

The Madaraka Express Railway

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Last August, my family and I travelled from Mombasa to Nairobi on the new Madaraka Express railway line. It was the talk of Kenya. We were treating it like the latest ride in an amusement park. The journey length is nothing noteworthy; it is neither a Trans-Siberian style marathon track nor a world-famous Japanese bullet train, a miracle in long-distance travel. The train's interior is equally nondescript; if it wasn't for the trilingual signs and announcements from the PA systems, the train wouldn't have been out of place running the circuit between Kings Cross and Edinburgh Waverly. Yet, the buzz around the project was extraordinary. And, although it would not be obvious to the casual observer or the back-packer just passing through, it seems the attention was warranted. The new railway supposedly cut the rail journey time by more than half. The potential for change in such a feat is huge; economically, optimistic analysts foresee a windfall. Access to the sea for cities located in the interior was one thing; shorter journey times for Kenya's business elite was another. And, if future objectives are met, the port of Mombasa may well become the launching point for landlocked East Africa's tradeable goods. The Madaraka Express, completed 18 months ahead of schedule, carries very important cargo indeed. Its freighters are brimming with heady East African optimism.

Clearly there is money to be made from this project. It is predicted that Kenya will retain a huge amount of the profits. However, what must not be forgotten is that it is not just Kenya that stands to gain from this endeavour. The cost of this new line is being funded largely by Chinese State Banks, many of which, like the China Development Bank, have made a habit of funding similar projects. 80 percent of the cost is being paid for with capital provided by a concessionary loan repayable over the next forty years – following a ten-year period of grace. And China, as the scope of her investment suggests, stands to gain from the creation of this railway. Eventually, the intention is to have the line reach as far as Kisangani in the DRC, Juba in South Sudan and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. All of which are important for China's East African trade; as raw materials flow out of Mombasa, goods and services will hopefully flow in. The propaganda of China's economic rivals, the American government, would have us believe that the Madaraka Express is a part of something much more nefarious. The Sino-American rivalry has given the international public a variety of increasingly entertaining examples of how any series of events can be bent to fit a manufactured truth. The competing narratives surrounding Chinese investment abroad is no different. The PRC would have us believe, and many among us do, that they are committed to an international policy of non-intervention. A mutual gain, a share of the spoils, an equal partnership, is this how we should consider the Madaraka line?

China certainly stands to gain economically from this project. Directly, it will affect the speed, cost and confidence involved in trade between it and Africa. Indirectly, it may have even larger ramifications on China's trade internationally. It is hoped that the early completion of the Nairobi to Mombasa project will facilitate something of a bounce back for China's image as an investing partner. Following the embarrassing failure to act on the bid to construct Poland's A2 highway – when engineers from the Chinese Overseas Engineering Group (COVEC): failed to consider various EU specific conditions; grossly underestimated the scope of the project; and made miscalculations on certain particularities, such as the rising cost of fuel – China's image as a partner for infrastructural improvement needed a positive realignment. This is especially true, when one considers the scope of the PRC's ambitions abroad. The network of rail that is intended for East Africa is a part of a bigger and broader project currently put in place by the Chinese government. The Belt and Road initiative is a huge project promoting infrastructural construction throughout Europe, Asia and Africa. The aim, it seems, is to modernise the trading routes that comprise the Silk Road. Few among us are so naïve as to consider any internationally scaled investment altruistic. Some commentators, however, consider

the reading of Belt and Road as a purely economic move to expand Gross Domestic Product equally as naïve.

Is the Madaraka line the latest move in a play to place a check on the king of global hegemony, the USA? Commentators, the most vocal of which hail from the United States, have been quick to condemn the Belt and Road initiative. They have sought to reframe the project as a thinly veiled attempt to increase the PRC's sphere of influence. Whilst Kenya's statesmen celebrate the new transport link – recently re-elected president Uhuru Kenyatta recently rode the line down to Mombasa in a hugely symbolic celebration of the project – others have voiced concerns about potential infringements on national sovereignty. In May of last year, the Telegraph reported on India's non-participation in the Belt and Road project.¹ The Indian government backed out of China's initiative over fears that it was a move to shape leverage for the Communist government in Indian politics. Varied and often conflicting voices emerge in the debate over what Chinese investment means for its business partners. Certainly, any talk of the Madaraka railway being a power play for influence in East Africa is omitted from the BBC's article announcing the completion of the Nairobi to Mombasa line.² The furthest the BBC goes in describing the relationship is as a 'growing link' between the two countries and perhaps the lack of clarity with which motivations are being considered makes it pragmatic to continue describing it so.

What is clear is that the developing world will continue to be embroiled in the competition for global hegemony. And in Kenya the race to the top seems to be heating up. In August of last year, the Kenyan government announced that Bechtel, an American firm, had won the bid to construct its first high-speed motorway. It too will run the Nairobi/Mombasa route. The motorway and railway, with their common destination and contrasting means of getting there, present an interesting metaphor for Sino-American ambition in Africa. At this moment in time Kenya is just one of the many battlegrounds chosen for this conflict. How her government should play this role is frustratingly unclear. Should Kenyans avoid looking a gift horse in the mouth only to find somewhere down the line that the horse and its handlers had yoked them to their cause? Should they, if they could, go back and reject Chinese assistance, like the Indians? How would Kenyans feel were they to watch their neighbours modernise without them? The answers are as stubbornly unclear as China's motivations. If it comes down to a question of sovereignty and poverty or wealth without agency, Kenyans must choose how they would rather their country was defined. For now, Kenya must wait and see whether this partnership plays out in their favour.

¹ Connor, N., 'Chinese Media Warn India over Belt and Road Project' (Last accessed: 14/01/2018) URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/15/chinese-media-warn-india-belt-road-project/>

² Anonymous., 'Kenya opens Nairobi-Mombasa Madaraka Express Railway' (Last accessed 14/01/2018) URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-40092600>