

Issue #  
**3**

**Security Dialogue for East Africa:**  
Insights & Perspectives

# Are East African Corridors Communist Red?

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Influence of the People's Republic  
of China on Land and Sea Flows  
in East Africa

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*The container terminal at the Port of Djibouti*

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# Abstract

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) has clearly carved out a special place for itself in the tangible and intangible flows of East Africa and the Indian Ocean (EAIO)<sup>1</sup> through the financing and construction of infrastructure such as ports, road, and rail networks. What are the characteristics of this presence? Does the way Chinese companies operate stand out from the other players? Can this influence be converted into a constraining effect on flows in the event of war or confrontation? Can it generate tactical and/or strategic gains in terms of competition between major powers?

## East Africa in China's Strategy

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Beijing's policy in East Africa, as in other areas of Chinese power projection, is governed by an ideological framework, that of the "Chinese Dream" and the "Rejuvenation of the Nation". Behind these aphorisms borrowed from the nostalgia of a lost power, the aim is to overtake the United States to become the world's leading power by 2049, the centenary of the People's Republic of China. While this primarily concerns the economic sphere, it also involves creating a new balance of military power in the Asia-Pacific region (including reunification with Taiwan). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 and further developed in 2015, are intended to simultaneously meet several of the needs that are key to achieving this objective:

- focus and streamline economic and commercial flows around China, to secure supplies and leverage innovation capacities by expanding markets,
- reshape its economic, political, and normative environment so that it is favourable to its development, while at the same time eroding Western influence in these areas,
- promote the development of landlocked regions in the centre and west of the country, which are holding back overall growth, by setting up six overland economic corridors,
- develop articulated land-sea corridors to bypass and loosen the stranglehold of the US military presence in its immediate vicinity.

In short, the aim is to "create a new global balance of power, favourable to China, through the economy, in particular through the financing of vast infrastructure projects"<sup>2</sup> and, by the same token, to consolidate its position on the international stage, particularly with developing countries, to create the equivalent of a sphere of influence.<sup>3</sup>

According to the study “The New Great Game” directed by Nadège Rolland, until recently, the African continent was included, from a doctrinal point of view, in the vast “Global South” over which China intended to exert a hegemonic influence.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the first official documents on the BRI did not include Africa’s eastern seaboard. It was not until 2015 that China’s most influential Africanists were commissioned by the central committees to think about a Chinese strategy in Africa, which consisted in adapting the BRI to Africa. This exercise, which lasted four years, resulted in a number of documents, notably highlighting the continent’s assets and its role in extending China’s strategic space in competition with the United States. While a finer analytical granularity might have been expected, it must be emphasised that the documents produced emanate a general, standardising approach to the African continent, which does not provide for the calibration of Chinese action according to different countries, groups of countries or regions – this is not to say that this is not the de facto case, as we shall see below. While this accessible work corresponds to the intermediate stage of the decision-making process, and we cannot say with certainty that it has led to the construction of a national African strategy as such, it does testify to a very recent desire on the part of the Chinese authorities to better think through, order and take advantage of China’s presence in Africa.

While it is true that the various Chinese actors involved in development in Africa, whether private or institutional, act at least in part in their own particular interests, which can go so far as to create competitive situations<sup>5</sup>, the present study is part of a critical tradition that highlights the intertwining of political and

economic considerations in major Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa. A number of factors support this assertion:

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has cells at various levels in all state-owned enterprises and China’s largest private companies, and has a seat on the committees that decide on political and strategic directions, which has been strengthened since Xi Jinping came to power.<sup>6</sup> If necessary, CCP representatives can use their presence to enforce the directives of the current five-year plan, such as those urging companies to contribute to the development of overseas ports, a national priority of the 2021 to 2025 five-year plan.
- In addition, many projects are awarded and approved following official visits by high-ranking Chinese dignitaries (e.g. projects in Djibouti and Kenya)<sup>7</sup>, presented by the Chinese regime as a symbol of successful bilateral cooperation between states, even if the project in question only involves private Chinese players. What’s more, many contracts are awarded to Chinese players in an opaque manner and without any competitive tendering procedure, thereby contravening national legislation.
- Added to this is the fact that Xi Jinping has strongly verticalized the decision-making process in the field of diplomacy (through “small leading groups”, as in other policies).

Taken together, these arguments reinforce the idea that many of the decisions to participate in large-scale projects have been part of a central planning calculus at the service of political, economic, and strategic objectives on a continental or even global scale.

# The Geostrategic Interest of the EAIO for China: Mineral Wealth and Access to the Indian Ocean

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## *Role of Minerals*

Contrary to popular belief, the PRC is not dependent on Africa for its energy needs. Indeed, Beijing's energy mix relies mainly on domestic coal and oil and natural gas sourced from the Middle East, Russia and Australia. Africa thus plays a very modest role in energy supply, even Angola, which accounts for 51 per cent of oil imported from Africa, but only 5 per cent of total Chinese imports in this category.<sup>8</sup> In EAIO in particular, South Sudan and South Africa represent a marginal oil contribution.<sup>9</sup> The economic interest of the EAIO lies more in its contribution to the diversification of partners, both in terms of outlets – behind a European market that is still first but has reached maturity – and of raw material suppliers, with the ultimate aim of securing its growth trajectory.

That said, the most strategic point is undoubtedly the involvement of this sub-region in its strategy to integrate the minerals value chain (copper, cobalt, coltan, lithium, uranium). Indeed, in 2016, 67.5 per cent of China's copper and cobalt requirements came from Central Africa<sup>10</sup>, and 31 per cent of Chinese investment in Africa went to the extractive industry in 2013.<sup>11</sup> The aim is to position the company from the mine to the finished product. As the refining and packaging stages are carried out on Chinese

soil, the PRC enters into arrangements with the authorities of the extraction countries to secure drawing rights; the "Sicomines deal", signed in 2008 with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), included a promise of 3 billion US dollars in infrastructure in return for the extraction of 6.8 million tonnes of copper and 427,000 tonnes of cobalt for fifteen years.<sup>12</sup> The PRC is the DRC's biggest cobalt customer, accounting for 80 per cent of exports of this strategic mineral, which is indispensable for the manufacture of lithium-ion batteries<sup>13</sup> – used in the most critical technologies (smartphones; electric cars).

In Zambia, the chosen model was different: a Chinese economic cooperation zone was set up, the first in Africa, near the Congolese border, to mine but also smelt copper. Here too, the objective of securing supplies seems to have been achieved, given the opacity surrounding the export of Zambia's rich copper reserves to China, to the extent that the President's economic advisor admitted that the exact export figures of Chinese companies were not known to the country.<sup>14</sup> These examples show how, through EAIO, China has succeeded in securing the "upstream" part of the value chain, an integral part of its strategy to dominate industrial markets<sup>15</sup>, particularly when it comes to technologies that are advantageous in strategic competition with the USA.

### **Connection with the Indian Ocean**

The maritime route along the eastern coast of Africa is of strategic interest to the PRC, as it leads north to European markets via the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean, and south to African markets and the wealth extracted from their soil. This explains the PRC's involvement in the fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden from 2008 onwards. A decade later, this commitment has served as a pretext for the Chinese authorities to perpetuate a naval military presence in Djibouti.<sup>16</sup> Officially, this base provides logistical support for its contingents engaged in peacekeeping operations and is intended to enable the evacuation of Chinese nationals in the event of a crisis, as well as helping to secure commercial shipping routes. In reality, it is a privileged observation and intelligence-gathering post that enables the People's

Liberation Army (PLA) to break away from the exercise of managing an overseas base and to spread its military diplomacy in the area.

Above all, located at the crossroads of crucial trade arteries for China between Africa, Europe and the Middle East, the Chinese military base completes a network of ports which, from Chinese possessions in the South China Sea from the island of Hainan to Djibouti via Cambodia, Burma, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, offers various supply and logistics options for People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels. The ultimate aim of this network is to erode American influence on the seas. Djibouti thus gives substance to a strategic continuum linking the Pacific and Indian oceans, so much so that the maritime BRI can be described as an "Indo-Pacific strategy with Chinese characteristics"<sup>17</sup>, even though the PRC officially rejects this term as hostile to itself.



*An Ethiopian cargo ship docked at the Port of Djibouti.*

Source: By Mikhail Goldovski - Flickr: \_DSC2509, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=31034255>



# A Dominant Role in Tangible and Intangible Flows

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This strategic interest in EAIO goes a long way towards explaining China's efforts to improve EAIO flows and infrastructures, which were and remain marked by the colossal needs set out in national plans. Beijing has become a major player in the intensification of land and sea flows in EAIO.<sup>18</sup>

## *Material flows*

Spectacularly, China has developed an extensive network of ports in which it is present in one form or another, so that it is a stakeholder in over a quarter of African ports, a significantly higher level than in other regions of the world.<sup>19</sup> East Africa is the second most concentrated region in Africa, after West Africa, with a stake in the development of 17 ports<sup>20</sup>, including major ones such as Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, which overlook the maritime artery leading to the Suez Canal. The Horn of Africa is home to the most ambitious Chinese projects in Africa (Djibouti commercial port and military base).

These ports are at the heart of larger projects. Two land-based infrastructure logics can thus be observed: the development of industrial-port complexes along the eastern seaboard (Nacala and Beira in Mozambique) and the opening-up of extractive economies such as the DRC and Zambia, as well as large markets such as Ethiopia, via the construction or modernisation of major cross-border trade corridors.<sup>21</sup> These corridors present

considerable needs in terms of roads, electricity grids, oil and gas pipelines, dams and so on. These are all infrastructure needs that Chinese companies are in a position to meet. Railways, in particular, act as the "backbone of the land component of the BRI"<sup>22</sup> and complement the maritime component, while they carry a significant political weight for African heads of state (symbol of economic development; vector of national unification in socially or ethnically fragmented societies).

Chinese participation in the development of these infrastructures takes various forms, often in combination: financing, construction, modernisation, maintenance, equity investment and/or operation of facilities. Chinese players, both private and public, are competitive across the entire flow logistics chain: from the extraction and processing industry to shipping (Cosco Shipping, China's leading shipowner, ranks fourth worldwide)<sup>23</sup>, construction companies (Chinese companies are the leading builders of ports in Africa, particularly China Communications Construction Company (CCCC)) and engineering. And then there are the commercial banks, both public and import-export (China Exim Bank), which are very active on the continent.

China has thus taken a leading role in linking the East African hinterlands with the major shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean.

## ***Intangible flows***

Backed by a reputation for quality and low costs, Chinese telecommunication companies (Huawei, ZTE, China Telecom, China Unicom, China mobile) are successfully positioning themselves in a wide variety of sub-sectors (national data systems, cell phones, submarine cables), to such an extent that Chinese technologies form the backbone of the telecoms systems in several EAIO countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia and Mozambique. On a continental scale, they have implemented 70 per cent of the 4G network, and are the leading provider of 5G<sup>24</sup>, for an extremely dynamic Internet user market.<sup>25</sup> African governments are increasingly using Chinese social surveillance equipment (cameras, facial recognition), under the banner of “Smart or Safe City contracts” (Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Uganda).

Infrastructure linked to intangible flows complements, supports and facilitates material flows. For example, Huawei Marine has built submarine fiber-optic cables to most of the major ports where China has a presence along the Indian Ocean coastline. The Djibouti data center is an emblematic Sino-African construction project, linking the continent to half a dozen submarine cables, including the Chinese PEACE cable, owned by China through subsidiaries of the large Hengtong Group<sup>26</sup>, which also links the Chinese base in Djibouti to Europe. Another example is China’s LOGINK platform, designed to facilitate transport and logistics by sharing information, which is now used in twenty major ports, including several operated by China.<sup>27</sup>

## ***EAIO as a natural extension of the domestic market***

What we are seeing is a development model that gives a central place to port infrastructures, linked to rail-based trade corridors, underpinned by large-scale data processing capabilities to fluidify flows. This model can be seen in East Africa, but the same logic of Chinese efforts can be found in other parts of the world, including Europe (the port of Piraeus and related trade corridors). In Africa, unlike Asia, China does not build high-speed lines, where competition between operators is much lower.

This is firstly because this model is in line with the history of national development, which has largely been shaped by ports overlooking China’s seas, and which continues to dominate the current Chinese leadership’s perception of economic development (central role of port complexes in the 2021 to 2025 five-year plan).

Secondly, the offer comes from the accumulated experience of Chinese companies, who were encouraged to internationalise at a time when their capacities were becoming surplus to requirements on the domestic market. This applies in particular to the rail, port and technology sectors, which have been financially and politically incentivised since the 1990s and Deng Xiaoping’s “going out policy” to turn to foreign markets – and these incentives have been partly taken up in the NRS framework. For example, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) lines built in Africa were modelled on the Chinese domestic network. China’s expertise in ports is also well established: 31

of the world's top 50 ports in terms of total cargo tonnage, and seven of the top ten container ports in terms of throughput, are located in China.

The development of EAIO infrastructures in turn directly serves the national industrial agenda, as they enable the growth of Chinese national champions to better compete with their rivals (this is particularly the case for Chinese oil companies, which are encouraged to eventually compete with the majors in the field), or to take advantage of large markets to stimulate in-house innovation, as described in the "Made in China 2025" plan, a programme putting forward a particularly aggressive strategy on high-tech markets, on which the regime now refrains from communicating.

### ***The leading extra-regional player in EAIO flow connectivity***<sup>28</sup>

China stands out for the scale of its presence, both horizontally (number of megaprojects) and vertically (presence across the entire construction chain). Chinese companies are involved in one third of the infrastructure contracts signed in Africa.<sup>29</sup> As a result, they are present on all of EAIO's major development corridors.<sup>30</sup> Other key players in EAIO include European countries, India, and increasingly Turkey and Iran, on the one hand, and the European Union and international institutions (World Bank, IMF) on the other. However, unlike China and its banks, traditional and emerging financiers,

as well as multilateral banks, do not have the same financial clout to position themselves in high-risk projects. As collateral, contractual obligations can be backed by resource access facilities (DRC), or debt-for-equity swaps, particularly for ports, when local authorities are unable to meet their debts (Kenyan Senate report on the Nairobi-Mombasa SGR and the Port of Mombasa).

The Chinese business model features a particularly integrated structure<sup>31</sup>, with contractual drawers and long-term commitments. For example, the construction of an SGR involves the use of locomotives, signalling and equipment, and monitoring systems. It also requires the implementation over several years of training programs, maintenance services and even the organisation of a management bureaucracy that is lacking in some countries.<sup>32</sup> Chinese companies are present and competitive in all these industrial and service segments. Contracts such as these, which are drawn up in principle, entail exclusivity for Chinese companies or subsidiaries of the same contracting company (e.g. CCCC with its subsidiary, the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), for port construction). Added to this is the complementary work carried out on technical and technological standards within international organisations, which reinforces the legitimacy and widespread dissemination of Chinese standards along these corridors, an aspect to which shall be returned later.

## Developing a Security Presence to Accompany Flows

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Alongside the growth of its economic interests in East Africa, China has shown itself ready to assume a more substantial security role. Clearly, it has been necessary to find ways of securing the infrastructures and Chinese personnel who build or operate them, in zones that are sometimes difficult or even in conflict (South Sudan, DRC). Although Chinese companies are still rarely targeted directly, they can fall victim to violence. In particular, oil and mining companies such as CNOOC and Sinopec face significant threats. In addition to the structural cooperation, they have set up with local authorities (training of security officers on the Nairobi-Mombasa train)<sup>33</sup>, Chinese companies have recourse to private Chinese protection companies such as DeWe, made up mainly of veterans of the People's Armed Police, who are generally unarmed<sup>34</sup>, and wholly or mainly owned by the Chinese regime.<sup>35</sup>

At inter-state level, the PRC has developed its security and military diplomacy: high-level military visits, training and exercises between military and police forces, conventional arms transfers (in first place in Sub-Saharan Africa, neck-and-neck with Russia, depending on the year), construction of military infrastructure (Tanzanian naval base in Dar es Salaam) and police infrastructure (Tanzania).

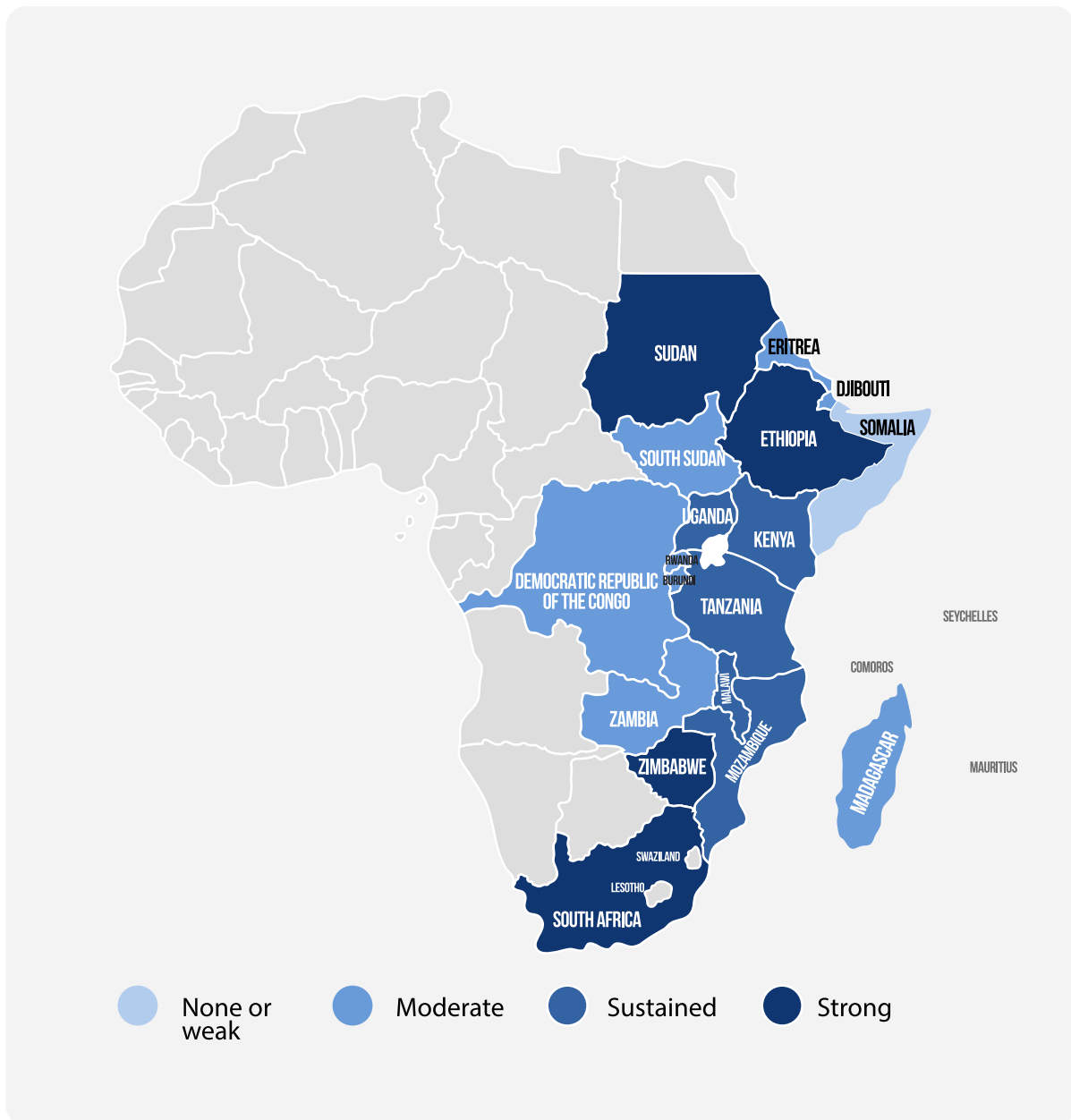
On a regional level, it is increasingly taking on a role in security matters. It now deals with this topic both with regional organisations

(pledging a 100 million US dollars contribution in 2015 to the creation of a permanent force at the African Union) and in fora created at its initiative, notably the "China-Africa Defense and Security Forum" launched in 2018. The evolution of topics addressed at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation also underlines this trend: after focusing on trade and investment (2000 to 2009) and then human exchanges (2009 to 2015), areas of cooperation now extend to security and governance. It also occasionally tries to take on the role of mediator in conflicts (South Sudan), with more than mixed success. It should be noted that each of these failed attempts concerned countries in which the PRC had oil or mineral interests.<sup>36</sup>

The maps below summarise the economic, political and security efforts of the PRC in the EAIO and highlight differences in intensity. In addition to differences in approach from one country to another, which would require a separate, comprehensive study to clarify and explain, it is clear that the countries that play the role of "hubs" in the flows, and which therefore provide the link between the Indian Ocean and the African hinterlands, concentrate a particularly high level of multidimensional efforts on the part of Chinese players. In "source" countries such as the DRC and Zambia, the range of influencing efforts deployed is clearly less comprehensive. This reinforces the thesis

underlying this article: one of the priorities of the Chinese authorities in EAIO is to occupy a strategic position in flow management, perhaps even before that of securing supply directly at source. Indeed, the dual (civil

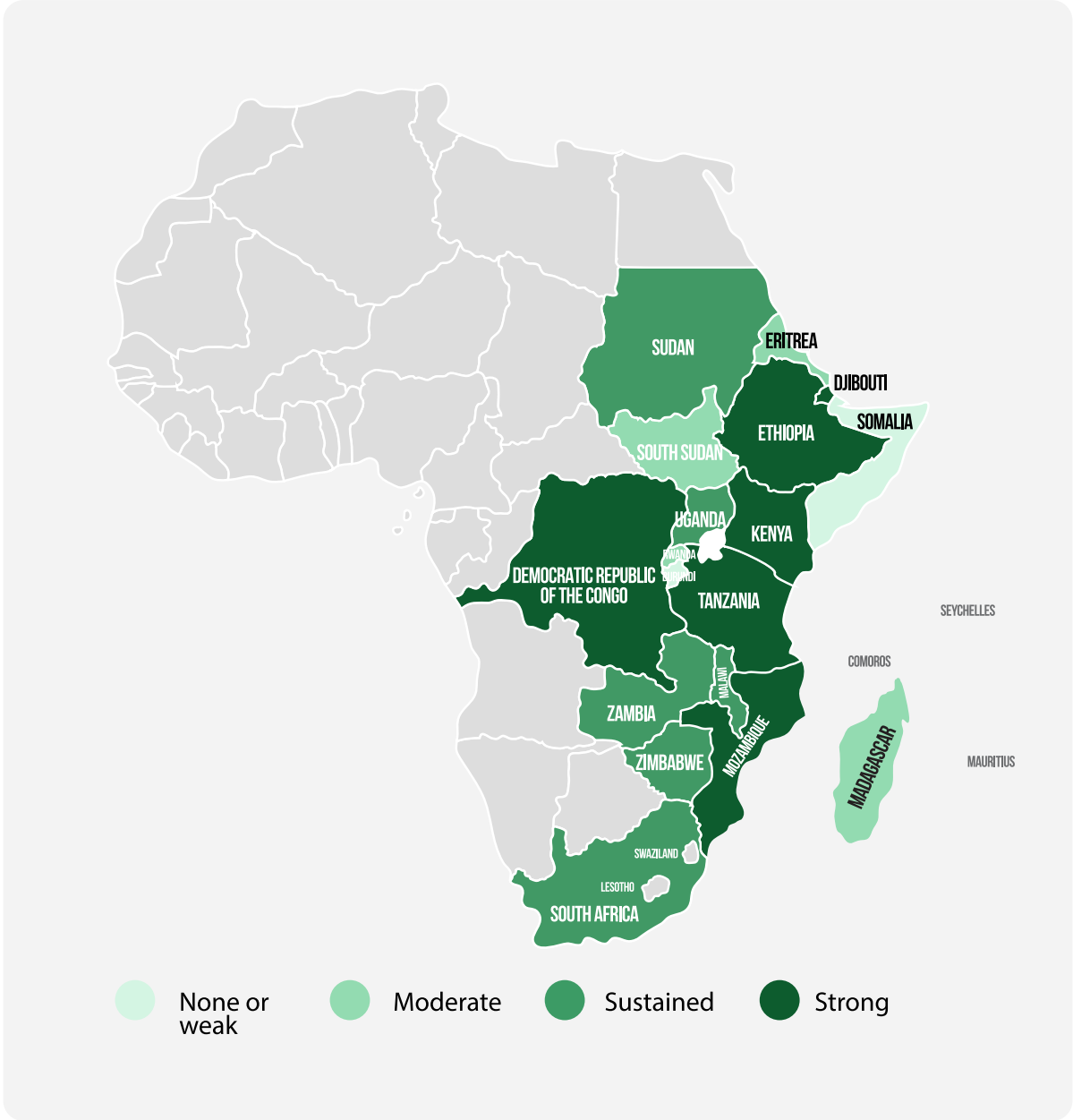
military) potential of partnerships with these hub countries gives the PRC a power that should not be overlooked, and which the paper will attempt to evaluate in the next sections.



## Political Presence

### Leverages and diplomatic efforts

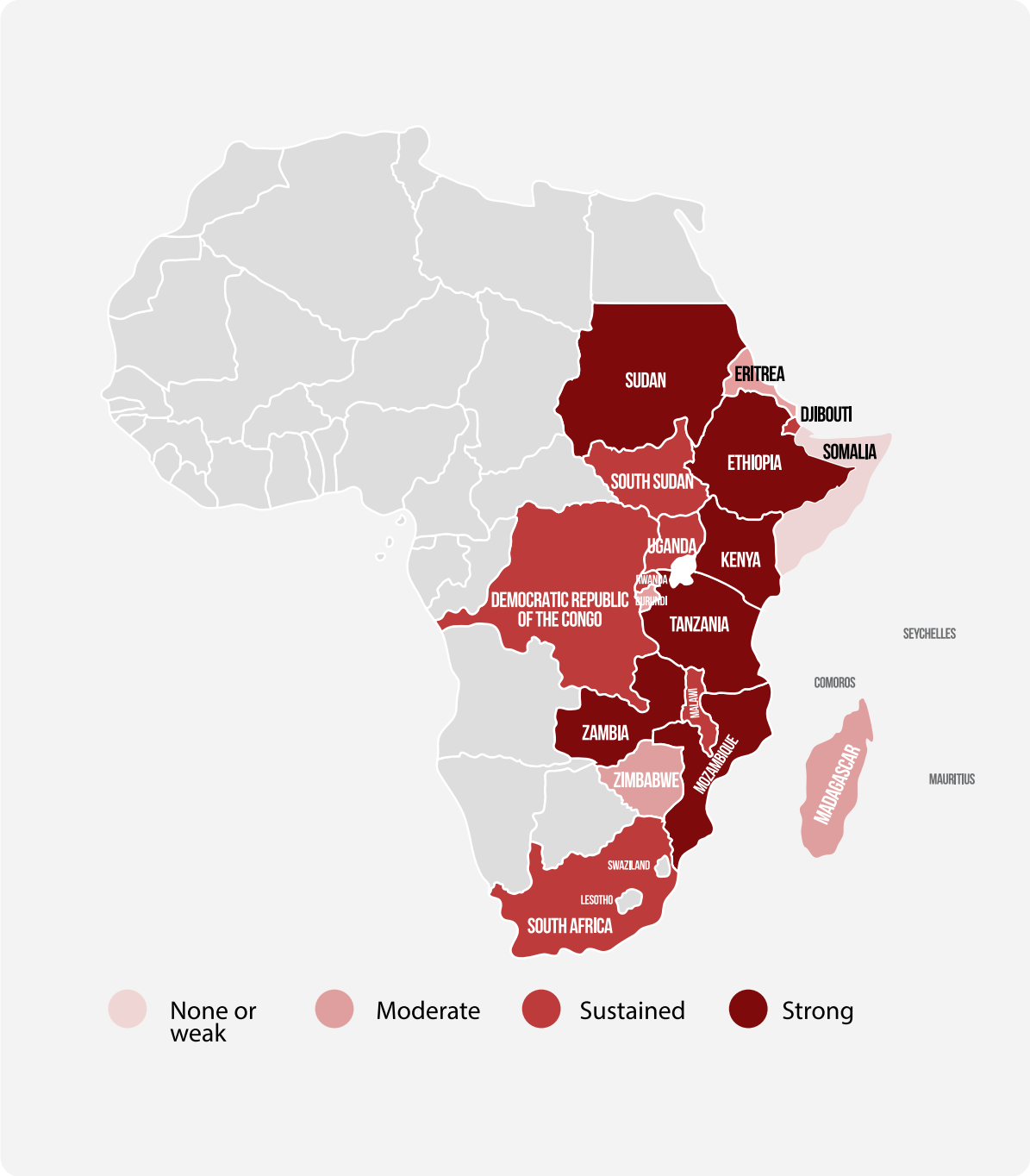
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### Economic presence

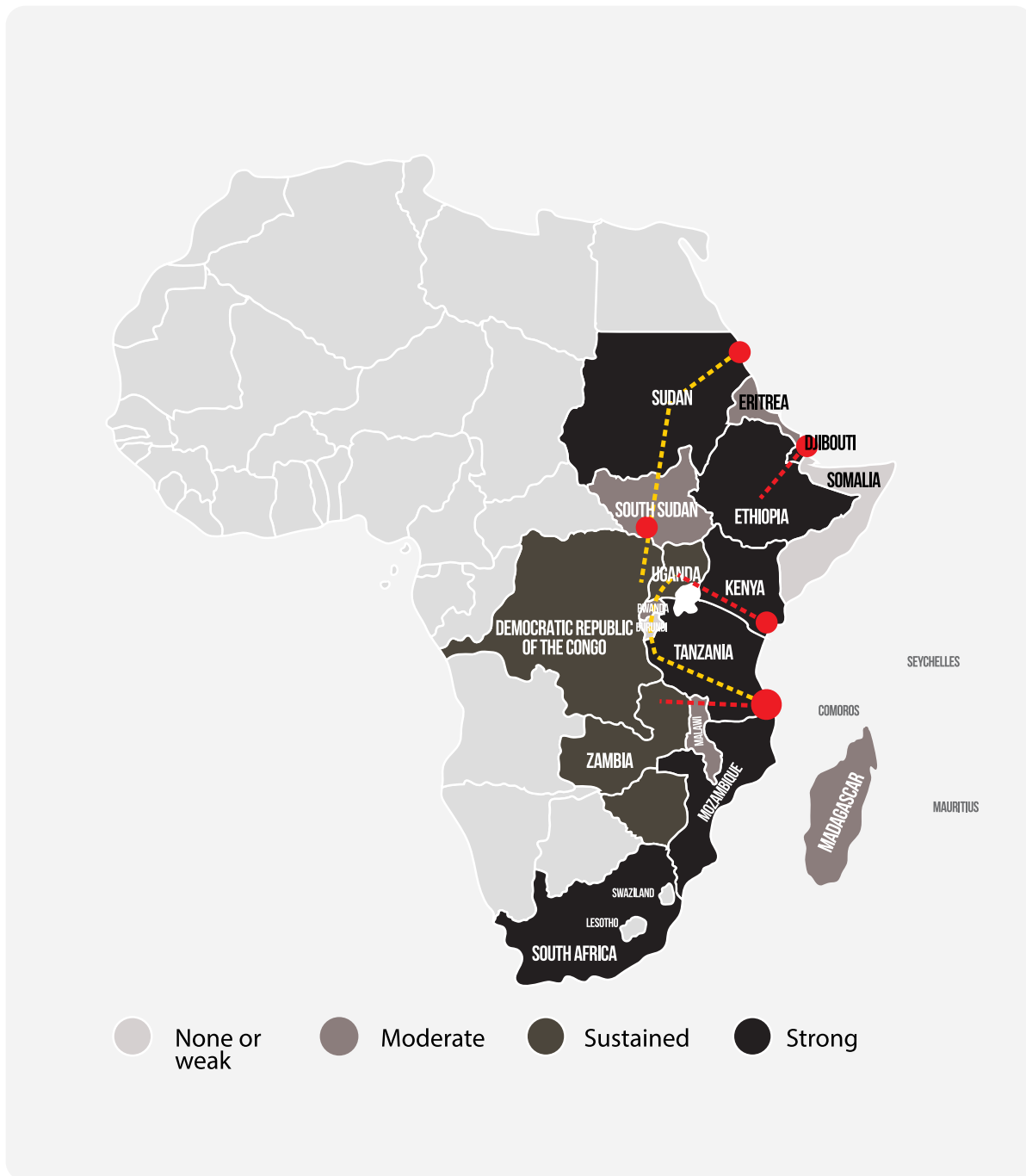
Financial, commercial and technological dependences to China

*Creation of the author with date from:<sup>38</sup>*



### Military and security presence Surveillance, training, arms and UN operations

Creation of the author with data from:<sup>39</sup>



**Political, economic and security presence of the PRC along the main development corridors**  
Synthesis of the previous maps



## What Power to Constrain Flows?

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Can its unique position on EAIO flows give the PRC tactical/strategic advantages in the event of a geopolitical crisis? And could it enable it to carry out operations to interdict or monopolize flows?

The sui generis mode of investment by the PRC in EAIO described above may give it direct control over certain flows. This would mean considering a hybrid mode of conflictuality, which calls for the mobilisation, in addition to conventional means, of non-conventional means, notably economic, and actions in the grey zone below the threshold of armed conflict. For example, China could use exports of strategic minerals as a geopolitical weapon, as was the case following incidents with Japan around the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands in 2010: Beijing took advantage of its dominant status in this market to decide on a one-year moratorium on rare earths, which first penalised Japan and then destabilised all global production chains. Furthermore, in ports where Chinese entities operate, they have operational control and the means to accept or refuse calls, or even decide to allocate commercial space for military purposes<sup>37</sup>, should the Chinese authorities so order. Few ports are involved, but they are central to international trade flows: Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and several ports in Egypt along the Suez Canal.

In addition to the tactical value of these isolated actions – whose damaging power is far from anecdotal – it is the “network” effect

of these infrastructures that could prove decisive, and present strategic gains in the event of confrontation or war.

### ***Horizontal climbing: the strategic role of East African passages***

In the context of an open crisis with the United States in the Asia-Pacific region (the most likely scenario for a geopolitical crisis involving China), the emergence of secondary theatres of direct or indirect confrontation cannot be ruled out, particularly in areas where the belligerents are in contact with each other outside the immediate vicinity, as in the Red Sea, where Chinese and American forces are located in close proximity via their respective bases in Djibouti. The spread of conflict to other geographical areas seems all the more likely as the scenarios envisaged for Sino-American conflicts emphasise a long conflict: according to a study (2023) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), while the United States would emerge victorious from an armed confrontation around Taiwan in 22 out of 24 cases, this would only be a first battle that would lead to a long war, the outcome of which is uncertain – not least because of China’s vastly superior renewal capacity (19 shipyards for Beijing versus 2 for Washington).<sup>38</sup>

The need for PLAN to be able to conduct joint operations to gain control over “important sea areas” and “important strategic passages” is mentioned in the 2020 Science of Military

Strategy. In the event of conflict, the passages of East Africa could be affected: the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a major choke point on the world's energy routes, could have disruptive effects on the supply of hydrocarbons to the United States and its European allies. Additional control of the Mozambique Channel would deprive Washington of an alternative route (that of bypassing Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, which is already much longer and more costly). In a protracted armed conflict, the disruption of supplies can play a decisive role, contributing to a strategy of attrition among armies and populations.

Their control could be useful as a counter-blackmail measure in the event of a blockade of the Strait of Malacca by the USA<sup>39</sup>, through which 80 per cent of Chinese trade flows and a large proportion of oil and other raw material imports transit.<sup>40</sup> Some experts go so far as to assert that the *raison d'être* of the Djibouti base is precisely to be able to impose this counter-blackmail, even if this remains in a purely dissuasive perspective.<sup>41</sup> A blockade could also restrict the navigation of the "sixth fleet", the US Navy's operational unit operating in the Mediterranean, which would then be unable to reach the Indian Ocean quickly. It is also conceivable that Beijing would prevent access to the port of Djibouti, which is critical to the operations of the nearby US base at Camp Lemonier.

However, the PLA's projection and interdiction capabilities are not yet sufficient for such operations. Although the PRC is modernising its navy at an extremely rapid pace (in the space of ten years, it has become the second-largest naval power in terms of tonnage; it aims to have a fourth aircraft carrier by 2027), it lacks combat experience, is lacking

in several vital areas (maritime logistics)<sup>42</sup> and remains far outclassed by the United States, particularly in terms of technology.<sup>43</sup> What's more, in times of confrontation, the PRC could not afford to deprive the main Pacific theatre of some of its power, given the balance of power between the American and Chinese armies. The operations carried out from the Djibouti base are rather basic (evacuation of nationals, counter-piracy, humanitarian missions) and evidence suggesting more offensive operations in the region has so far been clear.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, while Chinese facilities in many port terminals are of dual interest and theoretically provide the PLAN with an interesting elongation network, China's room for maneuver in mobilizing these various ports in the event of a confrontation is difficult to assess.<sup>45</sup> The latter cannot compete with the depth of military access, the number and size of bases (Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia), and the network of alliances of the United States in the region<sup>46</sup>, which remains the dominant security power in the Indian Ocean. European countries also benefit from a significant politico-military footprint, such as France, which has sovereignty forces on Réunion.

In addition, these two passages are characterised by a dense and complex interplay of players, which limits the PLAN's tactical depth. Power competition takes place between a number of militarily present players (USA, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, PRC, France, Japan, Italy). These two passages are also extremely sensitive due to their natural configuration, their security fragility (warring riparian countries, piracy, jihadist terrorism) and governance (in the case of

the Mozambique Channel), as well as the covetousness of their recently discovered resources (liquefied gas in Mozambique). India is increasingly present in the Mozambique Channel, both in terms of naval transits and infrastructure investments, to compete with and contain the growing influence of China.

Experts argue that complementing this network with other military bases in strategically positioned territories would allow China to exercise effective control over East African passages, notably a base in the Comoros or Eritrea<sup>47</sup>; relations between Beijing and Moroni are excellent (military training; construction of a deep-water port by a Chinese state-owned enterprise), and Eritrea has a long tradition of granting military location rights. Russia, which once had a base there, is currently negotiating to re-establish itself. However, this view is not unanimous: some argue that China stands to gain more from deepening its network of dual facilities than from establishing new military bases, which would not fundamentally change the balance of power, but would alter the American perception of its objectives and thus exacerbate strategic rivalry.<sup>48</sup> Some authors go so far as to consider that its “outposts” and supply networks could turn into handicaps, since China is much more vulnerable along the main arteries of the Indian Ocean than in the Western Pacific.<sup>49</sup>

All in all, it seems that ambitions for interdiction operations in EAIO’s strategic passages, if any, are immediately running up against the backdrop of China’s projection capabilities and need to be re-evaluated on a longer-term prospective basis. It is clear, however, that the infrastructure network already in place is complicating the

operational environment in the Indian Ocean and is likely to create uncertainty over certain supply flows in the event of a crisis.

### ***Further into the indirect strategy (or hybridity)***

The “theory of the external frontier”, a concept coined by Mao, is often evoked by Chinese Africanists in an abstract way in narrative warfare, not excluding a strategic dimension a priori: this consists in engaging the adversary, attacking and harassing him on several fronts to disperse him, so that he loses his hold on the main theatre.<sup>50</sup> This includes hitting the enemy where it is weakest, and Africa is perceived as the weakest link in American strategy.<sup>51</sup> China’s presence in EAIO’s critical infrastructures must therefore be seen as one of the driving forces behind the creation of ecosystems that are globally favourable, even permissive, to the detriment of the United States and the West as a whole.

Firstly, because the critical infrastructures in which Beijing invests are highly transformational<sup>52</sup> on host economies and societies, both on a continental and national scale. Railways, for example, are vectors of unity, economic development and national and regional integration, while at the same time providing extensive coverage of the country.<sup>53</sup> Some systems can also be used in a wide range of fields: for example, China’s BeiDou satellite system, which has broad applications in public safety, agriculture, transport and other areas.

This contribution to the structuring of societies is not neutral since the characteristics of the Chinese economic and

political model are disseminated through them. Thus, through the creation of a platform of connected ports, China not only intends to win markets, it is proposing to join a new world maritime order.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the adoption of its technological solutions by markets as dynamic as the EAIO gives it weight in international bodies regulating cyberspace (United Nations International Telecommunication Union), and thus contributes to the gradual construction of its technological domination.<sup>55</sup> The result is the establishment of “integrated systems of Chinese presence”<sup>56</sup>, of which industrial parks are the most acute expression. Paths of dependence are then established, and it becomes rational to persist in these systems, as it proves economically, bureaucratically and normatively costly to leave them.

Technological dependence on the PRC is so strong that some authors have argued that, in the event of Sino-American decoupling, African countries would be forced to choose the PRC because of its technological dependence.<sup>57</sup> This dependence has been theorised in the PRC through the concept of “double circulation”, which aims on the one hand to integrate critical value chains and reduce China’s vulnerability to external pressures, and on the other hand to make the outside world dependent on the Chinese economy for a number of advanced

technologies, such as artificial intelligence and next-generation telecommunications. Technological dependence can become intrinsically political, especially when the former has a strong potential for espionage or even military use (e.g. the scandal of the African Union headquarters being bugged by China).<sup>58</sup>

As a result, this approach comes under what Jean-Pierre Cabestan theorises as a “strategy of encirclement of the North by the South”: the aim is to influence the balance of power with the United States by relying on the countries of the South, either by rallying them to the Chinese cause, or by neutralizing them. The interweaving of “elite capture”<sup>59</sup>, debts and economic and technological dependencies, could “silence opposition in diplomatic or security matters”<sup>60</sup>, which would become acutely apparent in the event of a geopolitical crisis. These are not alliances in the traditional sense of the term, a concept to which PRC diplomacy has never adhered since its advent, and which is now rejected even more clearly than its predecessors by Xi.<sup>61</sup> Rather, it is a form of restructuring security architectures in which economic and technological partnerships take precedence, and which could, in the future, gradually extend to military and security partnerships.<sup>62</sup> Developing and emerging countries are precisely the focus of this strategy.

## Conclusion and Perspectives

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China's presence in Africa's critical infrastructure is giving rise to growing discontent and concern, as it presents risks in terms of security and espionage, non-compliance with international social and human rights standards, and unprofitability of the works (rail line between Addis Ababa and Djibouti). The Chinese method is also accused of not benefiting local populations, notably because the systematic awarding of projects to Chinese companies and their personnel hampers the transfer of know-how and the industrialisation of recipient countries. As Thierry Payrault, French sinologist and socio-economist, Emeritus Research Director, regularly demonstrates with figures, China in Africa is a financier, a service provider, but not an investor. While the hypothesis of a "debt trap", i.e. that the Chinese authorities would like to see payment defaults in order to strengthen their control, has been refuted, it cannot be denied that the debts owed by Chinese banks accentuate the asymmetrical nature of bilateral relations. Local populations have voiced their discontent at what is perceived as a loss of sovereignty (e.g. miners' demonstrations in the DRC).

Beyond these criticisms, this study highlights the instrumentalization of the EAIO states in China's grand strategy to achieve primacy in its rivalry with the USA. This confers an eminently geopolitical dimension on any decision to award megaprojects, and sets in motion issues of sovereignty, particularly in economic, technological, industrial and

resource terms. EAIO governments are far from ignoring these issues, and are deploying a variety of strategies in response (which would merit a separate study): some are taking advantage of this competition to improve the quality of the projects on offer or drive down their prices ("playing the bidding game"); others are putting the need to diversify partners at the forefront to protect their independence (e.g. Uganda); some are favouring African solutions and emphasising the need to speed up industrialisation and up-scale exports for more balanced trade (Uganda again). Relations with the EAIO countries are likely to continue to be marked by a certain ambiguity, as illustrated by the criticism of Kenyan President William Ruto, who disapproved the Chinese loans contracted by his predecessor but tried to obtain a new loan of 1 billion from Beijing to finalise works during a visit to Beijing at the end of 2023.

However, power competition cannot be the main structuring factor in EAIO. For example, a magnifying glass effect on Chinese infrastructures can produce the optical effect of an order of material and immaterial flows that would be entirely Sino-centric or even "Sino-fugal": Chinese infrastructure projects are often based on regional integration projects designed by the states of the region (e.g. the SGR Tanzania-Kenya-Uganda-Burundi-Rwanda railway project) or modernise old routes, sometimes dating back to colonial times (Djibouti-Ethiopia line).

As the South African president said at the last BRICS summit, with the Chinese president posing on his right in the official photograph, Africa refuses to be the stage for “competition between world powers”. Today, this slogan seems largely performative, but it does have the advantage of inviting us to decentralise their gaze and not to obscure endogenous structuring dynamics, whether local, national or regional.

Moreover, the Chinese influence on infrastructure needs to be put into perspective in view of what appears to be a decline in Chinese participation, both in absolute and relative terms: the PRC has been much more selective in its choice of projects since 2016, a year marked by the first decline in Chinese investment in Africa, amplified by the pandemic. The PRC is now facing a multi-dimensional economic crisis that suggests the end of a cycle of efforts in major EAIO infrastructures<sup>63</sup>, the end of which could be amplified by the experience of governments that are now scalded by partnerships with the PRC, several of which

have been marred by setbacks (e.g. the failing hydraulic dams in Uganda). At the same time, many of the projects that attracted Chinese presence or operations, generally for five or six years before being managed by local administrations, have either come to an end or are about to do so.

Ultimately, what this study highlights is that observers of power competition must continue to evolve our way of monitoring the deployment of China’s presence in Africa, in the sense that Beijing will be led to distinguish itself in the future less by its massive, visible infrastructure megaprojects, than by the gradual rise of an even more structuring, even transformative influence: normative, technological and global. This Chinese ambition remains deeply rooted in geopolitical realities, in that it continues to prioritise regions of the world such as the EAIO that not only play a role in global strategic competition (mastery of the high-tech value chain) but are also zones of confrontation or even potential theatres of confrontation with the United States (strategic passages).

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