicious neighbours—shows more receptiveness towards the PQI than the BRI. The second stream of research arises mostly as a response

to the first. Scholars in this stream of research, hailing mostly from Mainland China, portray the MSRI purely as a win-win and collaborative approach to economic development. Many of these scholars deny any political or military dimensions of the MSRI, stressing rather that the Initiative is about building a "community of common destiny."

Despite the optimistic outlook of the MSRI, there are important security challenges which arise naturally through interconnectivity that African states cannot ignore. The first, and probably the most conspicuous security challenge for Africa, pertains to the increased militarisation of the waters off Somalia and the Gulf of Aden (see Figure 1 for how the MSRI connects with East Africa). Although military presence in this region—both Chinese and other militaries—is justified as anti-piracy operations, this part of the world is a volatile flashpoint due to its strategic location in global trade. Countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen also have ongoing internal armed conflicts that could further threaten regional stability on land and at sea, thus calling for more military presence in the region. Instability in this region has also been used to justify China's naval base in Djibouti, which Beijing says is only a logistical facility for supplying PLA Navy ships involved in peacekeeping operations. With its naval base in Djibouti, China joins a cluster of other regional and extra-regional powers that wish to project naval power off the waters of Northeast Africa.

There are clear linkages between China's naval base in Djibouti and the MSRI. It can therefore be expected that as the MSRI comes into fruition, China will deem it necessary to increase naval presence off the waters of Northeast Africa to secure its shipping and protect its citizens living in this part of the world. China has already invested in 46 sub-Saharan ports that are said to align with Beijing's military, commercial, and political objectives. Out of these 46 ports, 41 of them are either funded or constructed by Chinese entities. Those wary of China's growing naval presence in the region may also respond in like manner to establish a naval balance. Africa thus needs to be wary not so much of the so-called "China threat" but the increased militarisation of place. The waters off Northeast Africa have indeed become an arena for growing great power rivalry where Africa could be caught in the crossfire.
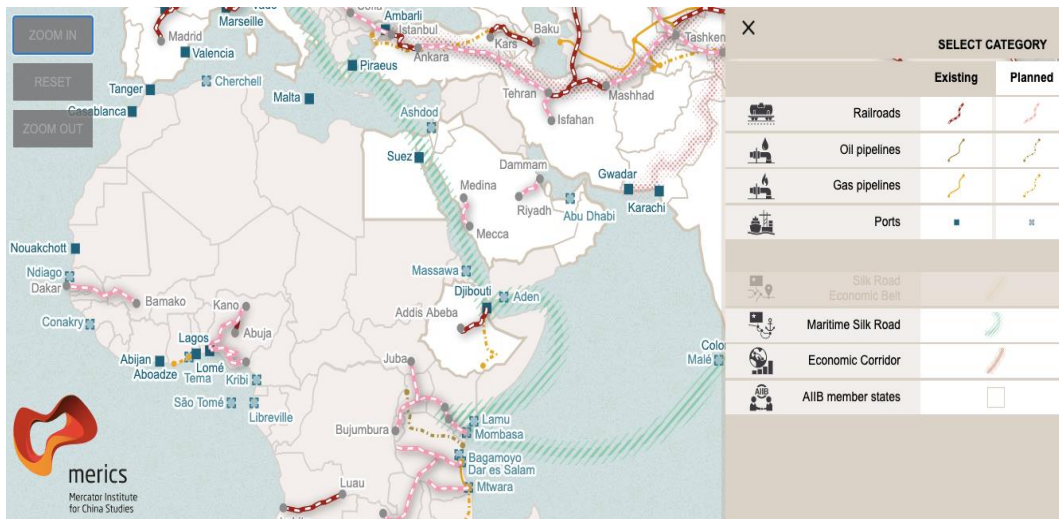

Figure 1: Map showing Maritime Silk Road Initiative connections with East Africa

Source: Merics.

The second security challenge has to do with the increase in China's extractive industries in Africa. Many countries on the continent are earmarked as important suppliers of natural resources such as crude oil,

iron ore/concentrates, and copper to feed China's growing appetite. In Africa, the long history of opening local resource deposits to multinational companies has failed to radically transform economies on the continent. On the contrary, multinational companies from around the world have colluded with authoritarian governments and local elites for self-aggrandisement at the expense of citizens. In some cases, companies from the extractive industries have colluded with local militias to control resource deposits leading to intra-state conflict and socio-political instability. China's hunger for Africa's natural resources could also increase the risk of intra-state conflicts on the continent. This is particularly true since China's arms sales to African states is said to be driven by China's pursuit of natural resources. With the MSRI, more of Africa's natural resource deposits will be opened and thereby extending the continent's dependence on mineral-led development. Therefore, the link between natural resources and insecurity is one that must be borne in mind as Africa opens itself up to Chinese extractive companies. Chinese extractivism in Africa must also be looked at through a securitized lens.

The final security challenge that the MSRI presents to Africa is in the realm of cyberspace. While some argue that Africa has more pressing needs to address than cybersecurity, the continent is not immune to cyber threats given the rapid development in cyber power and Africa's need to establish cyber sovereignty. In addition to the sea and land dimensions of the BRI, there is also a digital dimension known as the Digital Silk Road Initiative (DSRI). The DSRI aims to make the BRI more efficient by facilitating cross-border interconnectivity through data sharing between China and BRI member states. Under the DSRI, numerous Chinese technology companies are investing in the construction of smart cities, smart ports, data centres, telecommunications infrastructure, and other state-of-the-art cyber-based technologies in Africa. For example, Huawei—a Chinese multinational technology company—built Zambia's national data centre which stores and handles government data. Huawei has also made deals with numerous African states to build "safe cities"—which, for all intents and purposes—are surveillance cities. It is not hard to imagine how these technologies may be used for cyber-attacks or cyber espionage if an actor—state or non-state—is so inclined. Concerns have also been raised about how Chinese surveillance technologies may be used by authoritarian African governments to increase political repression. There is therefore, as Van der Waag-Cowling rightfully points out, a need for Africa to signal the intent to deal with cyber security challenges and "assume an immediate visible posture in dealing with them." There is also a need to ensure the responsible use of cyber power by African governments as such power lends itself to abuse and the violation of human rights.

Conclusion

This brief sought to highlight three key security challenges for Africa pertaining to the MSRI. It pointed out that Africa faces security challenges due to the increased militarisation of the waters off Northeast Africa, the further opening of Africa's natural resource deposits, and the vulnerability of the continent's cyberspace. It would be inaccurate to claim that these are new challenges or that they are wholly attributable to China's growing influence on the African continent. Indeed, the conditions that perpetuate these challenges were long embedded in Africa's socio-political and economic realities. Nonetheless, China's growing influence on the continent deserves an equally critical gaze as has been cast on western influence. African governments have an important role to play in fostering equal, just, and fair Africa-China relations. What is crucial for African governments is to ensure that benefits of MSRI membership trickle down to common citizens. Failure to do so could inadvertently turn the MSRI into a "community of common insecurity." After all, in a hyperconnected world, instability on the other side of the globe could resonate throughout the entire network, making one's problem everybody's problem.

Recommended reading:

Xing, L. (Ed.). (2018). *Mapping China's 'one belt one road' initiative*. Springer.

Lungani Nelson Hlongwa is a PhD candidate at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University (NYCU) in Taiwan and former student of the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University.

E-mail: lungani.c@nycu.edu.tw