

China's Engagement with the Island States of East Africa in the Western Indian Ocean: A Geo-economic Perspective

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Abstract

China's grand strategy to create a Sino-centric world order by expanding the People's Republic of China's (PRC) 'sphere of influence' is evident in the strategic island states of east Africa in the Western Indian Ocean. This is craftily done by fostering closer economic integration with countries along China's periphery and beyond, thereby shaping these countries' interests to align with the PRC's. The Belt and Road Initiative helps PRC's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to export overcapacity, such as in the cement, steel, and construction sectors. It creates investment opportunities for the PRC's large reserve of savings. Beijing's strategic financing and predatory lending of infrastructural projects in participating countries are modelled to create dependency creating a conducive environment for debt-trap, which the PRC could leverage to pursue its geopolitical interests. Against this backdrop, the proposed paper intends to examine the strategic salience of these Island States of East Africa to Beijing's grand strategy. It will further investigate the geoeconomics of China's engagement with these four island states, namely Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. Lastly, it will end with an analysis of China's economic polarisation.

Keywords: China, Island States of Africa, Western Indian Ocean, Geoeconomics, BRI

Introduction

China is 'constrained by geography' so long as it lacks direct access to the Indian Ocean. As Colin Gray argues, that "geography is

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inescapable...Geography not only provides ‘the physical playing field for those who design and execute strategy but also drives, certainly shapes, the technological choices that dominate tactics, logistics, institutions, and military cultures’ (1999: 165). China’s prominent role in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) must be understood in the context of the larger geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. China has become an important player in the geopolitics of the WIO due to its wide-ranging economic, political, and military involvement in the region (Kuo, 2018). The engagement between China and the island states of Africa in WIO is now getting more visible, particularly in the wake of the changing strategic environment of the region. China’s increasing footprint in the region is the cause of this change in the regional strategic setting. Over the past three decades, China has significantly increased its engagements in the Indian Ocean region. As a result, strategists are now concerned that China’s growing naval presence, combined with its use of so-called “debt-trap diplomacy”, could provide China with permanent military advantages far from its shores (Chellaney, 2017). China having no direct access to the Indian Ocean region, which is critical for Beijing’s economic and energy security, makes it vulnerable, creating a security dilemma in its strategic thought. China’s access to the Indian Ocean is long and challenging as a result of the country’s lack of simple access to the ocean through land routes. On the other hand, taking into account the degree to which China is reliant on oil imported from other countries as well as its other interests in the area, many analysts believe that, in the long run, China will focus a great deal of its attention on the WIO, which is the region in which the majority of its interests are concentrated (Brewster, 2018). Thus, China’s new thrust in the WIO region is a result of China’s broader maritime strategy to expand its presence in the region, in which island states with weak and fragile economies are its primary targets.

China, anxious about India’s geographical advantage and New Delhi’s strong political and security ties with WIO island states of Africa, has led Beijing to devote greater attention to the small island states of the WIO. Beijing’s strategies are aimed at having a higher level of physical presence in the WIO island states of Africa than would be warranted by its present levels of trade and other economic activities. China is

increasing the scale and intensity of the economic, diplomatic and political engagement with the island nations of the region, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. China's strategic intentions underlying its high-profile outreach to these island states are mostly driven by India's rise as an economic power. David Brewster argues that "China and India are emerging as major maritime powers of the Indo-Pacific as part of long-term shifts in the regional balance of power. As their wealth, interests, and power expand, China and India will increasingly come into contact in the shared maritime security space of the Indo-Pacific. How India and China get along in this new context - cooperation, coexistence, competition, or confrontation - will be one of the key strategic challenges for the region of the twenty-first century" (Brewster, 2018, p. 5).

The critical significance of island territories has been well established. Throughout history, rising powers have commanded strategic control over islands to project power far beyond their shores (Baruah, 2020). However, they have always been seen as an object of competition or a tool to extend the major power's sphere of influence (Sora, 2022, p. 114). In the current era, especially in the 21st century, the strategic islands of East Africa in the WIO region, namely: Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles, are trying to negotiate their strategic importance highlighted by their location along key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) with powers like Indian and China to maximise their gains. These islands are crucial to maintaining a constant naval presence along vital international shipping routes, as they provide a strategic geography from which a navy can patrol and secure SLOCs in times of peace and from which it can interdict and cut off enemy communication in times of conflict (Michaelsen, 2003, p. 365). The major maritime nations have used these tactics to constrain the movements of ships and deny access to the open ocean deterring trade and other activities (Michaelsen, 2003, p. 366). In this context, the significance of smaller but strategically located island states is crucial. Their role in providing security presence in the form of military bases, naval monitoring stations, listening posts, logistical support facilities, joint military exercises, etc., aid in providing the naval forces with the capacity to monitor the key maritime routes to

ensure free flow of energy and other critical commodities. The island nations are also becoming more vulnerable due to the 'great power' politics of the major powers in the Indian Ocean. Non-traditional security risks, including piracy, terrorism, and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, are on the increase, endangering regional security and stability and undermining their other role and comparable importance in global geopolitics, especially in the discourse surrounding climate change and blue economy are often overlooked (ICWA, 2023, p.9).

Since both India and China are rising at the same time, their interests clash in many common sectors. In this context the paper presents a comparative and analytical investigation of the importance of the island states of Africa in WIO region for China. Focus of the paper is on the contemporary developments in the region vis a vis China's aspiration to influence the region and reorient the power relations. This paper is aimed at examining the nature of engagement China has with the WIO island states of Africa. In conclusion it has looked into China's the dimensions of engagement with the WIO island states of Africa and how it shapes up the strategic environment of the WIO island states of Africa having a substantial effect on the strategic balance of the Indian Ocean region as a whole.

Strategic Significance of WIO for China

The strategic importance of the WIO has been increasingly recognized, with various countries vying for influence in the region. In addition to France (a resident power of the IOR) and the United States (the only extra-regional power having a permanent presence in the WIO), China has emerged as a significant player with substantial interests in the WIO. China's engagement in the WIO can be categorized into four main areas: dual-use infrastructure development, politico-diplomatic endeavours, connectivity and access initiatives as tools to attain its geoeconomics goals, and military activities in the wider canvas of geosecurity objectives (Gurjar, 2019, p. 385). These four aspects are interconnected and serve China's overarching goal of power projection and expansion of Beijing's 'sphere of influence'. While Beijing has no direct access to the IOR in general and the WIO region in particular, leading to a security

dilemma, China has devoted much of its focus on building dual-use infrastructure in the WIO, which is aimed at creating facilities that can serve both civilian and military purposes. By investing in infrastructure projects such as ports, roads, and railways, China seeks to enhance its economic and military capabilities while ensuring access to vital resources and trade routes. This strategic approach aligns with China's objective of securing energy supplies, sustaining economic growth, and safeguarding military interests.

In recent years, the Indian Ocean, in general, and WIO, in particular, have gained significant strategic importance as emerging powers in Asia focus their attention on this vast expanse of water. The region's international shipping lanes, sea lines of communication (SLOCs), abundant energy reserves in coastal states, fisheries resources, and rapidly growing economies in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have attracted attention from various nations (Suri, 2017). The WIO plays a crucial role in global trade as it serves as a vital conduit connecting West Asia, Africa, South Asia, and other regions. Several highly important and strategic chokepoints, such as the Straits of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Malacca, are situated in the IOR. These chokepoints facilitate the transportation of approximately 32.2 million barrels of oil and petroleum per day. It is estimated that the sea routes in the Indian Ocean handle two-thirds of the world's seaborne trade in oil, half of the seaborne container traffic, and one-third of the world's seaborne bulk cargo (IORA, n.d).

China's rapid economic growth has resulted in ever increasing demand for fossil fuels, especially oil and gas. China is a net importer of oil and gas and is heavily dependent on overseas energy supply for its sustained economic expansion and development. To meet these demands, China has increasingly relied on international trade, particularly merchandise trade (90 per cent seaborne trade and 50 per cent across the Indian Ocean). The country's industrialization and urbanization processes have driven the need for commodities such as metals, minerals, and petroleum-based energy sources. It is predicted that the demand for oil and gas will continue to rise, accounting for 32 per cent of the total

energy mix by 2050 (IEEJ, 2018). Therefore, China's continued global outreach for oil resources revolves around two regions, West Asia and Africa, which account for almost 63 per cent of its crude oil imports (EIA, 2022). Much of these energy supplies pass through the Indian Ocean region (IOR), to which Beijing has no direct access and is often considered by many analysts as its most critical vulnerability (Brewster, 2018). The pause in economic activity caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in China seems to end with the lifting of 'zero-covid policy' restrictions amid mass protests (Huang & Han, 2022). The economic recovery, thereafter, will end the decline in energy consumption. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has affected Europe's oil and gas supply, increasing the demand for hydrocarbons from West Asia and Africa. To ensure an affordable and consistent supply of oil and gas, Beijing is increasingly engaging with the resource-rich countries in the world.

While China has emerged as the world's largest exporter and the second-largest importer due to its significant trade surplus in recent years, despite implementing stringent policies, China maintains a relatively open approach to foreign trade, with trade accounting for approximately 37 per cent of its GDP in 2022 (World Bank, 2023). A major part of all these merchandise trade passes through the Indian Ocean, and its critical chokepoints to which Beijing has no direct access make it vulnerable. The most crucial chokepoint is the Strait of Malacca through which a significant portion of China's energy and merchandise trade passes. The Strait of Malacca serves as the most direct sea route linking East Asia and the Middle East, playing a crucial role in reducing transportation time and costs for trade between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Its strategic location makes it an essential waterway for the shipment of hydrocarbons, container goods, and bulk cargo. According to the US Energy Information Agency (EIA), in 2016, around 16 million barrels of crude oil and 3.2 million barrels of liquefied natural gas (LNG) were transported daily through the Strait of Malacca (EIA, 2016). This volume represents the second highest globally, following the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. According to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), approximately 70 per cent of China's petroleum and liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports,

pass through the Strait of Malacca. This dependence on the Strait underscores its critical importance in China's energy security policy (Nakashima & Medeiros, 2017). However, the significance of the Strait extends beyond energy transportation. The CSIS also calculates that around 20 per cent of global maritime trade and 60 per cent of China's trade flows traverse the Strait and the South China Sea, making it the most crucial sea line of communication for the Chinese economy. In November 2003, Chinese President Hu Jintao described this reliance on the Strait as the "Malacca Dilemma," emphasizing China's vulnerability to a naval blockade due to the lack of alternative routes. President Hu referred to "certain powers" encroaching on and attempting to control navigation through the Strait, a veiled reference to the United States and its naval capabilities (Nakashima & Medeiros, 2017).

China's Expansionism: Beijing's Growing Footprint in the Island States' of Africa in the WIO

China's robust economy and geopolitical aspirations have contributed to the country's rising profile in the global geopolitical order. The mission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is the 'rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' which aims to create a Sino-centric world order by reorienting the present for a dominant future. China's economy which has taken a historic leap in the last decade has added much required impetus to the "Chinese Dream". Peoples Republic of China's (PRC) exponential growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from USD 8.53 trillion to USD 17.77 trillion and from 11.3 per cent to 18.5 per cent of the world's total economic volume, places Beijing as the second largest economy globally (Chinese Embassy in Seychelles, 2022). The authoritarian regime in PRC has helped it achieve significantly in the manufacturing sector which has made the average Chinese contribution to global economic development to 38.6 per cent, making it the most by any country (Chinese Embassy in Seychelles, 2022). Therefore, as its economy grows, China is also taking real measures to expand its maritime reach beyond its borders. China's maritime strategy to displace US and encircle India is a function of its "grand strategy" in the international security context. This goes beyond maritime, military, or

even regional planning. It details China's ambitions to upgrade its military and expand its influence beyond the South China Sea to the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Gulf by gaining access to new ports and airfields and forming new diplomatic ties and military alliances. China is showing increasing might in the Indian Ocean area as it becomes more aggressive.

For China, the WIO region is critical for its economic and energy security. The WIO is a sub-region that connects with the resource-rich regions of the African and Arabian Peninsula. It is one of the connecting links between the Eastern and Western hemispheres as well as the Northern and Southern hemispheres. It connects Asia, Africa, and Europe on one hand whereas the Atlantic and Indian Ocean on the other. Therefore, WIO region is a critical transit route through which bulk of China's energy imports and merchandise trade passes. The region is also home to some of the vital chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Mozambique Channel demonstrates China's vulnerability which can be compounded in an event of disruption of the free flow of energy supply and merchandise trade. For instance the blockage of Egypt's Suez Canal for six days by the ship Ever Given in March 2021 led to a disruption of the flow of critical commodities necessitating re-routing (through another weather-determined chokepoint a route dangerous for transit, the Cape of Good Hope) thereby increasing not only the transportation cost significantly but also the chances of ship disaster manifold (Baruah & Duckworth, 2022). In this context, China aims to attain its geo-economic and non-geoeconomic goals by approaching small states first, such as Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles through a web of complex and predatory economic policies. Therefore, the lack of investigative research on Sino-Small Island States geo-economic relations provides ample scope for exploring the need to examine the factors influencing trade flows between them. As China's political economy motives are hidden in the Chinese international investment treaties, and their designs aim to create dependencies that suit Beijing's pursuit of a Sino-centric world order.

Geo-Economic Engagement

Due to its growing influence and economic power, China is implementing a geo-economic strategy of centrality in various regions of the Indo-Pacific, including the East African Island States. Beijing's geo-economic approach involves a diverse set of tools, such as trade, investment, finance, development aid, and infrastructure alliances. Over the past decade, China has become a significant player in the East African Island States, actively engaging through extensive aid programs, expanding trade and investments, and proactive political-diplomatic initiatives. Notably, these island states have also been included in China's ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative, specifically as a crucial node of the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. Historically, China's involvement in the East African Island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles has been primarily motivated by its diplomatic recognition of the 'One China Policy' and UN accession. However, in recent times, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increased its investments in the East African Island States to assert itself as a significant global and Indo-Pacific power. This strategic move aims to challenge the existing regional order and gain political support for Chinese policies in other regional forums or on a global scale. Furthermore, Beijing sees the East African Island States as a testing ground to assess the resolve, capabilities, coordination, and resilience of Western stakeholders in the broader Indo-Pacific context.

China's provision of aid is not treated as an isolated policy but rather as an integral part of its broader economic statecraft. Through its geo-economic activism, and statecraft of economic polarisation, China has significantly expanded its influence in the East African Island States and is reshaping the regional development model and discourse. The substantial financial assistance provided by China represents a "silent revolution" as it offers an alternative source of funding and a broader range of policy options for its SID economic partners in the WIO. As major bilateral lender in the region, China becomes an attractive destination and opens up new economic opportunities, including the potential for large-scale investments. Consequently, the established norms of regional economic governance

face challenges and undergo rewriting (Dornan, 2018, p.467). China's increased engagement with the East African Island States has presented significant economic development opportunities for both the countries and the region. However, it is important to note that China's economic pursuits are not solely driven by economic objectives but also serve strategic and foreign policy interests, often at the expense of established regional partners. Beijing's geo-economic strategy seems to involve gradually weakening the bonds between Pacific Island nations and their traditional Western allies, using a "one loan at a time" approach. China provides substantial loans to small island countries, even though their ability to repay is questionable, with the intention of leveraging economic indebtedness for geopolitical advantages. Through reshaping the regional economic landscape, China aims to reconfigure the geopolitical order in the region to align with its broader Indo-Pacific strategic goals (Friedman, 2019, p. 21).

The Island governments of East Africa have responded somewhat positively to China's offers of long-term commitment, showcasing of wealth and expertise, comprehensive aid packages, regional development plans, and defiance of Western powers. Despite Western concerns and objections, the economic partnership with China has been enthusiastically embraced by the East African Island States, as Chinese loans and investments have been perceived as coming from a friendly nation of a "Win-Win Cooperation" without imposing stringent conditions (Breslin, 2020, p. 251). East African Island nations that have become recipients of China's strategic generosity are exposing themselves to the risks of "debt-trap diplomacy." These countries have accepted substantial loans from China without a clear path for repayment, potentially leaving them vulnerable to Chinese demands regarding strategic assets or diplomatic influence. As China gains increasing economic leverage through its lending practices, the debtor countries find themselves increasingly dependent and susceptible to a state of clientelism, where their resources, policies, and diplomatic actions can be instrumentalized by China to undermine the established rules-based order (Rabobank. 2019, p.4).

China's insecurity coupled by its geographic vulnerabilities linked to its increased dependence on the WIO region has led Beijing to devise strategies for navigating through these security dilemmas. Therefore, China is expanding its outreach in the WIO region specially with the Indian Ocean Island states of Africa, as they are situated along the key transit routes that passes through the WIO. China has increased exchange and cooperation since diplomatic ties were established with these island states in the 1970s. China's engagement with Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles the small island nations situated in the WIO near the northern mouth of Mozambique Channel – a critical transit route through which 30per cent of the global tanker traffic passes, is an important actor in China's geostrategic calculations.

Comoros

“Comoros is one of the least developed nations in Africa, and with an estimated gross domestic product (GDP) per capita income of about USD 700, is among the world's poorest nations” (BharatShakti, 2022). For a long time now, China has surpassed France as the region's leading economic and military power, making Comoros its most important developmental partner. Political instability and fragile economy have given Beijing the opportunity to step up its presence in Comoros, a strategic island state of East Africa. China's strategic investment was mostly aimed at receiving support from the small island state in international forums like United Nation to its One-China policy. The trade-off for China was very reasonable as it warranted a very insignificant amount of financial aid compared to China's size. The engagements grew deeper with Beijing's growing strategic interest in the region. Regular diplomatic visits, financial and developmental aids, medical aid, infrastructure development helped Beijing surpass France as Comoros's leading development partner.

Comoros lacks proper infrastructure that would aid in its development and has therefore signed a commercial deal with Beijing's China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) in March of 2018, for the purpose of redeveloping the current port of Moroni by constructing a deep-water

port by means of dredging at a cost of USD 165 million (BharatShakti, 2022). In March 2017, Beijing's China Communication Construction Corporation (CCCC) constructed the Port of Moheli on the island of Moheli at a cost of USD 149 million (BharatShakti, 2022). China's strategic design is given shape by undertaking critical infrastructure projects (airport, ports, rail, road, palaces, etc.) and completing it in record times. The installation of undersea fibre optic network cable between Comoros and East Africa is one such project that gives China an edge to gain geopolitical advantage over the small island territory. Therefore, with China's extensive engagement in Comorian infrastructure projects, it's reasonable to assume that Moroni would eventually become China's strategic partner in allowing port facilities for dual-use purposes.

Madagascar

The Sino-Malagasy relations date back to 1972, and the year 2022 marked fifty years of diplomatic and economic relations between Madagascar and China. Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world and a former French colony situated at a strategic junction of the global maritime shipping route close to the Mozambique channel, is of critical significance for the regional and extra-regional actors present in the region. China is Madagascar's biggest trading partner and supplier of essential primary products. Since 2001, China has been Madagascar's leading trading partner ahead of France, which till recently was its biggest partner. China and Madagascar have had strong relations since 1972, primarily in the areas of trade, investment, infrastructure development, and diplomacy. In 2020, China's exports represented 25.1 per cent of the total, far ahead of India, whose exports have been growing since 2010 (8.6 per cent), France (7.2 per cent), the United Arab Emirates (6.6 per cent) and South Africa (4.2 per cent) (Giovalucchi, 2022). Madagascar became the first group of African nations to support the growth of Chinese footprints in Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) after signing the memorandum of understanding (MoU) on BRI with China in 2017, perhaps without fully comprehending the ramifications of doing so (IFFRAS, 2021). Over the years, China has become Madagascar's largest trading partner, its biggest source of

imports and its fourth-largest export destination. In 2020, the trade volume reached USD 936 million, with exports to China worth USD 118 million, and imports from China worth USD 818 million (WorldBank, 2020). The bilateral trade has grown 100 times since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. However, the trade volume is highly imbalanced tilting heavily in China's favour.

China has also invested heavily in infrastructure development projects in Madagascar, such as building roads, bridges, and airports. Madagascar's strategic geographic location and abundant natural resources are the major reasons for China's increased interest in the island state. Beijing's outward-looking economy is making deeper inroads in the developing world of Africa with vast aid amounts. "China has aided the building of infrastructure, has poured in massive revenue resulting in an increased number of Chinese-funded enterprises who now comprise 90per cent of the market. This is an alarming trend for a small nation like Madagascar which runs the risk of falling prey to Chinese predator like policies" (IFFRAS, 2021). Madagascar's debt vis-à-vis China represents only 3.7per cent of the total external debt in September 2021 (Bertrand & Zoghely, 2021). Through BRI, China is fast making Madagascar an important destination for its strategic financing to create a sphere of influence. China currently has invested in five infrastructure projects through its flagship BRI projects. In 2007, Beijing invested 53 million USD through its Export-Import banks (Exim bank) for the construction of 'the Golden Peacock five-star hotel in Antananarivo. Other strategic investments by Beijing in Madagascar's infrastructure development include a 105 million USD investment in road transport in 2017; 41 million USD in road transport in 2018; 157 million USD in road transport in 2019; and 59 million USD in road transport connecting the Port of Toamasina in 2019 among several other sectors (CARI, n.d; & Africa Intelligence, 2022). The Chinese state own companies are also positioning themselves on major strategic port and airport infrastructure projects but with not much success, as their offer for the construction of new terminals in Antananarivo and Nosy Be has been withdrawn, which was won by an ADP-Bouygues-Colas consortium in 2015 (WorldBank, 2022). During the 2017 meeting between President Rajaonarimam-

pianina and President Xi Jinping, a memorandum was signed for the construction of a deep-water port on Narindra Bay, on the northwest coast of Madagascar, facing the Mozambique Channel (Honoré, 2020). In fact Madagascar is one of nine sub-Saharan members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) launched in 2014 by China to counter the influence of the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the World Bank (IFFRAS, 2021).

Mauritius

Mauritius is one of Africa's most stable and thriving democracies and has grown to be one of Africa's wealthiest countries. According to a 2019 World Bank survey, Mauritius is the best in Africa for ease of doing business and the 13th best in the world. Mauritius has the second-highest per capita income in Africa. Mauritius has grown into a regional financial hub, and the current government hopes to make the country a gateway to Africa for foreign investors interested in entering the African market. Despite the fact that India is Mauritius' most significant strategic partner, Chinese efforts to build influence in the country have increased in recent years. In 2019, China concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Mauritius, which went into force in 2021 (China's first FTA with an African country). Chinese state-owned firms invest in infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy.

Trade between Mauritius and China has been rapidly expanding. Beijing's geo-economic outreach to Mauritius is driven by strategic considerations where it views Mauritius as an important actor in the region to expand its sphere of influence. Since 1972 with the initiation of diplomatic engagements between the two, China's longstanding bilateral ties have expanded in scope and intent. The increasing momentum of bilateral engagement between the two countries is driven by several factors of which the geopolitical objectives of Beijing are strategised through its geoeconomic tools. Mauritius has experienced notable advantages from Chinese technical assistance in agriculture and certain infrastructure projects (Bakshi & Deelchand, 2017). The Chinese government has consistently provided scholarships to Mauritian students

for higher education in China, beginning in 1984 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Mauritius, n.d.). In the realm of economic cooperation, Mauritius and China have entered into treaties aimed at avoiding double taxation and preventing tax evasion (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2018). Furthermore, an Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement was signed between the two nations in 1996 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade, 2011). Cooperation, particularly in the economic and technical sectors, has gained significant momentum since 2004, which is evident in the signing of eight agreements by the governments of Mauritius and China between January 2004 and March 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade, 2007).

In 2020, China emerged as the primary source of imports for Mauritius, comprising 24.6 per cent of the total imports (Mauritius Revenue Authority, 2020). The substantial share of imports from China underscores the growing economic ties and trade relations between the two nations. Trade between China and Mauritius has experienced rapid growth in recent years, although Mauritius has faced challenges in accessing the vast Chinese market. Despite this, China holds the top rank as the largest source of imports for Mauritius, with imports reaching USD 0.84 billion USD in 2019, accounting for 16.69 per cent of total Mauritian imports and one-third of imports from Asia (Mauritius Revenue Authority, 2019). Over a span of 20 years, imports from China have grown by 13.7 per cent. In contrast, the volume of Mauritian exports to China remains relatively low, constituting a mere 1.71 per cent of total exports (Mauritius Statistics, n.d.). This disparity has resulted in a significant trade deficit for Mauritius.

China has also made significant investments in Mauritius, particularly in infrastructure development and special economic zones. Notably, China has supported the construction of the Jinfei Economic Trade and Cooperation Zone, aimed at attracting Chinese investment and promoting bilateral trade (Xinhua, 2019). Mauritius has expressed interest in participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative aims to enhance connectivity

and promote trade between China and countries along its envisioned land and maritime routes. Mauritius, with its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, has been considered an important partner in the BRI (The Diplomat, 2019). In 2013, China's investment in Mauritius amounted to USD 190 million, while Mauritius's investment in China reached USD 870 million, showing a notable increase of 27 per cent. During this period, various China-aided projects, such as the construction of operation theatres and wards at Victoria Hospital, maintenance of the MBC headquarters, and agricultural technology cooperation, progressed smoothly, further enhancing the bilateral relationship between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, n.d). China has also shown interest in supporting Mauritius in developing its renewable energy sector. In 2018, China and Mauritius signed an agreement to cooperate on the development of a solar energy project in Mauritius (Xinhua, 2018).

Seychelles

Seychelles, despite its small landmass of 452 sq. km and a population of approximately 98,000, holds significant geostrategic importance due to its location at the convergence of Africa, West Asia (the Middle East), and India. This has made it a strategic destination for various major powers with vested interests in the region, a trend that dates back to the Cold War era (Hu, & Ali, 2020, pp. 177). The significance of Seychelles to China has been further enhanced by President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the establishment of a Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) base in Djibouti. While China established diplomatic relations with Seychelles in 1976, it wasn't until 2004 that relations between the two countries intensified. In 2004, a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation was signed, allowing PLA vessels to dock in Victoria, the capital of Seychelles. The relationship between the two countries received a significant boost in 2007 when then-Chinese President Hu Jintao made the first-ever visit by a Chinese president to Seychelles. This visit led to an increase in grants and cooperation projects funded by concessionary loans (Hu, 2020). Since 2012, Chinese presence in Seychelles has increased further, partly influenced by the intensifying competition between China and India.

While China's methods of influence have predominantly been economic and cultural, there have been attempts to expand security cooperation and increase its political influence in the country through indirect means. The evolving dynamics of Sino-Indian competition have played a role in shaping China's strategic interests in the Seychelles.

According to Jovanovic and Marroushi (2021), Chinese economic cooperation projects in Seychelles have witnessed significant growth since 2012. One notable example is the accord signed in August 2016, where China provided a generous grant of USD 15 million for the construction of the Seychelles Broadcast Corporation (SBC) House in Victoria (Jovanovic & Marroushi, 2021). As part of the agreement, the SBC would also purchase new and modern equipment for radio, television, and their online platform from China. However, it is important to note that the construction of projects like the SBC House has given China and its propaganda apparatus a unique advantage in influencing the content of Seychelles' radio and television programs, enabling the promotion of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political narrative. The increasing number of Chinese projects has contributed to the growth of Seychelles' total external debt, which stood at 110 per cent of its USD 1.6 billion GDP by the end of 2018 (Jovanovic & Marroushi, 2021). Recognizing the burden of this debt and aiming to encourage Seychelles to accept further loans, the Chinese government made a significant move in August 2018. They decided to write off a loan to Seychelles amounting to 37,816,400 renminbi, equivalent to USD 5.5 million (AllAfrica, 2018). These actions highlight China's strategic approach in leveraging financial assistance to enhance its influence and shape the economic dynamics of Seychelles.

During President Faure's visit to Beijing to attend the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), significant developments took place between China and Seychelles. Following President Faure's meeting with Xi Jinping, two memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed, focusing on trade connectivity, investment, industrial cooperation, and marine collaboration (Bonnellame, 2018). The first MOU aimed to enhance cooperation within the framework of the Silk Road Economic

Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, promoting socio-economic development and infrastructure projects between China and the Seychelles. The second MOU focused on marine cooperation to strengthen oceanic understanding, climate change awareness, marine environmental protection, and integrated marine management. In addition to the MOUs, China provided a grant of USD 7.5 million to Seychelles to support mutually agreed projects, reflecting China's ambition to deepen its strategic understanding of the Indian Ocean and leverage its closer relationship with Seychelles for this purpose. Furthermore, an Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement signed in October 2017 resulted in a USD 7.3 million grant for the construction of a post-secondary commerce and visual arts school in Anse Royale. In June 2019, China provided an additional financial assistance package of USD 22 million to Seychelles, which included funding for a new technical and vocational school. These projects were financed through a grant administered by the Central Bank of Seychelles (Laurence, 2019). These initiatives demonstrate China's commitment to strengthening its engagement with Seychelles and signify its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region.

Apart from economic ties, China has provided medical and agricultural assistance to Seychelles. Since 1985, China has dispatched medical teams to Seychelles, with a total of eight batches consisting of 102 medical personnel sent as of 2019. In the same year, there were six Chinese medical team members present in Seychelles, providing training to local medical personnel. Furthermore, China has trained approximately 1,500 individuals in various fields by sending eight batches of 106 young volunteers and two agricultural technology experts to Seychelles. As a gesture of goodwill, China also donated five ambulances to Seychelles in 2013 (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

Conclusion

China's aid to Africa has often been viewed as part of its strategy to gain influence and secure its accession and global recognition to the United Nations (UN). According to Gregg Brazinsky's study on Sino-American

rivalry in Cold War Africa, enlarging China's status in the Third World was a central goal of Chinese foreign policy. The provision of aid served as a means to achieve this objective (Brazinsky, 2015). Historically, Chinese friendship treaties and aid agreements were devised as tools to supplement Beijing's diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China especially by Small Island States of Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (Larkin, 1971). This pattern indicates that aid was instrumental in securing diplomatic recognition for Beijing. Therefore, China's transformation from a regional player with a narrow focus on its immediate surroundings to a global actor has been remarkable.

In just a few decades, China has emerged as a major player on the world stage, with its interests and influence extending across the globe. Today, China stands among a select group of nations capable of pursuing and asserting its interests on a global scale. Its presence is strongly felt in diverse regions, spanning from the South Pacific and South and Central Asia to the broader West Asia, Africa, Latin America, and beyond. According to numerous experts, China has been employing predatory economics and the weaponization of supply chains as strategies to enhance its sphere of influence. These tactics have been observed in various contexts and regions, indicating a pattern of behaviour lending China a neo-imperialist character. For instance, in a report by the Centre for a New American Security (CNAS), it is argued that China's economic practices, such as debt-trap diplomacy and unfair trade practices, enable it to extend its influence over other countries and regions (CNAS, 2019). Today, China employs a range of geoeconomics tools to expand its sphere of influence and attain its geopolitical goals. China utilizes economic statecraft, including infrastructure investments and financial assistance, to establish closer ties and influence the domestic policies of other countries. This strategy is often referred to as "debt-trap diplomacy." According to a study by researchers at AidData, Chinese infrastructure projects in recipient countries correlate with increased support for China in international forums (Dreher et al., 2019). The BRI is a massive infrastructure development project aimed at enhancing connectivity across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. It serves as a platform for China to extend its economic and political influence. The

Jamestown Foundation notes that the BRI provides China with greater leverage in recipient countries, allowing it to shape their policies and secure access to strategic resources (Blanchard, 2018). These tools play a strategic role in Beijing asserting itself and taking unilateral decisions such as the construction of artificial islands (in the South China Sea) and the establishment of military outposts in distant geographies of Africa and Asia, enabling it to project power and expand its influence in the wider Indo-Pacific region and beyond. China strategically invests in and acquires companies and industries critical to national security and economic competitiveness in other countries. China also employs information warfare and influence operations to shape narratives and perceptions in its favour. The United States Department of State has published reports highlighting China's use of disinformation campaigns, media manipulation, and propaganda to advance its interests globally (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

China's engagements in the WIO are driven by its pursuit of securing markets, obtaining raw materials and energy resources, and enhancing its international stature. Against this backdrop, China's claims of aiding Africa in bridging the infrastructural deficit, socio-economic development and digital divide should be approached with cautious optimism. While China introduces its infrastructure and digital technology, offers attractive concessional loans, and promotes the so-called win-win cooperation, Africa's economic structures are increasingly at risk. The implementation of port infrastructure and other connectivity projects highlights the damaging consequences of opacity and impunity. Therefore, it is crucial for stakeholders within and across East African island countries to intensify their efforts in resisting such projects. They must scrutinize the geopolitical motivations, key actors, and priority status of these geo-economic initiatives, challenging not only China but also national governments and local elites who benefit from such secretive dealings.

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