

# ***China's Belt and Road Initiative: Navigating a geopolitical landscape impacted by COVID-19***

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08 January 2021

## **Abstract**

*With the world continuing to navigate the effects of the worst pandemic in 100 years, foreign policy scholars and practitioners have sought to understand whether or not COVID-19 is bringing a completely new set of dynamics to global politics. This paper seeks to unpack some of the geopolitical dynamics accelerated by the pandemic, particularly the role of China and its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The paper analyses the broader geopolitical ramifications of COVID-19 and its dynamics in different countries and regions, with specific focus on how the pandemic has shaped relations and perceptions of China. It then looks into how China is repositioning itself in the midst of the pandemic, including how the ongoing implementation of the BRI has been affected. The paper, based in part on the author's previous publications on the BRI and different current affairs reports on the pandemic, argues that despite the immediate negative effects of COVID-19, key domestic and global drivers of the BRI remain as relevant during the pandemic as they were prior to the onset of COVID-19. This means that while lockdowns have had a negative impact on some of the BRI projects, China is likely to see the BRI as even more important in navigating a post-pandemic global order. The paper concludes by offering ideas and recommendations on how African countries in particular could capitalise on the BRI to invest in projects that enhance the resilience of national and regional economies and value chains.*

## 1. Introduction

With the world continuing to navigate and confront the effects of the worst pandemic in 100 years, foreign policy scholars and practitioners have sought to understand whether COVID-19 is bringing to the fore new dynamics in global politics. What is certain though is that the pandemic has thus far acted as a catalyst, accelerating trends that were underway prior to COVID-19, especially in the relationship between China and the United States (US). This has significant geopolitical and economic ramifications for the global order. The relationship will shape the global environment in which China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is implemented throughout the world.

This paper seeks to unpack some of the geopolitical dynamics accelerated by the pandemic, particularly the role of China and its flagship BRI. It analyses the broader geopolitical ramifications of COVID-19 and the dynamics generated in different countries and regions, particularly the way in which the pandemic has shaped relations and perceptions of China. It then looks into how China is repositioning itself in the midst of the pandemic, including how the ongoing implementation of the BRI has been affected. Drawing from existing work by the author and recent analyses on the BRI, it incorporates various engagements from the 2020 China-Africa Think Tanks Forum, BRICS Academic and Civil Society Forums, and the Africa Think Tanks Forum. In each of these arenas, scholars and practitioners in the global South, and beyond, took a keen interest in the BRI and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).

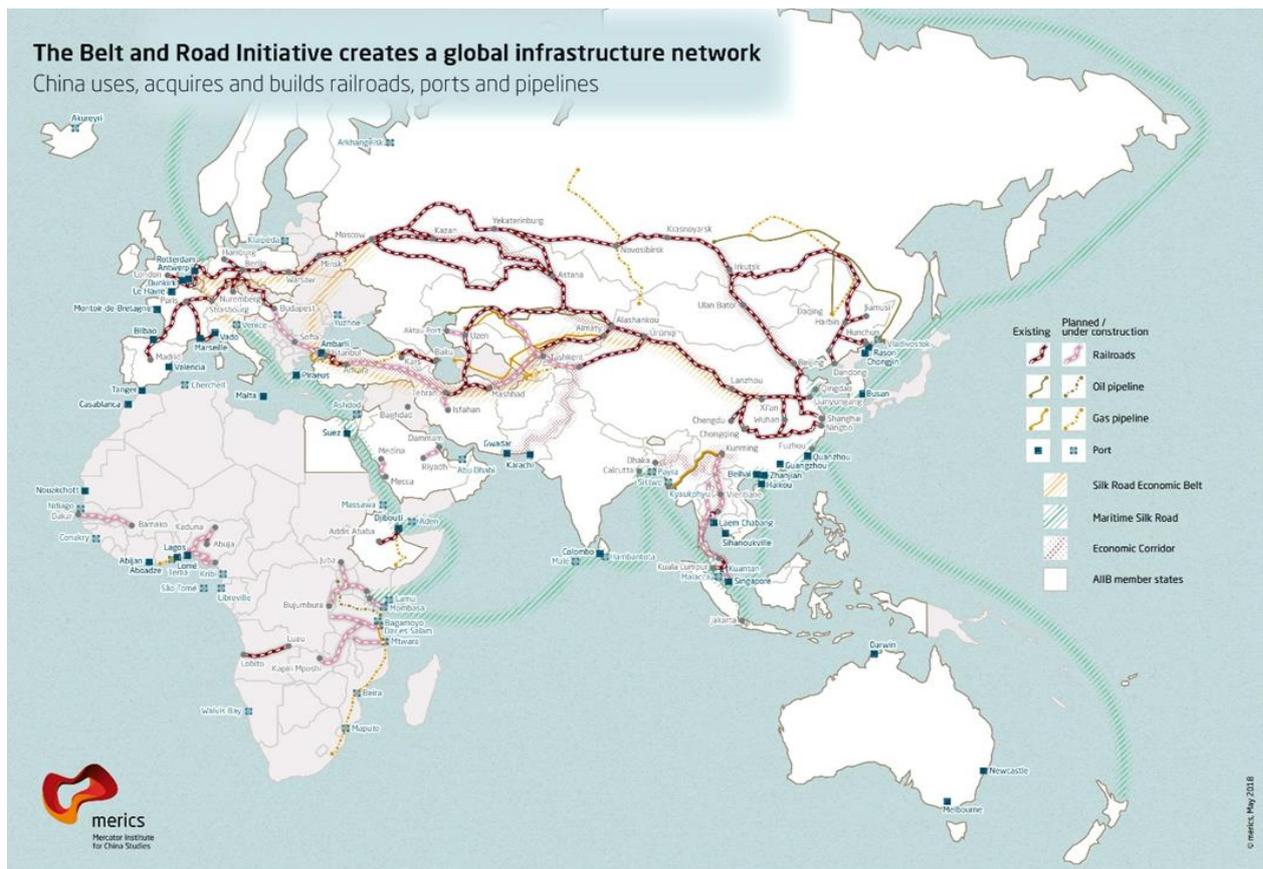
The paper puts forward ideas and recommendations on how African countries in particular could capitalise on the BRI to invest in projects that enhance the resilience of national and regional economies and value chains. Despite the immediate negative effects of the pandemic, it is argued that the key domestic and global drivers of the BRI remain as relevant during the pandemic as they were prior to the onset of COVID-19. This means that while lockdowns have had a negative impact on some of the BRI projects, China is likely to see the BRI as even more important in navigating a post-pandemic global order, especially an order that is seeing some of China's partners either taking an openly hostile position or a lukewarm attitude towards China.

The impact of the BRI will not be felt in a uniform manner. Some stakeholders will see the opportunities presented by a new injection of development finance, particularly one targeted towards large-scale infrastructure projects. Other stakeholders will see opportunities as the Chinese market continues to open up, and some will identify opportunities for much sought-after foreign direct investment. However, it is important to acknowledge that some stakeholders and interest groups will see a threat to their local industries, as companies that have driven China's infrastructure and manufacturing success look for opportunities presented along the continental belt and maritime road.

This places an important responsibility on negotiators to conclude deals in the coming years that are of mutual benefit, factoring in how these may play out in domestic and regional political environments. This necessitates a broader engagement strategy from China, one which seeks to work not only with its government counterparts, but also with non-state actors in respective societies. This would facilitate to get broader buy-in, and the building of consensus on the necessity of certain projects for national and regional development. The BRI thus has the potential to unleash another, even more significant wave of China's earlier 'Going Out' strategy, which saw the country more systematically supporting Chinese companies to invest abroad (Mthembu, 2020a: 146).

Following its launch in 2013, commentators have sought to compare China's BRI to the Marshall Plan, also known as the European Recovery Programme. This United States (US)led programme provided much-needed aid to Europe in the aftermath of the devastation of World War II (George C. Marshall Foundation, 2020). Now that the world is in the midst of a truly global war against an invisible enemy in the form of COVID-19, global powers find themselves under pressure to rebuild or create a new economic and political order in a changing landscape. The BRI remains the most ambitious and universal of initiatives amongst the great powers, and its importance will likely be accentuated as the international community attempts to move beyond existing lockdowns and finds itself in need of new development paths and resources. The BRI may thus act as an important economic stimulus for beneficiary countries, but will simultaneously face challenges from an increasingly confrontational US (Bhaya, 2020).

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs says that about 20 per cent of projects under China's ambitious BRI to link Asia, Europe and beyond have been 'seriously affected' by the coronavirus pandemic as the economic impact of COVID-19 takes a toll on countries across the world. Wang Xiaolong, Director-General of the Ministry's International Economic Affairs Department, said at a news briefing in Beijing (Al Jazeera, 2020). that a Ministry survey found that about 40 per cent of projects have seen little adverse impact, and another 30-40 per cent have been somewhat affected. The impact of the Pandemic is also evident in the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-year Plan of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which does not put any explicit GDP targets for the country. This underscores the reality that the world is entering into an uncertain period, making it difficult to set concrete GDP growth targets as China seeks to navigate a changing global landscape. Instead, the country puts greater emphasis on the quality of growth, using terms such as 'green growth', while also emphasising the importance of 'innovation' and a 'dual economy' as the country moves towards greater efforts to unlock the potential of the domestic market in its development model (Guan, 2020).



The One Belt One Road network. (Map courtesy of the [Mercator Institute for China Studies](https://www.merics.org/))

Source: Nantulya, 2019

## 2. A regional overview of responses to COVID-19

Since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), the epicentre of the disease quickly shifted away from China and Southeast Asia as those regions implemented a range of measures - including lockdowns, mass testing, isolation, quarantine, social distancing, and better hygiene – which yielded results. This changed the narrative of Wuhan being the epicentre towards one of China increasingly playing a supportive role through solidarity and material support to countries in the global North and South. It is important to note that, in a changing geopolitical environment, many of the best practices in combatting COVID-19 are found in Southeast Asia. China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have shown a high level of efficiency and an ability to mobilise different parts of society to enforce compliance with various new COVID-19-related measures. Countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea have also received high acclaim, even as they continue to remain vigilant to minimise the threats posed by second or subsequent waves of infections. Indeed, the manner in which this important region of the world has responded shows the resilience and discipline underpinning some of the social, economic, and political structures in some of these societies, and

presents valuable lessons for other regions of the world. The global pandemic has also revealed the potential future role of this region as a growing centre of knowledge, economics, and politics. The growing number of infections in other parts of Asia such as India, however, have become a concern even though the death rates remain relatively low when compared to the number of new cases. This is causing scientists to search for answers to the question of why countries with conditions that make social distancing difficult are not experiencing the predicted high number of fatalities (Biswas, 2020).

In Europe, the coronavirus has also had a significant impact and tested European solidarity in addressing the health crisis, especially given that health remains the responsibility of national governments, rather than being addressed at European Union (EU) level. Europe has moved beyond the worst parts of the first wave of the pandemic and some countries such as Italy and Spain were heavily affected both by initial and second waves of COVID-19 infections. Europe is now faced with the matter of implementing an ambitious recovery plan under the coordination of Germany, which currently holds the rotating European Council Presidency. European leaders also find themselves in the challenging position of having to balance relations and interests with countries such as the US, China, and Russia.

The US response compares unfavourably to other countries that reached their peak number of cases earlier. The US is still grappling with an ever-growing number of new cases as unemployment numbers and COVID-19 related deaths continue to remain a worrying factor in relation to the divisive election of November 2020 and the leadership vacuum created by President Trump's refusal to concede to former Vice President Joe Biden. The US response to COVID-19 has also not been helped by growing social tension and unrest. This was sparked by the police the killing of unarmed black civilians, which resulted in mass countrywide protests in solidarity with George Floyd, and others like him, under the banner of Black Lives Matter. Efforts to re-open the world's largest economy are, however, being constrained by the high numbers of new cases and COVID-19 related deaths, especially given the recent increase in such numbers, which have surpassed 100 000 daily infections, causing states to re-impose restrictive measures (Wentzel, 2020). Growing efforts by the world's military superpower to dismantle or reshape existing multilateral structures such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have continued to put into question years of US leadership on multilateralism while creating a leadership vacuum in the geopolitical landscape. Given the November 2020 Biden victory, which at time of writing still needs to be officially confirmed, observers will be interested in Biden's ability to reverse some of the unilateralism that prevailed under Trump.

South and Central America have also added to the growing number of hotspots for new infections, exemplified by the cases of Brazil and Mexico. Colombia, Argentina, and Peru have also had notable

outbreaks (Horton, 2020). Brazil's response has certainly not been helped by President Jair Bolsonaro, who, from the beginning, has not taken the threat of COVID-19 seriously, often referring to it as a small flu. He himself eventually tested positive for COVID-19 (Al Jazeera, 2020a), following weeks of defying the regulations of his own Health Ministers and State Governors by attending protests against lockdown measures without a mask. for COVID-19 (Al Jazeera, 2020a)

Africa has not been hit as hard as other regions in terms of the health crisis. However, it is feeling the economic impact of the pandemic as economic activity mostly ground to a halt and supply chains were impacted in a region in which at least six or seven of its economies were amongst the fastest growing in the world in the past two decades. On a vast continent such as Africa, cases are also concentrated in a few but important countries such as South Africa, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Ghana, and Nigeria (AllAfrica, 2020). Unlike in Europe, African countries have, from the beginning, sought to coordinate efforts to source much-needed medical equipment and supplies in order to prevent smaller African countries from being cut out of supply lines if countries were to compete directly. COVID-19 has also exposed the region's vulnerabilities in global value chains, prompting efforts to bolster resilience through the creation of regional value chains. It is in this context that the geopolitics of the novel coronavirus are playing out, as the pandemic continues.

### **3. Understanding the key drivers of China's Belt and Road Initiative**

Despite the immediate challenges caused by COVID-19, China's BRI has strong internal and external drivers, which bode well in the changing global landscape despite the fact that the BRI's continued implementation has been affected in the short term. One of China's central domestic objectives is to address the country's deepening regional disparity as the economy continues to modernise. China thus hopes to link its underdeveloped hinterland in the west of the county to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and other centres along the various transnational infrastructure projects. The government also hopes the initiative will help address the country's chronic excess capacity. Rather than dumping excess products in global markets, the initiative is linked with an effort to migrate its surplus factories (Cai, 2017), which may bode well for countries seeking to attract additional investment, especially in manufacturing.

While COVID-19 has had an impact on 2020, there is general acknowledgement that the BRI is a decades-long one, very much in the mould of China's long-term planning and implementation processes. Chinese bankers will continue to play a key role in determining the success of the BRI, especially since they will have to re-assess the risks and opportunities associated with the BRI in a

COVID-19 landscape. While in support of the initiative, some bankers have expressed their reservations about financing sometimes risky projects in territories they are not always familiar with (Mthembu, 2020a: 143). However, Chinese bankers have arguably been generally less risk averse than their counterparts in the global North, and their ability to navigate a complex external environment affected by COVID-19 will determine the speed at which the BRI is able to move. China's ambitious BRI is set to cost approximately \$1 trillion, with the aim of improving the connectivity between China, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa in a process closely linked with the domestic changes in the Chinese economy (Mthembu, 2020a: 143).

While facing a setback in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19, China's economy is likely to continue to transform as the country works towards the industrial and technological targets set in its 'Made in China 2025' strategy. This strategy is aimed at ensuring that the country becomes a global leader in new technologies such as 5G, Artificial Intelligence, and other high-tech manufacturing, and it will have a lasting impact on countries along the BRI. The 'Made in China 2025' industrial policy aims to make China a leader in global high-tech manufacturing. The core objectives of the programme include the following (McBride and Chatzky, 2019):

Using government subsidies, state-owned enterprises, and pursuing intellectual property acquisition to catch up and eventually surpass Western technological prowess in advanced new industries. For the United States and other countries in the West, the policy has been looked at with great suspicion and even as a threat to their security. Announced in 2015, some of the industries being targeted include electric cars, next generation IT, telecommunications, robotics and artificial intelligence. Some of the other sectors being targeted also include agricultural technology; aerospace engineering; new synthetic materials; advanced electrical equipment; emerging bio-medicine; high-end rail infrastructure; and high-tech maritime engineering.

Under 'Made in China 2025', the country wants to achieve 70 per cent self-sufficiency in high-tech industries by 2025 and to essentially dominate high-tech industries by 2049, a significant milestone as the country will be celebrating its one hundredth anniversary as the People's Republic of China (McBride and Chatzky, 2019). China 2025 is thus central to transitioning the economy beyond what is often referred to as the middle-income trap, where wages begin to rise as growth of the economy slows down. While this has affected many developing countries in the past, the Chinese Communist Party has sought to navigate the country away from the low wage manufacturing model, which placed greater emphasis on mining, energy, and consumer goods such as clothing and footwear, although these continue to account for a significant amount, almost half, of the economy. Some of these drivers

of the BRI have inadvertently contributed to a face-off between China and some of the advanced countries in Europe and the US, which increasingly see China not only as a competitor, but as a systemic threat to their interests.

#### **4. Navigating an increasingly confrontational geopolitical landscape**

With China having provided much needed support to its partners as they respond to the effects of COVID-19, the leadership of the US and the EU is under growing pressure to demonstrate collective leadership and solidarity at the very moment when the transatlantic partnership is under severe strain. While the US continues to be consumed by internal paralysis and an increasingly polarised political environment, the early days of COVID-19 in Europe saw Serbia chastising the lack of solidarity shown by members of the EU, stating that it could only rely on China for assistance in these difficult times (Vuksanovic, 2020). Given that much of Europe's leadership on the world stage over the past few decades was supported by the security of the US, the leadership vacuum is likely to increase in the near future, especially given that, until Brexit is finalised, the coherence of European partners on the world stage will continue to be constrained. This will shine a brighter spotlight on Beijing in global coordination efforts. These challenges are compounded by the domestic fault lines of rising populism and economic nationalism across the United States and Europe. These may have an impact on global value chains as the US and some of its partners, such as Japan and Australia, increasingly discourage their companies from producing goods and services in China. This position was consistently aired by the Trump Administration.

Having made commendable strides in its fight against COVID-19 within the country, China has turned its attention towards demonstrating solidarity with global efforts to halt the virus. However, it is also having to adjust to a geopolitical environment in which the pandemic has been politicised. This has resulted in the country finding itself at the receiving end of an anti-China sentiment, fuelled by an increasingly confrontational diplomatic landscape, on which the geopolitical battle lines for a post-COVID-19 global order have been drawn (Tourangbam and Hariharan, 2020).

These tensions came to the fore in the annual meeting of the World Health Assembly, which saw Australia leading a call for an investigation into China's handling of COVID-19, particularly its level of transparency in the early stages of the outbreak (McDonald, 2020). While this proposal was not adopted, the meeting did agree to an independent inquiry of the WHO-coordinated global response. This proposal was supported by China with a further pledge of \$2 billion towards efforts to tackle the pandemic and resulting consequences (Shih et al., 2020). This additional contribution has a high level of symbolism. It will go a long way at a time when multilateralism continues to come under attack

from the US, which first decided to withhold its contribution to the WHO during the worst pandemic in 100 years, and then subsequently decided to begin pulling the US out of the WHO in a further blow to global coordination efforts and multilateralism.

It is also important that the emerging geopolitical environment has revealed fault lines in China's immediate region especially in terms of the Sino-Indian border dispute, which led to deadly clashes in June 2020 with fellow BRICS<sup>i</sup> counterpart India, resulting in fatalities on both sides. The increasingly confrontational diplomatic environment will likely see increased efforts by the US to apply pressure on China through Hong Kong and Taiwan in the aftermath of Beijing adopting new National Security Legislation (Al Jazeera, 2020b). In addition, greater scrutiny on Xinjiang will be used to limit China's international standing. The position of India, which opposes the BRI due to the government's reservations about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor infringing on its sovereignty, will need to be closely monitored as it could also have a negative effect on BRICS cohesion.

Even before the United States blamed China for the spread of the novel coronavirus, the Trump administration had already hardened its position towards China in the trade war and in other multilateral fora. It also continues to accuse China of conducting economic espionage and intellectual property theft (Giglio, 2019); the Trump administration closed the Chinese Consulate General in Houston over spying allegations. This was reciprocated by the Chinese government, which ordered the closure of the US Consulate General in Chengdu for interfering in the domestic affairs of China (Bradsher and Myers: 2020) A continuation of the Trump presidency would have meant that the geopolitical cleavage would have been further fostered, although it is important to understand the limitations that an incoming Biden administration will face due to negative sentiment about China at home. Indeed 2020 polls on US attitudes towards China conducted by the Pew Research Centre suggest that even under a Biden administration, it would remain difficult for the two most powerful countries in the world to cooperate (Silver, Devlin and Huang, 2020). There is a growing negative sentiment towards China in the United States amongst both Democrats and Republicans, a trend that has been accelerated by the continuous verbal attacks from the White House that have been led by President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (Silver et al., 2020).

Such deep seated distrust in the US means that a normalisation of relations will not be easy to usher in. This is likely to be accentuated by tensions and competition over new technologies such as artificial intelligence and 5G, which are arguably one of the main reasons behind the trade war that preceded the pandemic. Indeed, the traditional allies of the US have for some time been under pressure to abandon Chinese telecommunications giants such as Huawei in rolling out 5G technology, with the UK

recently announcing that it, too, will follow the US position of banning or phasing-out the roll out of 5G technology in the UK by Huawei (Shieber, 2020).

When one combines these actions with the Trump administration's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech at the Richard Nixon Library on China, it is clear that from the US perspective the geopolitical gloves are essentially off: Pompeo said that if the 'free world' does not change Communist China, Communist China will change them first (Pompeo, 2020). This heralds an even more confrontational stance towards China by the US administration, one that will see it engaging in activities that China views as an interference in its domestic affairs. However, given the importance accorded to moving up the technological ladder in China's strategic objectives, these actions by the US and the United Kingdom are likely to reinforce the Chinese leadership's pursuit of its objectives of being less dependent on developed countries in high-tech manufacturing.

Chinese decision-makers will thus have to navigate an increasingly competitive geopolitical terrain, characterised in Beijing's immediate neighbourhood by souring relations with India and tensions in Hong Kong and Taiwan. These two geopolitical fault lines will continue to test China's policies, patience, and strategic thinking. China and India are important members of the BRICS group of countries, and it will be important that tensions do not escalate and derail cohesion within BRICS at a time when India is also placing greater importance on its relations with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, namely the US, Japan, Australia, and India. The territorial disputes around the South China Sea present another fault line that will increasingly be emphasised by the US and countries involved in the dispute. Indeed Pompeo's speech at the Richard Nixon Library made specific reference to the South China Sea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as fault lines the US would focus on with greater purpose. This followed the US removal of all trade preferences when it imposed sanctions on individuals in the Communist Party of China who were seen to have spearheaded the newly-adopted Security legislation impacting on Hong Kong.

However, while there may continue to be distrust, Europe is not united over its relationships with the US and China, especially given existing fault lines in the Transatlantic partnership. This provides an opportunity for Beijing to strengthen its ties with countries not following the hard-line position of the US, which sees China as a strategic threat in its National Security Strategy of 2017 (White House, 2017). Following Italy signing onto the BRI in 2019, China may seek to invite other individual European countries into greater involvement in the BRI as these countries battle economic and ecological crises on the back of a health crisis precipitated by COVID-19. Within this landscape, Europe may find itself increasingly seeking to play a balancing role between China and the US. The Association of Southeast

Asian Nations will also continue to balance its relations with the US and China in order to prevent having to choose one country over another.

## **5. What role for the BRI in building resilience in Africa?**

Research by the Department for International Development (DFID) – Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Development and Economic Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) assesses whether and how Chinese trade, investment and finance contributed to economic transformation in Africa. The research notes that most of the jobs created are at the low and semi-skilled levels (Calabrese and Tang, 2020: 6). Oya and Schaefer (2019) conclude that ‘African employees made up on average 70 to 95 per cent of the total workforces in the Chinese firms they studied’, a rate of localisation highly influenced by the regulatory frameworks of host countries. For instance, Oya and Schaefer (2019) find that ‘Ethiopia’s strict regulation on work permits raised the percentages of local employees to over 90 per cent, whereas those in Chinese firms in the same sectors in Angola were only around 75 per cent’.

It is important in Africa’s engagement with the BRI to have a clear strategy and objectives, which must be communicated within the continent and with Chinese partners in order to ensure greater benefits. African countries should thus guide Chinese investors towards sectors they want to develop, adding a range of incentives for local and Chinese actors. With this approach, investors must align with existing national and regional development plans rather than dictate the conditions and policies of recipient countries. China itself followed a similar long-term strategy, attracting investment based on its own short to long term development plans (World Bank, 2010).

Calabrese and Tang (2020: 7) confirm that many of China’s investments in Africa are geared towards tapping into the African market to provide cheaper alternatives to consumers. These investors thus do not see the continent as a low-cost destination to produce goods and services for other markets. This is understandable given Africa’s demographic trends and the stitching together of the continent’s trade landscape through regional economic communities and the African Continental Free Trade Area. The challenge for African stakeholders will be to ensure this relationship evolves and diversifies towards attracting Chinese investments for production into third markets. This will advantage both Chinese and African stakeholders as it would create additional quality jobs while bringing producers closer to their consumers. This will also be important in overcoming cases of ‘Dutch disease’, where the export of commodities has not assisted countries to diversify their economies. It is however important to note that in addition to extractives, Chinese investors have played an increasingly

important role in transport infrastructure and manufacturing on the continent. China is thus a growing source not only of trade, but of investment, although still behind countries such as France, the Netherlands, the US, and the UK in Africa (Calabrese and Tang, 2020: 10-11).

African countries would do well to not get sucked into contemporary geopolitical fault lines. They should rather seek to ensure strategic autonomy in engaging proactively with China, the US, the EU, Russia, and other external powers seeking opportunities presented by the continent. In this regard, African partners should continue to emphasise their agreed priorities, as articulated in Agenda 2063 (Africa Union Commission, 2015). This will mean addressing some of the weaknesses exposed by COVID-19 about the resilience of the global value chains (GVC). Whilst efficiency was prioritised in the pre-COVID-19 economy, pushing producers to move production where it was cheaper, current dynamics have shown the fragility of global value chains despite their efficiency. African countries and regional bodies must thus use their engagement with the BRI to support regional value chains and manufacturing on the continent.

Some of China's excess production capacity will continue to move abroad as the country places greater emphasis on encouraging domestic consumption and the manufacturing of high-tech products, which will create opportunities along the BRI. However, with the pandemic having made all countries poorer and economic activity almost grinding to a halt, Africa will find itself competing with Southeast and Central Asia, amongst other regions, along the BRI. This may force the continent to work more coherently and strategically in ensuring that BRI projects act as catalysts for the building of regional value chains and creating more job opportunities on a continent projected to grow demographically to 2 billion people by 2050 (The Economist, 2020). The BRI will also be under pressure to demonstrate that projects undertaken are sustainable and enhance societies' resilience to deal with impending health, economic and ecological crises.

As the dynamics of the pandemic continue to evolve, the management of supply chains has been a particularly important matter for the African continent. This is especially the case given its location within the geopolitical landscape, which places it at the end of the line in procuring important medical supplies, exposing Africa's weaknesses within global value chains. The opportunity here is for the continent to continue to pursue and implement its identified priorities, as set out in Agenda 2063, and strategies for development, manufacturing and building value chains among its regional economic communities. This crisis has exposed that, in the absence of these important regional value chains, Africa will remain vulnerable because epidemics and pandemics will continue. In order to build resilience, Africa will have to press ahead with prioritising the development of regional value chains

and growing manufacturing, something that the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) should assist in catalysing (Mthembu, 2020b).

This leads to the final recommendation: in order to ensure greater resilience in future, Africa will have to use its international engagements and partnerships strategically in order to support the creation and development of regional value chains. Whether through the BRI, the Africa-EU Summit, the India-Africa Forum Summit, or the Russia-Africa Summit, one area that will have to be consistently emphasised by both individual countries and through a collective diplomatic effort is that Africa's international partners must support the continent's efforts to build regional value chains and manufacturing. If the continent manages to do that it will be able to sufficiently influence its international partners towards supporting its development priorities, which will be very important for a continent that is set to double its population by the year 2050 (Mthembu, 2020b).

## **6. Conclusion**

While still grappling with the domestic ramifications of a health and economic crisis, countries looking to grow their relations with China should not lose sight of the strategic opportunities presented by the BRI (Mthembu, 2020a). While the BRI has been negatively affected by the global pandemic, it arguably still gives China an important strategic mechanism to engage a post-lockdown global landscape facing a serious economic slowdown, only overshadowed by an even greater ecological crisis.

At a time when countries remain at different stages of opening up and again locking down their economies, the BRI is likely to see a greater push towards cooperation in health and digital technology in the short term, which would be followed by planned infrastructure projects in the medium and long-term (Boo et al., 2020). In line with President Xi Jinping's announcements during the second BRI Forum in 2019 about the need for quality projects and greater involvement of the private sector, the initiative is likely to continue the push to open up further to international partners (Ji, 2020). It will encourage a greater role for the private sector to complement the existing role of state-owned banks and enterprises in China, while also inviting non-Chinese private sector companies to partner on projects along the BRI. This will be important in the long-term sustainability of the BRI. Such an approach may even keep the door open for the participation of the private sector in countries with hostile governments. One could thus still imagine the eventual involvement of US companies, even under a hostile administration, as they seek to advance their own economic interests in a post-COVID-19 landscape. Given tensions in its immediate region and with the US, China will also likely seek to

ensure that it does not lose further allies and close partners in other regions of the global South such as Latin America and Africa.

Policy makers and decision makers will have to be driven by scientific evidence and long-term development strategies, instead of paying too much attention to the emotions and passions triggered by an increasingly confrontational relationship between the US and China. African countries must also remain focused on using their engagement with China to enhance the positive, and reduce the negative, elements of the relationship. This must be driven by the existence of reliable data to make sound decisions. Knowledge cooperation between institutions in BRI countries and Chinese institutions will thus have to be an important area in order to ensure that all sides are cooperating on the basis of reliable empirical research conducted by scholars along the BRI.

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<sup>i</sup> BRICS refers to the group of nations, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.