THE ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF THE CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONSHIP: CASE STUDIES OF CHINESE ENGAGEMENT IN KENYA AND ETHIOPIA

By

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki,
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the environmental impacts of large-scale Chinese investments in Africa, with a particular focus on Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway in Ethiopia. Drawing on qualitative data, this study focuses on the state and civil society discourses surrounding Chinese engagement and development projects, sustainable development, and environmental responsibility. A discourse analysis is conducted for both host countries to examine the ways in which Chinese engagement is perceived and shaped by domestic political, economic, and social contexts, from both state and non-state actors. The findings reveal multiple complex and often conflicting mechanisms within the domestic contexts of Kenya and Ethiopia that contribute to the environmental outcome of Chinese funded development initiatives, underscoring the limitations of China's self-proclaimed commitment to green development. By examining the local responses and mitigation strategies in Kenya and Ethiopia, this thesis contributes to the growing literature on the ecological consequences of Chinese engagement in Africa.

List of Abbreviations Used

AADR: Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway
BRI: Belt and Road Initiative
CBDR: Common-But-Differentiated-Responsibilities
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CCECC: China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation
CCCC: China Communications Construction Company
CMA: China Meteorological Administration
CRBC: China Road and Bridge Corporation
CRCC: China Railway Construction Corporation
CREC: China Railway Engineering Corporation
CIDCA: China International Development Corporation Agency
EMCA: Environmental Management and Conservation Act
EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment
EKC: Environmental Kuznets Curve
ETS: Emissions Trading Systems
EXIM: Exim-Import Bank of China
FDRE: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FDI: Foreign Direct Investment
FOCAC: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
FYP: Five Year Plan
GDI: Global Development Initiative
GDP: Gross Domestic product
GNP: Gross National Product
GONGO: Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization
HA: Hectare
HPR: House of Peoples Representative
ICA: Infrastructure Consortium for Africa
IEBC: Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission
IFA: Institute of Foreign Affairs
INGO: International Non-Government Organization
IMF: International Monetary Fund
IR: International Relations
IREN: Inter Region Economic Network
KHA: Kilohectare
KNCHR: Kenya National Commission of Human Rights
KRC: Kenya Railways Corporation
KWS: Kenya Wildlife Services
LAPSSET: Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport
MSSD: Most Similar Systems Design

NDRC: National Development and Reform Commission
NEMA: National Environmental Management Authority
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
PBO: Public Benefits Organization Act
PRC: People's Republic of China
SEO: State Owned Enterprise
SGR: Standard Gauge Railway
SPC: State Planning Commission
SSCCP: South-South Climate Cooperation Program
UNCHE: United Nations Conference on the Human Environment
UNCED: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WB: World Bank

Chapter 1: Introduction

The relationship between China and Africa has emerged over the past few decades as a pivotal axis of economic dynamism and geopolitical significance. Characterized by large-scale infrastructural development and rapid economic growth, this contemporary alliance holds immense potential to reshape not only the socioeconomic landscape of the involved nations but also the trajectory of global environmental sustainability. This thesis investigates the environmental implications of the contemporary China-Africa relationship by exploring how the political, social, and economic contexts of African host countries shape and determine the ecological outcome of Chinese-funded development initiatives.

While there is global awareness of China's massive role in climate change, whether in exacerbating the current crisis or providing crucial opportunities for sustainable development, there is still a significant gap in the literature on China's growing role in African development from an environmental perspective. This is particularly concerning given that the China-Africa relationship carries inevitable consequences for the natural environment, as it is not only centered on goals of rapid development and economic growth, but also because both China and Africa are sites of abundant and valuable resources, such as rare minerals, natural gas, and sheer population size. If this partnership lacks a clear and substantive climate approach, then the increasing number of Chinese-led development initiatives could severely intensify, and accelerate, ecological degradation.

However, China and Africa are not monolithic machines that cohere to a single ideology or approach when it comes to sustainable development. Each state in Africa contains a specific political, social, and economic landscape that reacts to, and influences Chinese engagement. Even for China, its authoritarian one-party system does not mean that the state is immune to internal contestation, personal motivations, and conflicting strategic preferences regarding both its relationship with Africa and its climate action agenda. For this reason, my research aims to contribute to the growing body of work on environmental sustainability, and advance understandings of both China's and Africa's role in green development from a more nuanced and empirically backed position, by exploring how contemporary China-Africa relations impact prospects for global environmental sustainability.

This study addresses two central research questions: Do economic priorities override environmental considerations in the context of the China-Africa relationship and Chinese-funded development initiatives? And to what extent does domestic regime type in host countries, particularly in terms of the degree to which there is a vibrant and independent civil society focused on environmental issues, alter the balance between economic and environmental considerations in regard to Chinese-funded development initiatives in Africa?

The central hypothesis of this study posits that, despite rhetoric surrounding green development and sustainable growth, economic interests take precedence over environmental concerns in the China-Africa relationship for both Chinese and African leaders and policymakers, as rapid industrial growth and infrastructure development ambitions outweigh long-term ecological considerations, particularly for developing economies. My study also aims to explore the extent to which domestic civic actors and organizations influence the environmental management of Chinese-funded development initiatives, as these actors are largely overlooked when examining the China-Africa relationship, hypothesizing that the nature of the relationship between state and civil society in host countries is likely to determine the degree to which environmental issues are prioritized. If the relationship between civil society and the state is more collaborative and civic space more open and independent, it is expected that non-state actors are more likely to effectively advocate for stringent environmental protections. Conversely, in countries where the civic space is restrained by, for example, authoritarian practices and a repressive state, environmental concerns from civil society are more likely to be sidelined in favor of economic or political interests.

While the central hypothesis of this project is relatively intuitive, the second hypothesis is arguably less conventional, given that the role of non-state actors is often overlooked in discussions of China's impact on Africa's environmental conditions or the China-Africa relationship in general, as analyses predominantly assume a more state-centric approach.

The importance and relevance of this research are underscored by the far-reaching implications of the China-Africa partnership for both regions, and for the planet as a whole. While this thesis does not grapple specifically with global climate change and action, it does make references to climate change as a particularly critical issue in the larger challenge of working towards more ecologically sustainable development practices. With China emerging as a key player in African development and climate governance, the environmental trajectory of this

relationship holds significant implications for global efforts to promote sustainable development. While the primary purpose of my research is exploratory, it is expected that the findings from this study can help better inform policymakers by highlighting the political, economic, and social dimensions of sustainable development, demonstrating that any attempt to formulate effective policies must consider all these factors in their specific domestic and global context.

Chapter Outline

Following this introduction, the thesis begins with a broader theoretical study and then concentrates on a more detailed analysis of specific case studies in Kenya and Ethiopia. Chapter two contains the literature review and research design, and chapter three examines China's role in global climate politics and the ways in which the state constructs its identity and national interests within the context of environmental responsibility. This chapter explores the context surrounding China's approach to green development and climate action by analyzing the ways in which China's role in climate politics is shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and global influence.

Chapter four examines the China-Africa relationship more specifically and discusses the geopolitical and environmental implications of the core strategic interests that characterize the overall partnership. This chapter includes a brief discussion of the characteristics of Chinese aid and introduces China's green Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and green development initiatives in relation to African development. While chapter three provides the context for China's approach to environmental sustainability and development, chapter four takes a closer look at how China's green initiatives are translated into its partnership with African partner countries.

With chapters three and four providing the overall context for China's approach to environmental responsibility and the ecological dimension of the China-Africa relationship, chapters five and six investigate the selected cases for this research, Kenya and Ethiopia. These chapters explore country-specific contexts, such as the political, social, and economic conditions of the host country, and the characteristics of the host country's bilateral relations with China in terms of the types of investments and development projects pursued, and diplomatic relations. Each chapter will examine the state and civil society discourse surrounding sustainable development, environmental responsibility, and Chinese engagement, to better understand how domestic state and non-state actors react, respond, and shape the prioritization of environmental

concerns regarding Chinese-funded development projects. For each country, a major BRI-related project will be explored to assess how economic and environmental concerns are prioritized by state and non-state actors, and the role that China and Chinese state-owned enterprises (SEOs) play in affecting the trajectory of African development projects.

Lastly, chapter seven will compare the variable outcomes in both cases in an attempt to highlight the main causal mechanisms that contribute to the sustainability and environmental outcomes of Chinese-funded development projects in Africa. The concluding discussion will review the key findings and significance for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Methodology

I. Literature Review

China-Africa relations and China's role in global environmental politics have been, separately, major topics for scholars within the international relations (IR) field. With China's rapid growth and massive contribution to emissions over the past few decades, it has met increasing pressures to take environmental responsibility seriously, both in its own domestic policies and overseas development initiatives. Meanwhile, China-Africa relations have evolved and strengthened as a result of expansive strategic development initiatives, discursively predicated on principles of mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation, and South-South solidarity (Li, Wu and Zhang 2019, 14). Given these intensifying linkages, questions regarding the environmental impact of China-Africa relations have gained prominence within academic literature. The following section will examine how the current literature engages with the question: how do contemporary sustainability?[1]

Surprisingly, few scholars have engaged with this question specifically from a theoretical perspective. Empirically, scholars employ various quantitative methods to evaluate the environmental impacts of Chinese aid, foreign direct investment (FDI), and other prominent development initiatives, such as the BRI, in Africa and/or the Global South more broadly (Busse, Erdogan, and Mühlen 2016; Tawiah, Zakari, and Khan 2020; Boamah 2022; Cuiyan and Chazong 2020). The theoretical literature, on the other hand, does not engage with the central question, but instead focuses on key dimensions of the subject from either a realist or constructivist perspective. Realists often examine China-Africa relations and the material interests that characterize the relationship (Shinn and Eisenman 2023; Eisenman 2015; Otele 2020; Cheng 2014), and constructivists pay greater attention to China's role in global climate politics, focusing more on identity construction and conceptions of responsibility and power (Hoo 2018; Falkner and Buzan 2022; Yeophantong and Goh 2022; Kopra 2018). This review will demonstrate how the current literature contains several notable gaps in both the empirical

[1] For the purpose of this review, environmental sustainability is defined as "meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them" (Morelli 2011, 6), and sustainable development will refer more broadly to "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).

and theoretical research and thus fails to comprehensively examine how China-Africa relations impact prospects for global environmental sustainability.

Empirical Discussions of China's Environmental Impact in Africa

Empirically, scholars have explored the environmental impacts, largely measured based on CO2 emissions, of various dimensions of China-Africa engagement, such as FDI (Shinwari et al. 2022; Claudio-Quiroga, Gil-Alana, and Maiza-Larrarte 2023), trade (Li et al. 2023; Huang et al. 2017), and the BRI and green development (Ascensão et al. 2018; Dusengemungu, Liu, and Zhou 2022; Coenen et al. 2020). Within the literature, there are two dominant and competing theories on China's environmental impact in Africa: the pollution halo hypothesis and pollution haven hypothesis. The pollution haven hypothesis argues that pollution-intensive industries move to developing countries with lower environmental standards, thus exacerbating ecological degradation in those countries (Levinson and Taylor 2008, 223). The pollution halo hypothesis argues that trade and FDI reduce pollution through the transfer of clean technology and importation of "industrialized country pollution standards" (Birdsall and Wheeler 1993, 148).

To determine which hypothesis best explains China-Africa relations, scholars conduct various statistical analyses to examine how pathways of Chinese engagement, such as investment in infrastructure and technology, and exports and imports, impact emission levels in various African countries (Tawiah, Zakari, and Khan 2020; Li et al. 2023; Huang et al. 2017). The findings from most scholars reveal inconsistent and varying outcomes, with both the pollution haven and pollution halo hypothesis finding support depending on certain factors, such as the type of investment activity or strength of domestic institutions and environmental regulations (Shinwari et al. 2022; Huang et al. 2017; Tawiah, Zakari, and Khan 2020; Belem 2023; Boamah et al. 2022).

Because China is simultaneously an intensive polluter and leader in renewable energy and clean technology, its presence in developing countries with weak environmental standards can either improve or exacerbate ecological conditions (Tawiah, Zakari, and Khan 2020, 3). Some scholars found that Chinese investment in construction and Africa's exports of natural resources positively correlates with an increase in CO2 emissions, while Chinese FDI and exports of goods and services, especially green technology, correlates to a decrease in CO2 emissions (ibid 4;9-10; Li et al. 2023, 9-13). However, Shinwari et al. (2022) found that increase

in Chinese FDI helps to mitigate CO2 emissions in BRI countries through investments in renewable clean energy, new technologies, and eco-friendly projects, validating the pollution halo hypothesis and the environmental Kuznets curve (EKC) hypothesis, which states that emissions reduce with higher economic growth. On the other hand, Claudio-Quiroga, Gil-Alana, and Maize-Larrarte (2023) found no relationship between Chinese investment and emissions in African countries but acknowledged that their analysis could be further deepened by including other relevant variables, such as the origin and type of emissions.[2]

Boamah et al. (2022) found that China's infrastructure activities have varying impacts on pollution levels of African countries, and emphasize internal institution mechanisms, such as strong environmental policies, as an overlooked intervening variable to lower emissions. For instance, Nigeria has various departments and ministries tasked with policy interventions and regulation implementation for polluting sectors and established several internal institutional mechanisms that aim to ensure environmental quality (Boamah et al. 2022, 56288). Nigeria's domestic institutions play a role in ensuring proper regulation of Chinese investments and opposing pollution intensive exports from China, thus resulting in a more favorable environmental outcome of Chinese engagement (ibid).

Another consideration is the concentration of power in African governments and presence of non-state actors, such as activists and/or non-governmental organizations (NGO). Tan-Mullins and Mohan (2013) compared Chinese projects in Ghana and Angola and found that the strong presence of non-state stakeholders led to better environmental management of Ghana's Bui Dam project, whereas the concentration of power by Angolan elites resulted in failure to introduce programmes or initiatives that enforced environmental protection mechanisms for its oil extraction projects. Another example is Burkina Faso's Kua Forest, in which plans to declassify 16 hectares (ha) of the forest[3] and build a Chinese-funded hospital met widespread resistance from civil society due to the ecologically damaging location of the project (Belem 2023). Activists and NGOs managed to exercise their influence and successfully pressure the government to change the project's construction site, preserving the forest and demonstrating

[2] The emitter could be, for example, industrial processes or households, and the origin could be fossil fuel combustion or cover cement processes (Claudio-Quiroga, Gil-Alana, and Maiza-Larrarte 2022, 3510)
[3] A classified forest means that it is legally protected and managed for ecological preservation (Melanidis 2020). Declassifying 16 ha of the Kua Forest is particularly concerning for the country, as Burkina Faso is a Sahelian country and the rate of desertification has been accelerating in the past few decades with approximately 233,193 ha of forest lost every year between 2002 to 2014 (Belem 2023).

how domestic political contexts, specifically in terms of open civic space, can play a significant role in determining the environmental outcome of development projects (ibid).

In terms of the BRI, many scholars have presented similar conclusions when assessing the environmental impacts of China's green development initiatives (Ascensão et al. 2018; Zhai 2021; Dusengemungu, Liu, and Zhou 2022; Chen et al. 2022; Bohnett et al. 2022; Jun and Zadek 2019; Cuiyun and Chazhong 2020). Scholars highlight the potentially adverse environmental impacts of the BRI, while also noting the ability for the BRI to advance sustainable development and bolster Africa's green transition (Bohnett et al. 2022; Dusengemungu, Liu, and Zhou 2022; Zhai 2021). Among all the empirical literature, scholars' policy recommendations tend to emphasize the need for China to invest in more clean technology and infrastructure overseas and adhere to international environmental standards, and for African governments to enforce stringent regulatory frameworks and systemic evaluations of China's proposed development projects (Zhai 2021; Shinwari et al. 2022; Dusengemungu, Liu, and Zhou 2022; Shinn 2016; Ascensão et al. 2018).

Evidently, the empirical literature provides conflicting evidence which suggests that China's environmental impact in Africa is inconsistent and contingent on numerous variables.[4] However, when asking how China-Africa relations will impact prospects for global sustainability, relying solely on empirical data is insufficient, as strong correlations cannot explain why such outcomes occur or identify what key causal mechanisms are at play, nor can it effectively make predictions or inform policy based solely on quantitative findings. A lack of theoretical engagement limits the explanatory and predictive power of the quantitative findings, as what is presented is a complex myriad of significant variables without a guiding framework to analyze them within. As John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2013) note,

> "Theories, in short, provide economical explanations for a wide array of phenomena. They help us interpret what we observe and tie different hypotheses together, making them more than just a piecemeal collection of findings…Although theory is necessary in every realm of life, the more complicated and diverse the realm, the more dependent we are on mental maps to help us navigate the terrain. IR should place a high value on

[4] The variables being, for example, environmental protection mechanisms within domestic institutions, the domestic political landscape for civil society and non-state actors, the type of Chinese investment activities (e.g. construction, renewable energy imports, pollution-intensive exports), level of natural resource abundance, and the overall development of host countries. Importantly, a number of these variables are not endogenous to China, thus suggesting that analyses on China's environmental impact in Africa must expand beyond examining only Chinese activities and take into equal consideration domestic factors in African partner countries.

theory, therefore, because it seeks to make sense of an especially large and complex universe" (435).

For a topic as diverse and complicated as China-Africa relations and environmental sustainability, having a theoretical foundation can help make better sense of the numerous variables and causal mechanisms uncovered in the empirical data. While the theoretical literature has not engaged specifically with the question of how China-Africa relations impact global sustainability, authors have contributed theoretical insights regarding the various dimensions of China's role in global climate politics, and China-Africa relations more broadly.

Theoretical Perspectives

International relations scholars examining China's role in climate politics typically employ a constructivist framework, specifically the English School variant which largely focuses on a synthesis of realism and constructivism[5], and maintains that states form an international society[6] and great powers have a special responsibility to safeguard it (Kopra 2018, 2; Hoo 2018; Falkner and Buzan 2022, 16-18;44).[7] Scholars examining the China-Africa relationship, or China's rise more broadly, often employ a realist approach (Shinn and Eisenman 2023; Jalil 2019; Myšička 2021). From the constructivist perspective, more emphasis is placed on examining the ideational factors that shape and inform China's behavior in international climate negotiations, such as norms, identities and roles (Kopra 2018, 3;28; Hoo 2018, 33). Conversely, the realist literature does not engage with ideational factors and instead maintains the following core realist assumptions: all states aim to maximize their self-interest, and a state's behavior is driven primarily by its relative material capabilities and position in the international system (Rose 1998, 146; Cheng 2014; Shinn and Eisenman 2023).

[5] Within the English School, scholars consider international relations as a world of power, domination, and material capabilities, as well as the normative dimensions of human conduct, such as equality, membership, recognition, and reciprocity (Buzan 2004, 6). The English School framework aims to "uncover the nature and function of international societies, and to trace their history and development" (8).
[6] According to Bull (1977), an international society exists "when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions" (13). The basic notion of international society is that, similar to human beings who live in societies which they both shape and are shaped by, states live in an international society which they shape and shaped by (Buzan 2004, 8).
[7] For my study, I accept the English School as a variant of constructivism rather than its own distinct tradition.

Other traditions, particularly dependency theory and postcolonial theory, have also engaged with the subject of China-Africa relations. While dependency theory is a broad field with various strands, most theorists examining the China-Africa relationship assume a structural approach which views the world as based on a hierarchy of industrialized and developed countries at the center, and underdeveloped, poorer countries at the periphery (Agbebi and Virtanen 2017). In the case of China and Africa, dependency theorists aim to determine whether China's role in African development, particularly in aspects of trade, aid, and investments, is fostering ties of dependency and entrenching African countries' peripheral position, or if the relationship is one of South-South cooperation (ibid; Maswana 2009; Adem and Babagana 2023; Lisimba and Parashar 2020; Tarrósy 2020).

Postcolonial theory, often in conjunction with dependency theory, takes into account Africa's history of extractive colonial policies and the ways in which foreign assistance has resulted in a number of African countries being relatively passive recipients of aid, rather than fostering economic development and self-reliance (Lisimba and Parashar 2020). Postcolonial and dependency theorists also examine how the China-Africa relationship is altering geopolitical dynamics and challenging Western conceptions of dependency that are based on conventional North-South relationships, instead demonstrating the possibility of a distinct South-South approach that is premised on equality and mutual gains (Maswana 2009).

I have chosen to not focus on dependency or postcolonial theories for my study, despite both offering insightful approaches that critically account for historical legacies of colonization and contemporary geopolitical dynamics. There are two reasons for this decision: For one, dependency and postcolonial theory do not delve into the social construction of the prescribed roles and identities that China and African countries assume in both their relationship with one another, and their relation to other states and global dynamics. Moreover, dependency and postcolonial theories do not account for the role of civil society and non-state actors, which will be a central factor in my analysis and discussed further in the later sections. For these reasons, this review will focus specifically on the constructivist and realist literature on China-Africa relations, and China's approach to environmental responsibility and sustainability.

Conceptualizing Great Power

Before delving into the theoretical literature, it is important to clarify what a great power is and to highlight the difference between a realist and constructivist conception.[8] Due to the limited space in this review, the full conceptual debate cannot be thoroughly examined; however, a brief overview of the concept is necessary. Realists generally determine a great power based on its material strength, such as military and economic capabilities, and sometimes geographical size (Mearsheimer 2001, 5; Waltz 1979, 59). Great powers are engaged in constant competition with one another and consistently aim to maximize their material capabilities in order to survive in the international system (Mearsheimer 2001, 5;33).

Constructivists view power as both a material and ideational concept that is socially, culturally, and ideologically constructed (Bettiza and Lewis 2020). Consequently, great power status is not only derived from material capabilities, but it is also a socially constructed identity that shapes how states perceive themselves, and how others treat them (Kopra 2018, 15). According to Hedley Bull (1977), great powers are "recognized by other states, and conceived by their own leaders and people to have, certain special rights and duties" (196). For a state to qualify as a great power, it must have the legitimacy and approval from other members of international society to be in a position of higher authority.[9] Great powers will aim to gain legitimacy by accepting special responsibilities and claiming special rights, such as providing public goods, maintaining the balance of power, and establishing global norms (Bull 1977, 199; Falkner and Buzan 2022, 34; Kopra 2018, 72). In terms of climate change, great powers possess the material capabilities to combat environmental degradation and have a socially constructed responsibility in leading climate action as part of their special rights and duties. Moreover, through the establishment of global environmental norms, albeit a far more complex process that requires more than simply great power leadership, great powers can significantly influence the extent to which environmental sustainability and responsibility are prioritized by other states.

[8] There are different strands of realism, such as offensive and defensive realism, which have slightly different conceptions of what a great power is, and what a great power's behavior will be.

[9] Legitimacy is another critical concept among the constructivist literature, and Kopra (2018) highlights how the means of gaining legitimacy can evolve overtime. For instance, Kopra (2018) notes that in the Cold War era, military strength and the maintenance of global security was a primary factor in determining legitimacy (14). However, military strength has lessened in importance, and now soft power and credibility has increased (14). Yan Xuetong (2019) also discusses the importance of soft power and credibility as defining elements of a great power.

Realism and Contemporary China-Africa Relations

Scholars engaging with the topic of contemporary China-Africa relations from a realist perspective focus heavily on issues of trade, security, conflict, and power politics (Eisenman 2015; Shinn and Eisenman 2023; Cheng 2014; Monyae 2018). Realists view the China-Africa relationship as a strategic alliance designed to maximize China's national interests, which are predominantly economic and geo-strategic. More specifically, China's approach to African development is part of its larger goal to expand its sphere of influence in the international community and shift the balance of power in its favor (Otele 2020, 269; Cheng 2014, 363; Monyae 2018, 356; Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 120-134). According to realists, China's engagement with Africa not only strives for extensive resource extraction to bolster its growing economic capabilities, but is also a means of undermining US hegemony by providing African governments with the resources and opportunities for growth that the West has historically failed to do (Otele 2020, 270; Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 865; Sarieddine 2023, 526).

A prominent theme within the realist literature is an increasing focus on the concept of African agency (Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 44-47; Otele 2020, 274; Gadzala 2015, xxii). The concept of agency is first understood as a "form of political conduct implying a specific sense of choice, free will and autonomy" (Vadrot, 2016; 63). *African* agency is a relatively ambiguous concept that has not been clearly defined by most scholars employing the term; however, it seems to refer to how African state and/or non-state actors maximize their leverage and influence China's activities in their favor (Gadzala 2015, xx; Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 48; Mohan and Lampert 2012, 92;98). For example, African countries with valuable raw materials can leverage these resources to negotiate more advantageous deals with China and defend themselves against predatory deals (Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 47; Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath 2016). Another example can be non-state African actors taking direct action to regulate the activities of Chinese companies through lobbying, pressuring the central government, and collaborating with other more powerful actors, such as NGOs and the media, to amplify their concerns or demands (Mohan and Lampert 2012).

There is a general trend within the literature to portray Africa as a passive actor with weak institutions, vulnerable to China's exploitative activities and economic temptations (Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 44-46; Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010; Shinn 2016, 53-54). However, some scholars have challenged this notion by examining the ways in which African

state elites influence and manage the outcomes of Chinese engagement activities, demonstrating that the China-Africa relationship is more locally driven and mediated than conventional narratives suggest (Mohan and Lampert 2012, 97-100;110; Corkin 2015, 77-79; Gadzala 2015, 92-93). The focus on African agency provides important insights about how African states' own national interests and political environments play an equally important role in determining the various outcomes of the China-Africa relationship (Taylor 2015; Corkin 2015; Lampert and Mohan 2015). Moreover, my research will expand this concept by also considering the extent to which domestic African civic spaces and the actors within them impact the environmental outcome and management of Chinese-funded projects (Belem 2023; Tan-Mullins and Mohan 2013).

Importantly, the realist literature presents several key points about the nature and dynamics of the China-Africa relationship, highlighting the significance of national interests, material capabilities, and strategic interactions between actors. Unfortunately, realist scholars fail to adequately address the environmental dimension of China-Africa relations and do not consider ecological concerns in their analyses of core interests. Moreover, the realist framework cannot account for the normative considerations that are also at play in the China-Africa relationship, such as China's aims to enhance its soft power through claims of South-South solidarity and mutual growth (Hurri 2023), given that the framework does not engage with ideational factors.

Constructivism and China's Role in Global Environmental Politics

While there is a notable gap in the realist literature regarding environmental issues, the constructivist literature focuses heavily on questions of China's role in global environmental politics. The constructivist literature maintains the following core assumptions when engaging with the subject of China's role in global climate politics: identities and roles are socially constructed; and international society is upheld by primary institutions, which are "durable and recognized patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by members of interstate societies, and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles" (Buzan 2004, 181). Constructivists tend to examine how China perceives its great power role and responsibility by analyzing its behavior in climate politics and compliance, or non-compliance, with environmental norms (Kopra 2018; Yeophantong and Goh 2022; Falkner and Buzan 2022). For instance, China's active participation in the Paris Agreement and Xi Jinping's proclamations that

China will be a "torchbearer in the global endeavor for ecological modernization" (Xi 2017c, 4) illustrates that China's conception of the great power role may be interlinked with greater climate responsibility (Kopra 2018, 158).

Park (2022) and Li (2017) note that China's role in international climate cooperation has evolved in the last few decades in response to pressures and expectations that it behaves more responsibly, given its massive contribution to emissions and capacity to advance sustainability with its economic and technological capabilities. However, scholars also emphasize how China is relatively reluctant to fully embrace the great power label because of the advantages of identifying as a developing country, such as the right to prioritize economic development over environmental responsibilities, as well as it being a key pillar of the South-South and mutual development rhetoric underpinning its relations with other developing countries (Hook 2019; Li, Wu and Zhang 2019, 94-95).

Yeophantong and Goh (2022) highlight that China holds a dualistic self-image as both a developing country and a great power. This paradox means that while economic development remains a top priority, other imperatives such as securing international legitimacy and regime security pressure China to act in an environmentally responsible manner (71-72). These factors help to explain why China's climate policies are often inconsistent and selective; for instance, in 2020, President Xi Jinping pledged that China would achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, yet Chinese companies continue to build coal-fired power plants overseas (Stern and Xie 2021; Belem 2023). Kopra (2018) also argues that China's sometimes contradictory behavior in climate policies is motivated by calculations of self-interest and interpretations of its identity as both a responsible great power and a developing nation (147). Similar to the empirical findings, the constructivist literature reveals an inconsistent pattern in China's approach to environmental responsibility. However, the constructivist framework provides a more coherent understanding of the ideational factors and causal mechanisms that contribute to the observed outcome.

Role theory is another theoretical framework that provides further insights into the ways in which China's behavior in its foreign policy reflects societally constructed roles. While the dominant constructivist framework adopted is the English School, role theory is a valuable model to engage with. Role theory focuses on the roles—which refers to both social positions in an organized group and any socially recognized category of actors—that individuals, states, and others enact on the international arena (Wehner and Thies 2014, 411). Scholars examining China

through a role theory lens concentrate on how China's self-identification as a developing country impacts its role behavior in global governance, and the ways in which China navigates its leadership roles in climate politics and Global South governance (Duggan 2020; Hurri 2023).

Although the constructivist literature engages thoroughly with the subject of China's role in global environmental politics and the ways in which socially constructed identities impact China's environmental behavior domestically, and within international climate organizations, there is a lack of attention to how these factors impact China-Africa relations. Scholars will emphasize China's failure to adhere to its green BRI commitments due to identity contradictions and conflicting core interests; however, they have not considered how specific contextual factors of each African country also shape China's behavior and environmental outcomes. The constructivist literature also does not sufficiently engage with questions of African agency and how the construction of identities and core interests at the African state and/or non-state level impact China's overseas environmental policies; this is particularly significant given the centrality of the intersubjective dynamics of norm creation within constructivist analyses.[10] Evidently, the theoretical literature is relatively fragmented, with constructivists focusing heavily on ideational factors and China's role in climate politics, and realists paying greater attention to the China-Africa relation in terms of material power and security. Neither perspective, however, offers a fully adequate explanation for the varied dynamics at play in this policy domain.

Conclusion

Numerous empirical studies have been conducted to demonstrate and evaluate the environmental impact of China in Africa. The findings reveal an inconsistent pattern with numerous variables contributing to a selective outcome. Unfortunately, the empirical literature can only produce correlational data, and the absence of any theoretical engagement significantly limits its ability to identify the causal mechanisms that underpin the inconsistent environmental impacts of Chinese engagement in Africa.

[10] For instance, some scholars briefly touch on Africa's history as a colonized continent and how historical legacies of colonization in different African countries impact approaches to FDI, aid, and foreign actors such as China (See Peter Volberdin and Jason Warner, "China and Uranium: Comparative Possibilities for Agency in Statecraft in Niger and Namibia," China Africa Research Initiative, Working Paper no. 0111, March 2017, 22; Boamah et al. 2022). However, these studies are typically quantitative, and the findings are not guided by a constructivist framework.

Although there has not been theoretical engagement with the specific question of how China-Africa relations will impact global sustainability, realist and constructivist scholars have examined different aspects of the central question. Realists discuss the motivations and actions of China and African states respectively, as well as the dynamics of their relationships in terms of strategic and material interests. Constructivists emphasize the ideational factors that shape China's evolving and often conflicting identity as a great power and a developing nation, and how this contradiction results in its selective behavior in global climate politics.

The theoretical literature exhibits its own gaps as well. Realists neglect environmental considerations of the China-Africa relationship, and constructivists pay little attention to the context-specific factors shaping China's behavior at the African state level. In order to assess how China-Africa relations will impact prospects for global sustainability, it is necessary to have both a coherent theoretical framework to identify and make sense of the numerous causal mechanisms, and empirical data to verify the assumptions and predictions generated by the theory. Bridging the gaps between theoretical and empirical research, and realist and constructivist approaches, is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of the ideational and material factors that inhibit or advance sustainable development within the China-Africa relationship, to then better understand how to promote environmental sustainability and formulate effective green development policies.

II. Research Design

Theoretical Framework

The predominant theoretical approach that scholars employ when examining China's role in climate politics is constructivist, particularly the English School tradition (Kopra 2018; Falkner and Buzan 2022; Yeophantong and Goh 2022; Hoo 2018), whereas the research on China-Africa relations largely assumes a realist framework (Shinn and Eisenman 2023; Eisenman 2015; Cheng 2014; Otele 2020). Both theories provide crucial insights on different dimensions of how the China-Africa relationship impact prospects for global sustainability does, while also suffering from limitations within themselves. Thus, this study will integrate selected core principles and assumptions from both constructivism and realism to produce a robust theoretical approach that can account for the numerous, material and ideational factors affecting the China-Africa relationship and its environmental impact.

It is particularly useful to synthesize constructivism and realism as both theories address the shortcomings of one another. For instance, realism faces criticism for its deterministic and material-heavy focus that does not consider ideational factors as significant objects of analysis (Jackson 2004). Constructivism, on the other hand, highlights the constitutive role that norms, ideas, and intersubjectivity play in directing the content and significance of material forces (Kurki and Sinclair 2010). However, constructivists are also criticized for overlooking the equally constitutive role that materiality has in defining social structures and relations, and failing to recognize the dialectic between ideas and material forces (ibid). The English School variant of constructivism does manage to address these limitations to a degree by acknowledging that a great power relies on the possession of both material capabilities and recognized legitimacy based on special privileges and responsibilities (Eckersley 2022, 54). By combining core elements of constructivist and realist frameworks, a hybrid approach offers more analytical persuasiveness by acknowledging the constitutive power that both ideational and material forces play in IR broadly, and the China-Africa relationship specifically.

This study will maintain the core realist assumption that the international system is made up of states who "think and act in terms of interest defined as power" (Morgenthau 1948, 4). Because the China-Africa relationship is implicitly strategic, the importance of material interests cannot be disregarded as a driving factor in the relationship. Realist scholars have demonstrated how material interests, such as economic growth and military strength, are core elements in the China-Africa relationship (Shinn and Eisenman 2023; Otele 2020; Cheng 2014; Monyae 2018). This thesis acknowledges that the realist school is vast and includes distinctions between offensive and defensive realism, among other differences: however, because this study is not aiming to examine conflict-related issues, such as security competition or power politics, the realist framework is only employed to establish the global context in which the China-Africa relationship exists and recognize its material dimensions.

In terms of environmental sustainability, realism has not sufficiently grappled with the question of how states respond to climate change. Moreover, realism assumes a state-centric focus that does not consider the role of civil society. Because realism does not engage with ideational factors, such as the construction of norms or identities, it cannot offer a framework for analyzing how Chinese and African actors react and respond to ecological concerns because concepts such as environmental sustainability and responsibility contain an essential ideational

element**.** For this reason, the constructivist approach will address the shortcomings of realism through its emphasis on deconstructing social and political reality and centering ideational factors in its analysis of state and non-state behavior (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001).

Constructivist scholars, specifically those belonging to the English School tradition, have demonstrated the ways in which China constructs and defines its identity as a great power, which then influences its actions in global climate politics (Kopra 2018; Hoo 2018; Falkner and Buzan 2018; Yang 2022). By applying a constructivist-English School framework, this study will examine how Chinese and African leaders and policymakers define and construct notions of environmental sustainability and responsibility, which will then provide insights into how these conceptions inform development initiatives between China and Africa. The theoretical framework for this study thus employs a materialist-ideational synthesis, maintaining the realist assumption that all states act according to their core interests; however, also acknowledging that these core interests are not defined based on purely material factors but are also socially constructed and informed by social, cultural, and ideological contexts, and impacted by civil society. This research aims to fill the gap in the prevailing theoretical literature by integrating both realist and constructivist approaches to better understand how contemporary China-Africa relations impact prospects for global environmental sustainability.

This study hypothesizes that despite China's ostensibly more proactive role in global climate politics and its professed commitment to advancing green development in its overseas initiatives, China-Africa relations inhibit efforts to advance global environmental sustainability because economic growth continues to be prioritized over climate action by both Chinese and African leaders and policymakers. The secondary hypothesis is that if the host country's civil society has a strong, collaborative relationship with the state, then non-state actors can wield significant influence in determining the environmental and social outcome of Chinese-funded development initiatives. Both hypotheses explore competing priorities and influences within the China-Africa relationship, specifically in terms of the tension between economic growth and environmental sustainability. The dual focus on state and non-state actors allows this thesis to analyze the top-down pressures of state interests, and the bottom-up impact of non-state actors, to reveal a more comprehensive examination of the mechanisms at play.

Methods

This study will conduct a discourse analysis to investigate how Chinese and African state and non-state actors perceive, express, and enact environmental sustainability and responsibility in relation to broader contextual factors, and include quantitative data on ecological and economic trends for contextualization. Moreover, core themes within state and civil society discourse regarding the impact of Chinese engagement will be analyzed to explore the extent to which state and/or non-state actors play a role in shaping the ecological outcome of development initiatives. Discourse analysis aims to examine the relationship between discourse, which consists of an "ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is produced and reproduced in a particular historical situation," and reality in a particular context, including broader relations of power and authority which shape that context (Halperin and Heath 2020, 364-65;368). Many scholars have conducted discourse analyses on China's evolving role in global climate politics and effectively demonstrate the ways in which such an analysis can provide insights into the contextual factors that shape China's approach towards climate governance (Kopra 2018; Finamore 2018; Hoo 2018). Conducting a discourse analysis on both Chinese and African texts will yield further data and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how environmental sustainability is understood and shaped within the China-Africa relationship.

The data will be generated by analyzing English and English-translated official speeches from Chinese, Kenyan and Ethiopian officials, policy documents on BRI projects**,** including Environmental Impact Assessments, reports and articles from Chinese and African think tanks, and online articles from Chinese and African state-owned media outlets and free press. Additionally, reports from Chinese and African NGOs and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), and media from international NGOs (INGO) that report on environmental or diplomatic topics between China and Africa will be examined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the overall discursive context surrounding the China-Africa relationship. These sources will provide insight on how Chinese and African discourse portray and interpret China-Africa relations and development initiatives. While the language barrier, particularly with the Chinese and Ethiopian sources, does limit the amount of data that can be collected, examining available English media is still valuable as it sheds light on how African and Chinese leaders address and convey environmental concerns and constructions of environmental responsibility to

both domestic and global audiences, given that the articles under examination are translated to, or written in English.

This study will specifically focus on major BRI projects, given the significance of the BRI to China-Africa relations and China's green development approach, and because the BRI has received widespread scrutiny for its potentially disastrous impact on ecological conditions. For Kenya, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) has been selected as it is among Kenya's most expensive infrastructure projects and met widespread controversy concerning its economic, ecological, and social impact. For Ethiopia, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway (AADR) will be examined as it is another flagship BRI project and garnered considerable attention for revolutionizing transportation infrastructure in East Africa (Volpi 2024). Because both projects are considered crucial drivers of economic development and key components to each host country's core interests, there is also a wider range of available discourses and quantitative data surrounding each initiative. Since this study is already restrained to English language sources, the prominence of these projects alleviates, to a degree, the challenging task of gathering a sufficient collection of data.

Moreover, these initiatives offer key insights into China's environmental commitments and the extent to which they are upheld in its overseas development initiatives. As China, at least discursively, promotes a dedication to advancing global sustainability, these projects provide an opportunity to empirically evaluate to what degree China's discourse corresponds to its actions. Due to the time constraints of this project, secondary empirical data will suffice to co-validate the qualitative findings.

For this research, a small-N comparative analysis to test whether regime type influences the environmental outcome of Chinese-funded development initiatives in Africa will be conducted in which Kenya and Ethiopia are the selected units of analysis. The small-N comparison approach is best suited for this study as it allows for detailed, in-depth analysis of the specific selected countries, while also providing greater scope for contextualization in terms of the overall environmental impact of China-Africa relations (Halperin and Heath 2020, 238). This study employs a most-similar systems design (MSSD) to investigate the environmental impacts of Chinese development initiatives in Kenya and Ethiopia. MSSD is an effective approach as it involves selecting cases that are similar in several key aspects, but differ in one key detail, allowing the analysis to isolate and examine the role of the primary independent variable: the

influence of domestic state systems and state-civil society relationship on environmental outcomes (Heath and Halperin 2020, 239).

Kenya and Ethiopia were selected for this research for several key reasons. First, according to the American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker, which gathers data on China's outbound FDI and construction contracts valued over $95 million since 2005, both countries are among the top five recipients of Chinese FDI with Ethiopia receiving approximately $36,010 million in investment and construction, and Kenya receiving roughly half this amount, at $16,550 million (American Enterprise Institute 2023; Scissors 2018). This also assists in data collection, as there are more large-scale development projects and thus data available.

Both countries are also anchor states in East Africa, meaning that they play a pivotal role in maintaining regional stability due to location, size of population, infrastructure, and financial markets (Barkan 2004, 88; Hanson 2009; Verhoeven and Woldemariam 2022,623). As a result, both are key strategic partners in Africa overall, and for China in terms of security, market access, and overseas development. Moreover, Ethiopia and Kenya were selected because of their differing regime types, in which Ethiopia has historically been authoritarian and has aligned with China's one-party system, while Kenya is a representative democracy with democratic milestones that have been highlighted by the U.S. government (Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 48; Blanchard 2013; "Democratic Governance, Peace and Security," n.d.).[11] While this research acknowledges that Ethiopia's current government was popularly elected, its "semi-authoritarian" system can still provide insight into how different domestic political and civic contexts impact Chinese engagement and the environmental management of development projects (Ayana, Arts, and Wiersum 2018, 314). By comparing these contrasting government systems, this study can investigate whether, and if so, to what extent, regime type and non-state actors impact the environmental outcome of development.

These cases will also shed light on how African agency is exercised in different political and civic landscapes. By comparing the semi-authoritarian and restrictive Ethiopian civic space to Kenya's relatively more open and democratic context, albeit one that is still affected by

[11] According to the Freedom House (2024a; 2023a), Ethiopia is rated "not free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties, and internet freedom. Kenya, on the other hand, is rated "partly free" on political rights and civil liberties, and internet freedom (Freedom House 2024b; Freedom House 2023b).

corruption and political violence (Freedom House 2024b), this study will highlight the degree to which African state and non-state actors, such as state elites and civil society organizations, exercise their agency to influence Chinese engagement to achieve their desired end. This will be determined by examining to what extent the ecological outcome and management of Chinese-funded development projects reflect the demands and priorities of civil society, taking into consideration perceptions and constructions of sustainability from local and non-state actors, or if the outcome is largely dictated by state interests.

Because the objective of this study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how China-Africa relations impact prospects for environmental sustainability, a random sample is not the most appropriate strategy for case selection. As Flyvberg (2006) argues, "the typical or average case is often not the richest in information. Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studies" (229). Ethiopia and Kenya are extreme cases in that both are within the top five African countries receiving the highest amounts of FDI from China and have expanding economies with ample market opportunities for China.

By integrating material and ideational factors, the following analysis of Chinese engagement in Kenya and Ethiopia will address both the strategic motivations and normative dimensions that determine and influence ecological and economic priorities. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research aims to understand how state and non-state actors navigate the tensions between economic imperatives and environmental responsibilities.

Chapter 3: China's Identity and Approach to Environmental Sustainability

China's stance regarding environmental responsibility has, and continues to be, intimately linked to its dual identity as a developing country and great power, and its core national interests— both of which are constructed and influenced by various ideational and material factors at the domestic and international level. To gain a comprehensive understanding of China's contemporary role in green development, it is necessary to examine the history of China's approach to environmental sustainability and responsibility in the context of global climate politics, and how its identity and leadership style has adapted to the changing political, economic, and social contexts.

This chapter begins with a brief exploration of China's national identity from the last 19th century to modern day, in order to establish the historical context of China's position within the international arena and its strategic relations with the developing world, particularly in terms of China-Africa relations. The following section provides the context for China's approach towards environmental responsibility by tracing the evolution of its attitude towards climate change and participation in international climate negotiations by noting key events in China's climate policy timeline and the political, economic, and social contexts in which they occurred. While global climate politics is not the main focus of this thesis, it is necessary to review China's role in climate governance to provide the context for its approach to sustainable development in the latter case studies. By applying a constructivist lens, this chapter will also examine the domestic and international factors that shape China's current approach to environmental sustainability and development, particularly in terms of its, at times conflicting, global identity as a potential leader in climate action and developing country that maintains economic growth as its top priority.

A Brief History of China's National Identity and Roles

China's national identity has been the center of debate amongst Chinese scholars and elites for several decades. Its role in international climate governance draws the attention of scholars and policymakers worldwide considering China is the world's largest carbon dioxide emitter and responsible for an increasing share of future global emissions (Li, Pattberg, and Widerberg 2023). In order to understand the evolution of China's dual identity and its subsequent approach to climate action, it is necessary to examine the ways in which China's

history is reflected in its contemporary identity. Due to the scope of this thesis and this chapter's main focus revolving around China's approach to environmental responsibility and sustainable development, there will not be a comprehensive discussion of China's political evolution in international relations. Nonetheless, it is necessary to explore some of the key events that are crucial components of China's current global role and identity while acknowledging that China's historical and political evolution cannot be adequately examined in a single chapter.

A significant event that many scholars highlight when analyzing China's national identity is its "century of humiliation," which has left a lasting impact on its foreign policy strategy and priorities (Boon 2018; Duggan 2020; Kopra 2018). The century of humiliation refers to the period between 1839 to 1949 when the British government forced China to open its ports to the opium trade and was compelled into a semi-colonial position (Kaufman 2010). Prior to this era, China held a central position within a complex regional tributary system and was less familiar with the concept of an international arena. However, over the course of this period of semi-colonization, China lost large parts of its territory to Western nations and Japan, and experienced further shame by the independence movements in Tibet and Mongolia, and Japanese incursions into Manchuria (ibid). In 1949 Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), signaling the end of China's century of humiliation; however, a central part of the PRC's foundation and narrative regarding China's role in international society is significantly shaped by this period.

In the first decade after the PRC's inception, Chinese leaders adopted an anti-imperialist and pro-developing state role which embraced foreign policy themes such as South-South cooperation and North-South injustice, and emphasized the shared history between China and other developing countries victimized by Western colonization, particularly African countries fighting for independence (Duggan 2020). Mao emphasized equality, mutual benefit, and mutual respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty as key principles of the PRC (Mao 1949b)—principles which continue to constitute the fundamentals of China's approach to its contemporary diplomatic relations and international roles. In the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were established comprising China's foreign relations principles which include: "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" (Xi 2024).

The Bandung Conference held in 1955 laid the ideological and philosophical foundation of Asia-Africa solidarity and accelerated China's involvement with Africa (Wood 2012). While China self-identified with the newly decolonized states in Africa and Asia, it also took the opportunity to claim a leadership role among developing countries as a powerful state that would defend the interests of the Global South and act as a leading actor in a Western-dominated global system (Boon 2018; Duggan 2020). During this time in the early 1950s, Mao and other Chinese elites[12] promoted a common vision of China fulfilling its rightful place as a great power, "[emerging] in the world as a nation with an advanced culture" (Mao 1949a). Moreover, Mao eschewed "great-power chauvinism" and stressed that China would always behave as a modest power in its international relations, making a greater contribution to humanity as a powerful socialist industrial country (Mao 1956b). Even today, China continues its role as a leader of the third world within global economic governance bodies such as the IMF, WB, and G20. Within the IMF, the PRC assumes a more proactive role as a promoter of reform in order to further the interests of itself and other developing nations, pushing for a greater voice for developing countries (Duggan 2020).

However, along with the nationalist rhetoric that Chinese leaders espoused, there was also a clear recognition of the country's material shortcomings. Mao noted in 1956 that China's two weaknesses were that it was "poor" and "blank," meaning that their industry and agriculture were underdeveloped, and their cultural and scientific level was not high (Mao 1956a). While these were considered weaknesses, Mao also assured that China is "like a blank sheet of paper, which is good for writing on" and "countries with a high scientific and technological level are overblown with arrogance" (ibid). China's perception of its material inadequacies linked to the notion that it needed to catch up with the developed world; this idea would be a critical motivating factor behind the Great Leap Forward policy in 1958 which ultimately ended in economic and social disaster (Boon 2018).

During the post-cold war era in particular, Chinese leaders also aimed to promote its role as a model of national liberation and independence to demonstrate to other colonized countries that they could overcome "humiliation" by learning from China's experience with foreign occupation (Le Prestre 1997, 189). Chinese leaders, particularly Mao, viewed the developing world as a political opportunity and source of international support against Western hegemony

[12] Elites in this case refer to high-ranking members of the government, the CCP, and the military.

(Boon 2018). However, it is important to note that while China does promote itself as a leader of the developing world and identifies itself with their ideals, it does not make any claims to global hegemonism (*Al Jazeera* 2023; Loke 2021). Chinese leaders emphasize that China is not seeking the status of a superpower; instead, they insist on principles of equality, sovereignty, and nonintervention. Contemporarily, Xi affirms this sentiment, noting that:

> "China has grown from a poor and weak country to the world's second largest economy not by committing military expansion or colonial plunder, but through the hard work of its people and our efforts to uphold peace. China will never waver in its pursuit of peaceful development. No matter how strong its economy grows, China will never seek hegemony, expansion or sphere of influence" (Xi 2017a).

While this section has only scratched the surface of the historical and political evolution of China's national identity, it provides the necessary foundation for understanding how China's contemporary role and approach to IR is shaped. The enduring impact of the century of humiliation and anti-imperialist stance continue to influence China's foreign policy principles, which will be seen to play a large role in its approach to climate action. Moreover, China's interest in the developing world has significant implications for global environmental politics and it is crucial for understanding how its national interests are reflected in its diplomatic and strategic relations, and the ways in which it impacts the prospects for global sustainability. The following section will delve more deeply into the evolution of China's climate role and examine the underlying social, political, and economic factors that shape its identity and subsequent approach to environmental sustainability.

The Evolution of China's Role in Climate Politics

Some scholars argue that the environmental crises China faces today, and its contemporary environmental practices can be traced back to the Maoist era (Kopra 2018; Kalantzakos 2017). The era in which Mao ruled was characterized by mass mobilization and industrialization, relocation and dislocation, and a militarist outlook of conquering nature to create a socialist utopia (Kalantzakos 2017, 68). Mao's approach to the environment disregarded science and tradition, viewing nature through a purely utilitarian lens as something to manage, utilize, and control (ibid). In order to achieve modernization and rapid industrialization, Mao pursued aggressive policies that were driven by a more ideological belief and desire to demonstrate the success of socialist development, rather than a fully rational, scientific

application of environmental management. During this period, the emphasis was on controlling and dominating nature to meet immediate economic goals, driven by a series of policies that included political repression, uniform implementation of country-wide policies without involvement of local expertise and adaptability to regional conditions, and mass relocation of populations from cities into the country (68-69).

While Maoist China did not heavily participate in international society, it was not entirely isolated from the international community either. China's participation in the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm, which was the first international conference that the PRC participated in, marked a significant first move into the international arena. At the Stockholm Conference, China's participation exposed its delegates to the growing global environmental movements and the PRC also produced a list of core principles that they believed ought to be included in the conference's final declaration, and most of which reflect the foundation of China's contemporary stance towards climate change and environmental problems (Peking Review 1972).

The PRC first noted that economic development and social progress are necessary prerequisites for environmental protection and improvement, highlighting that developing countries' urgent need is to develop their national economy, build modern industry and agriculture, and achieve economic independence to then have the capacity to improve their natural environment. They contested the belief that population growth and environmental conservation are irreconcilable, arguing that proper measures and planning can resolve any potential issues and pushed for the complete destruction of biochemical and nuclear weapons. They rebuked the capitalist superpowers that pursue imperialist policies and aggressive wars, adding that compensation and support should be awarded to countries that are victims of colonization and imperialism. Moreover, the PRC advocated for international cooperation and the establishment of an international environment fund financed by major industrially developed countries (Peking Review 1972, 9-11).

Several key principles of the PRC's initial list are still reflected in its contemporary approach to climate action, which will be further discussed later in this chapter. Going back to the historical timeline of China's role in international climate politics, China's reform period in the late 1970s to early 1990s marked the era in which Chinese leaders focused heavily on domestic economic growth and the development of its socialist market economy, while "keeping

a low profile" in the international arena—a guiding principle of China's foreign policy that was developed by Deng Xiaoping (Xuetong 2014). During this era, and still today, China's core national interests revolved around maximizing economic growth and "[completing] the historical task of industrialization and urbanization," which largely stands at odds with environmental sustainability (Kopra 2018, 129;
"China's Policies and Actions for Addressing Climate Change" 2011, 1).

In terms of climate change, China's top leaders consistently represented China as part of the developing world which, like other countries in the Global South, are victims of the adverse environmental effects that the Global North has historical responsibility for (Yang 2022). A key strategy China adopted in climate governance throughout this period of reform was constructing climate change in terms of climate equity, promoting the Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) principle which acknowledges the different capabilities and responsibilities of individual states in tackling climate change, arguing that developed countries have a special responsibility to tackle climate change due to historic global inequalities and disproportionate contribution to environmental degradation (Kopra 2018, 115).

Integrating into the international community was still a priority for the PRC mainly due to economic interests such as channeling foreign investments and technology into China (Kopra 2018, 52). Following the end of the Cold War, China's foreign policy approach under Deng focused more on domestic economic and social reforms aimed at opening the economy to foreign investors and technology in order to modernize the country's material capabilities (Le Prestre 1997, 191). However, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, China's relations with other countries, particularly those in the West, drastically deteriorated and China needed to find a way to break the diplomatic isolation that followed.

At the time, international climate negotiations under the UN were considered high profile negotiations and provided China an opportunity to rejoin international society and alleviate its diplomatic tensions with the Western world (Yang 2022). Soon after the incident, China began to demonstrate a willingness to engage in international environmental cooperation; for instance, sending over 120 Chinese environmental groups abroad in 1990 and joining the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 (Shouqiu and Voigts 1993, 25). In 1992 Premier Li Peng presented at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro a series of proposals for managing the global environment to over

110 world leaders (ibid). China also refocused its attention on the developing world in fear of international isolation and promoted the formation of the "G77+China" (Duggan 2020; Li 2017). Compared to Western countries, most developing states, particularly those in Africa, displayed a certain level of understanding regarding the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) response to the protests at Tiananmen Square, demonstrating a convergence of views on the non-universality of the liberal democratic model (ibid).

Alongside international pressures to participate in the global climate regime, an increased domestic awareness of environmental problems also partially drove China's involvement in international environmental diplomacy. At the beginning of China's economic opening in 1978, climate change was treated as a scientific issue reserved for discussion in remote international negotiations (Heggelund 2021). Despite the ostensibly proactive role China began to assume in the 1990s, it still demonstrated an unwillingness to prioritize environmental sustainability over development and continued to promote the CBDR principle at the forefront of its multilateral climate negotiation approach. In this sense, China's early participation in global climate governance was largely for instrumental purposes to entrench its position in international society rather than pursuing ambitious climate policies.

Climate change was still framed by China as a North-South problem, in which the Global North was obligated to carry the bulk of climate responsibility while the Global South had the right to pursue its own prosperity, regardless of the environmental implications. However, China began mainstreaming and integrating climate change into its central economic development framework in response to various drivers in the late 1990s. From 1981 to 1991, gross national product (GNP) increased an average of 8.8% annually and GNP per capita reached over $300 (Shouqiu and Voigts 1993, 26; "China GNP 1962-2024," n.d.). While the economic reform greatly enhanced living standards, it also produced new social issues such as pollution and overall environmental degradation, particularly in terms of air quality.

While China's authoritarian one-party system may be assumed to be invulnerable to social unrest, this is not necessarily the case. Domestic pressure and the need to ensure the authority and legitimacy of an unelected regime is paramount for the Chinese State in order to maintain political stability (Beeson 2017). Therefore, the CCP has been long concerned with maintaining its legitimacy, which was been secured through its economic performance since the reform era (Teng and Wang 2021); however, with environmental problems increasing in severity

towards the late 1990s, and citizens even becoming ill or dying due to air, land, and water pollution, ecological concerns now represents a top reason for social discontent in contemporary Chinese society (Kopra 2018, 130). In particular, middle-class citizens have increasingly urged the government to acknowledge the severe problems with air quality and formulate policy instruments that would reduce, or limit, pollution in major provinces (Finamore 2018; Stalley 2021). As a result, the CCP's policy priority has gradually shifted away from the single objective of economic growth to a wider variety of social and environmental challenges (Shen and Xie 2018, 715).

With the economy in a more stable position, China could afford to focus more attention on improving other living conditions. Several key developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s marked a new phase in China's climate policies, in which the government began to recognize the severity and urgency of domestic environmental problems, and equally, if not more importantly, the fact that climate change contributes to new sources of performance legitimacy (Teng and Wang 2021). In 1998, the main responsibility for climate change negotiations shifted from the Chinese Meteorological Administration (CMA) to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), which began as the State Planning Commission (SPC) in 1952 and is one of the most powerful agencies within China's state system (Li 2017). The NDRC is responsible for formulating policies for economic and social development and holds the authority over Chinese climate change and energy policy (Gippner 2020, 70). The shift from the CMA to NDRC symbolized that climate change was no longer sidelined as a purely scientific issue but is now recognized as a highly political and economic issue that warrants a position on the State's political agenda.

In 2004, the new leader Hu Jintao initiated a paradigm shift in China's development philosophy, calling for a "comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable approach to…economic and social development" (Hu 2004). During this time, Hu continued to insist on representing China as a major developing country with underdeveloped material capability in the "primary stage of socialism," and resisted any suggestions for revising its identity (Hu 2007; Yang 2022). While China still rejected a more proactive leadership role on the global front of environmental responsibility, at the domestic level, policymakers and leaders began introducing more substantive parameters for environmental policy considerations that mainly revolved around energy-related emissions (Heggelund 2021). Ma Kai, the head of the NDRC said in 2007 that

China will not "tread the traditional path of industrialization, featuring high consumption and high emissions," but will set forth a new path to development (Watts 2007). In Hu's report at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, he acknowledged that the "socialist market economy is basically in place, but there remain structural and institutional obstacles slowing down development," arguing that overall socio-economic development planning is conducive to a "resource-conserving and environment-friendly society" (Hu 2007).

However, as China continued to achieve massive growth and increasing material strength, relying on claims of CBDR and its developing country identity to avoid stronger climate commitments met scrutiny from the international community, including other developing countries that were often represented by China in the majority of international negotiations. In 2006, China surpassed the US as the world's largest annual emitter of GHGs (Kopra 2018, 136), and in 2010 it overtook Japan as the second largest economy (Hao 2022).

With China's growing contribution to emissions and reluctance to accept greater responsibility— exemplified in China's rigid refusal of binding targets at the Copenhagen Accord in 2009— criticisms from both the Global North and South began challenging China's reliance on its developing country identity and lack of ambitious climate targets (Yang 2022). Under Hu's leadership, China had consistently approached foreign policy based on Deng's philosophy of "keeping a low profile" (Xuetong 2014). However, a distinct shift occurred in China's foreign policy and climate strategy following Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2013, with China no longer keeping a low profile and, instead, "striving for achievement" (ibid).

China's Contemporary Climate Role

Xi aimed to offer a new definition of China's international identity, stressing that, in terms of defining international norms and reforming the global governance system, the country should be a leading state rather than a follower (Yang 2022). The 2015 Paris Agreement is frequently referred to as a critical moment in China's climate governance approach, as it was the first time China made any claim to climate leadership (Hurri 2023). However, a year prior in 2014, China and the US signed a joint agreement to curb carbon emissions, including China's first-ever commitment to stop its emissions from growing by 2030, and was key to creating the conditions for the Paris Agreement and China's increased willingness to play a larger role in global climate governance (Landler 2014). Following the US' withdrawal from the Paris

Agreement in 2017, China assumed a significantly more constructive role with Xi announcing that China would be "taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change" (Xi 2017c). Some scholars suggest that China's more proactive approach was a response to the US' shrinking involvement in the global climate politics arena (Kopra 2018, Finamore 2013). Xi aimed to disseminate China's new national identity, which is that of a global '*yinlingzhe,'* meaning a leading state (Yang 2021). Importantly, Xi does not use '*lingdao*' which means leader, as this term indicates a hierarchical structure between leader and follower, whereas '*yinlingzhe*' does not and instead contains meanings of pioneer and leading actor (ibid).

Xi discursively constructs China's identity as a global leading actor pursuing a shared leadership based on win-win cooperation and harmonious coexistence (Xi 2015a; Xi 2017a). Xi notes that China's guiding principle for its state-to-state relations is based on partnership-building and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, claiming to "boost pragmatic cooperation with other developing countries to achieve common development" (Xi 2017a). At the Leaders Summit on Climate in April 2021, Xi remarked that "ecological advancement and conservation have been written into China's Constitution," and that they will "continue to prioritize ecological conservation and pursue a green and low-carbon path to development" (Xi 2021a).

Critics, particularly those from the realist camp, may argue that these discursive representations are Chinese propaganda and China still has the intention to act as an aggressive rising power with growing material capabilities; however, these official discourses demonstrate how China communicates itself to the world and the ways in which it reinforces its soft power through discourse (Yang 2022). Moreover, although China claims that it is not seeking hegemony, Xi does not attempt to hide the fact that he believes China needs to "lead the reform of the global governance system with the concepts of fairness and justice," communicating somewhat contradictory intentions (*Xinhua* 2018).

In terms of environmental responsibility, the concept of ecological civilization is the foundation for Xi's vision for China's global climate role and acts as a guiding framework for China's environmental policies and governance approach, and also aims to distinguish Chinese leadership from conventional Western paradigms (Hansen, Li, and Svarverud 2018). Ecological civilization explicitly links environmental sustainability and economic prosperity, highlighting the mutual inclusivity of both goals, and building on core Chinese philosophies of Confucianism,

Taoism, and Buddhism (Geng and Lo 2023). Although ecological civilization shares similar rhetoric with Western approaches to mainstreaming environmentalism, China's approach differs due to its foundation in traditional Chinese philosophies that emphasizes harmony between humanity and nature, promoting a holistic approach distinct from the more technocratic and market-drive sustainability paradigms in the West.[13]

In Chinese discourses, the burden of climate responsibility is now reconstructed as an opportunity for China to demonstrate its superior leadership and distinguish itself from traditional Western paradigms (Yang 2022; Shinn and Eisenmann 2023, 12). However, China is also careful to not assume too much responsibility and emphasizes that "parties need to build on existing consensus, increase mutual trust, step up cooperation and work together" (Xi 2021b). In keeping with the CBDR narrative, China ensures that it maintains the notion within its discourses that "all countries need to maximize actions in light of their respective national circumstances and capabilities," and that China will "contribute even more to tackling the global climate challenge," but the spotlight should stay on other developed countries to pull their weight (Xi 2020).

Although Xi is attempting to carve out China's new identity as a leading state, there is still a level of inconsistency and ambiguity regarding its role in climate politics and the extent to which it is willing to take on a more active or even dominant role. As a result, China's climate targets and policies are often scrutinized for lacking ambition, and the CCP's proclaimed dedication to advancing sustainable development ostensibly fails to correspond to its actions. For instance, China introduced a set of climate and energy policies, such as its pledge to cease financing overseas coal plants, establish an emissions trading scheme (ETS) for its electricity sector, and reach carbon neutrality by 2060 (Stalley 2021). China has also demonstrated its leadership role in the global energy transition as it is the largest exporter and installer of renewable technology, and its Made in China 2025 initiative aims to promote innovation in ten core industries, triggering a major shift in the country's energy policy (Heggelund 2021).

[13] The extent to which China's sanguine rhetoric is reflected in its actions, however, is questionable when considering the contradiction between ecological civilization and aspects of China's development practices, both domestically and internationally. For instance, China continues to support the expansion of coal plants overseas despite its 2021 pledge to half foreign coal projects (Qiwen 2024), and China's dominance in Africa's copper belt (the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia) pose significant concerns due to opaque mining contracts and environmentally harmful extractive practices (Egyin 2024).

However, while China has a strong track record of fulfilling its pledges, it is also accused of setting soft targets in order to "overdeliver" on its promises (Stalley 2021).

When examining China's climate policies more closely, it is apparent that these policy instruments are still insufficient; for example, its ETS lacks a hard cap on emissions, the prices of carbon credits are too low to prompt companies to limit emissions, and its commitment to reach carbon neutrality by 2060 is too distant (ibid; Olcott 2022). Despite China's attempts at greener policies, it is still the world's highest contributor to rising emissions, and its short-term climate objectives are criticized for being too weak relative to its contribution to the climate crisis. Several scholars argue that while China possesses the resources to effect positive change and lead in sustainability, it lacks the political will to do so due to not only the country's identity paradox, but also the fact that China's actions are shaped by a multitude of factors with the most powerful ones being primarily economic and geopolitical (Yeophantong and Goh 2022, 74).

China's commitment to its climate goals is largely dependent on its domestic economic and political context. For instance, in 2017 China's economy grew faster than expected at 6.9% and Xi announced that China would be shifting away from the "high-speed growth phase" to a "high-quality development stage" that is focused on innovation, sustainability, and balance (Xi 2017c). At this time, environmental policies were core to China's economic transformation and a key aspect of its national interests. However, when the economy slowed soon after to its lowest pace since the early 1990s, China's political priorities shifted from environmental protection to stabilizing the economy, with investments in solar power decreasing after 2017 (Hook 2019). China's approach to its climate policies is therefore deeply intertwined with other economic and political considerations, such as securing regime stability, international status, and growth, and only partly motivated by concerns about environmental protection and sustainability (Yeophantong and Goh 2022).

On the global front, although China hesitates to claim a strong and clear leadership identity, its role in climate politics can be better understood through a role theory framework, where climate leadership is viewed as an auxiliary role which supports the realization of its two master roles as responsible great power and leader of the developing world (Hurri 2023). Because China declares itself as a "responsible major developing country" (*Xinhua* 2023b) and "voice of developing and emerging nations," the auxiliary climate leadership role can enhance

China's soft power by building trust, preserving alliances, and strengthening its discursive power in international climate negotiations (Yeophantong and Goh 2022, 1074).

For instance, China's soft power in the Global South is enhanced materially through loans and debt relief, technological transfers, infrastructure projects such as the BRI, and other global initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative. The China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), which oversees China's foreign aid and international development cooperation, has mobilized a $12 billion commercial fund under the GDI and a $4 billion Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund (Luo 2017). Through these efforts, China is able to present itself as a reliable ally dedicated to building the capacity of other developing nations, which is particularly important in international organizations as the Global South offers potential support for China, especially in terms of challenging dominant Global North discourses regarding pathways to development (Hurri 2023).

Ideationally, China employs several strategies to expand its influence, such as discursive leadership in global governance, particularly the UNFCCC, and experience-sharing through various channels such as the South-South Climate Cooperation Program (SSCCP) (Qi and Dauvergne 2022). In terms of discursive leadership, China actively promotes the CBDR principle in multilateral negotiations and stresses the need for developed countries to increase their mitigation ambition and support climate adaptation in developing countries through financial and technological assistance (*Xinhua* 2023b). China's advocacy for the interests of the developing world reflects its strategy to build trust and sustain alliances within global climate governance, and further its discursive power in international negotiations.[14] As China's performance in international climate governance has not exactly received widespread approval, the pressure to strengthen its climate leadership to promote its master roles presents an opportunity to pursue more ambitious targets and policy instruments.

China's role in global climate politics is a complex interplay of its historical identity as a developing country and victim of Western domination, and its emerging status as a responsible global power. While this chapter could not delve into a comprehensive outline of China's political history, it highlighted several key points in the evolution of China's national identity

[14] Albeit China's advocacy is largely based on whether the interests of the developing world align with its own strategic priorities, particularly in terms of economic growth and geopolitical influence.

and approach to foreign policy. In terms of environmental sustainability, China's policies and approaches reflect a balance between competing domestic interests and international pressures. Under Xi's leadership, China has shifted towards a more proactive and assertive role and actively promotes itself as a leader of the developing world and advocate of the Global South, calling for the UN to give developing countries a greater voice (*The Economist* 2023). However, there are still significant concerns regarding China's role in global climate politics and skepticism concerning its ability to fulfill the sanguine promises of sustainable, peaceful development for both its domestic development and overseas initiatives, considering economic and geopolitical interests continue to be the CCP's main priorities, with climate change often being a convenient accessory to both.

Chapter 4: China and Africa's Strategic Partnership

While President Xi Jinping has professed China's commitment to sustainable development, particularly in regard to China's overseas development projects, criticisms arise over the environmental impact of Chinese aid and investment in Africa. Despite China's pronounced rhetoric of South-South cooperation and green growth, there is evidence from various cases of Chinese engagement in Africa that suggests a disconnect between China's commitment to environmental responsibility and the actual ecological impacts of its role in African development.

China has made significant progress in its diplomatic relations with Africa since the 1960s and 70s due to not only its more pragmatic, rather than ideological, approach to foreign policy, but also because China has grown to be a major trading power with vast amounts of capital to invest in, and loan to, Africa (Eisenman and Shinn 2023, 24). The primary motivation behind China's aid in the 1970s was strategic diplomacy, aiming to shift diplomatic alliances away from Taiwan, and counter the influence of the West and the Soviet Union (Brautigam 2009, 34).

This chapter explores the environmental and geopolitical aspects of the contemporary China-Africa relationship in order to establish the necessary context for the case study analyses in the following chapters. The first section discusses the China-Africa relationship in terms of economic development, aid, diplomatic relations, and the ways in which African agency affects the dynamics and outcomes of Chinese-funded development from a perspective more favorable to China's role in Africa. This will be followed by a discussion of the BRI and the green initiatives the CCP has promoted in its discourse. The latter half of the chapter reviews key criticisms of Chinese engagement and its approach to African relations, juxtaposing the narrative presented by China. Overall, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the various sub-arguments surrounding China's involvement in Africa to situate the more granular case study analyses that follow.

Contemporary China-Africa Relations

In 2021, Xi celebrated the 65th anniversary of Chinese-African diplomatic relations at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). He remarked in his keynote speech that over the past 65 years, China

and Africa have established an "unbreakable fraternity in [their] struggle against imperialism and colonialism, and embarked on a distinct path of cooperation in [their] journey toward development and revitalization" (Xi 2021c). Since Xi's presidential election in 2012, China's strategic relations with Africa have undergone unprecedented expansion, with Beijing increasingly dedicating resources to party-to-party exchanges, military engagement, and educational and cultural programs with various African states (Eisenman and Shinn 2023, 1).

Under Xi's leadership, China has enhanced relations with Africa through the establishment of various regional and subregional organizations, such as the FOCAC, the Forum on China-Africa Local Government Cooperation, the BRI, and the China-Africa Urban Development Forum (Li and Wu 2019, 13). The FOCAC was established in 2000 and is the primary platform for economic cooperation between the two partners, meeting every three years at the ministerial or summit level (Devecioglu and Akçomak 2024). Since 2000, China has approximately tripled its financial commitments to Africa and garnered further support from African states in the UN through the FOCAC (ibid).

In 2015, Xi held the first FOCAC on the African continent in Johannesburg, South Africa, which effectively advanced China and Africa's comprehensive strategic partnership, predicated on the "five pillars" of partnership: political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation, mutually enriching cultural exchange, mutual assistance in security, and solidarity and cooperation in international affairs ("Spotlight: China, Africa map out strategic vision for win-win cooperation with practical action plan" 2015). At the following forum in 2018, Beijing pledged $60 billion in economic assistance and then $40 billion in 2021, with promises of additional support to combat COVID-19 and goals to increase imports from Africa to a total of $300 billion (House Committee on Foreign Affairs 2022).

Xi's pronounced interest in strengthening cooperation with Africa is no mystery. Africa is an "emerging battleground for global influence" (Pierson and Chutel 2023), with the U.S. foregrounding the need to strengthen democracies across the continent and encourage "democratic transition" (Wong and Crowley 2022), while China directs billions of dollars in aid, loans, and investments to countries that have "long been ignored by the West" (Pierson and Chutel 2023); however, Chinese aid has also been accused of being positively associated with the acceptance of autocratic norms and deterioration of local democracy (Gehring, Kaplan, and Wong 2022). Regardless, China's outreach and economic cooperation with Africa has resulted in

increased diplomatic support in international organizations such as the UN and access to critical resources that can power China's growing energy industries (Pierson and Chutel 2023).

A common theme intimated in China's international relations approach with developing countries is the concept of a global community ("Full Text: A Global Community," 2023). The Chinese state emphasizes in its rhetoric that the goal of a global community is "not to replace one system or civilization with another," but to bring together countries with differing social systems, ideologies, histories, and levels of development, to promote shared interests, rights, and responsibilities in global affairs ("Full Text: A Global Community," 2023). Linked to the concept of a global community is Xi's vision of the "Chinese Dream," which centers "achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation... [and bringing] about a moderately prosperous society (Xi 2012). According to official state rhetoric, the Chinese Dream is important for practical reason, through improving the lives of people in lower-tier cities and rural areas, and national identity reasons, by "[bringing] a country with a proud history out of the shadows of the troubling last couple of centuries" (*China Daily* 2014).

In order to realize the vision of a strong, civilized, and harmonious China (Xiangyang 2023; Kuhn 2013), Beijing has focused on creating an expanding network of relations with like-minded foreigners (i.e. the community), in an attempt to reshape international relations and governance norms and challenge the dominant Western liberal order (Eisenman and Shinn 2023, 6-7). The China-Africa community is predicated on two primary structural features: multi-tiered and interlocked, and "sino-centrism" (11). First, China's foreign relations with Africa are characterized by a complex and interconnected network of regional and international cooperation, encompassing bilateral, regional, and subregional engagements. Through this dense network, China is able to share the capacity-building knowledge and resources that African countries require for development, which the West has historically failed to provide, and strategically build relationships with major African political partners through various subregional multilateral organizations to ensure they do not become potential venues for collaboration against Chinese interests (ibid).

The second structural feature, sinocentrism, refers to a hierarchical global system where China is positioned at the center and asserts political and moral superiority over peripheral nations (12). The concept of sinocentrism can be traced back to China's imperial era, where cultural superiority was based on the belief that the Confucian ideology and Chinese imperial

system preserved domestic social order and political stability, and should therefore be extended to surrounding states (Park 2015). However, rather than form an exploitative and unbalanced hierarchy in relation to peripheral states, sinocentrism indicates that China will protect the subordinate states and nurture harmonious relations through interdependence and co-prosperity.[15] Contemporarily, these two structural features are exemplified in China's professed commitment to fostering "South-South" relations with African states, largely through increased FDI and aid that is based on principles of non-interference and no-strings loans.[16]

Characteristics of Chinese Aid and Investment

Several fundamental characteristics of China's approach to aid and development cooperation are its non-interference policy and win-win rhetoric. In keeping with the narrative that China and Africa are united in their mutual development and shared history of unjust treatment by the West, China adheres to the principle of not attaching any political conditions to its aid and not interfering in other countries' internal affairs (Li and Wu 2019, 26). In contrast to the traditional Western model of aid through the WB or IMF, in which funds are provided based on adherence to certain conditions reflective of Western values, such as the promotion of democracy and protection of human rights, China does not impose any political conditions. Instead, China makes a clear and pronounced effort to establish itself as an attractive alternative partner to the West, offering aid and loans that do not require governance or policy conditions.

According to China's special representative on Darfur, Liu Guijin, "providing assistance is just for the benefit of the people, it is not for political purposes, not for showing off to the outside world" ("Chinese Envoy: China to Provide," 2008; Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010). Xi remarked at the 2015 China-Africa Business Forum that by becoming the world's largest manufacturing country and second-largest economy, "China has testified to the success of

[15] Though, the concept of sinocentrism potentially contradicts the multi-tiered, interlocked structure of China-Africa relations, particularly when viewed through the lens of normative principles such as mutual respect, equality, and non-interference. The implied hierarchical structure contradicts China's purported intention to foster interdependence and mutual capacity-building, and promoting the notion of political and moral superiority conflicts with China's non-interference principle.

[16] However, the extent to which the no-strings approach empowers Africans, rather than just African state elites, is unclear. While political and economic elites in Africa may favor no-strings loans, as unconditional aid is particularly attractive to developing countries' governments, there may be instances where the projects pursued are directly in conflict with the demands of civil society, considering the numerous priorities and interests at play in each different national context. This conflict will be further examined in the following case studies.

its probe for an industrialization path suited to its national conditions" (Xi 2015b). China's approach to development aid positions itself as a conceptual alternative to the Washington Consensus and demonstrates that a country can successfully pursue a development path tailored to its specific context and achieve tangible results, rather than having to adopt the purportedly "universal" route of Western development (Corkin 2014, 63).

From 2000-2012, Chinese FDI increased from $200 million to $2.2 billion USD, and Chinese aid initiatives, in the form of economic or technical cooperation, reached $35 billion in 2012 (Busse, Erdogan, and Mühlen 2016). Moreover, China continues to be Africa's largest trading partner with Sino-African trade surpassing $200 billion in 2021, and China announcing its goal to increase imports from Africa to $300 billion (House Committee on Foreign Affairs 2022). Furthermore, according to China's win-win rhetoric and mutual growth approach, Africa's development is implicitly interlinked with China's, and by supporting African nations in alleviating poverty and achieving economic growth, China also benefits from new markets, sources of raw materials, and geopolitical allies. Evidently, China expresses a commitment to strengthening cooperation with Africa and supporting poverty reduction strategies and goals, offering both knowledge and resources to help facilitate inclusive and sustainable economic development, that is, development that benefits all in the present without compromising future generations' needs (Li and Wu 2019).[17] As a result, China has increased investments in prominent development projects throughout Africa, such as the construction of key infrastructure projects like roads, railways, government buildings, stadiums, etc. The most prominent example is the BRI, which has been lauded by various national leaders in the Global South and exemplifies China's commitment to strengthening South-South relations.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Xi launched the BRI in 2013 with the vision of an expanded regional and trans-national trade and infrastructure network that connects Asia and Europe along the ancient Silk Road trade routes (Xi 2017b). Since then, "more than 150 countries and over 30 international organizations have signed Belt and Road cooperation documents" (Xi 2023), extending beyond Eurasia into Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. Broadly, the goals of the BRI are policy coordination,

[17] However, while this is what China's discursively declares, the following case studies will demonstrate the extent to which development initiatives fail to consider environmental and social implications, significantly limiting the "inclusivity" of development.

cultural exchange, financial integration, cross-border trade and investment, and overall enhanced connectivity between countries (Yalew and Guo 2020). Financial integration is identified as a key underpinning for the implementation of the BRI and thus, the CCP calls on the governments, financial institutions, and companies from involved countries to "follow the principles of equal-footed participation, mutual benefits and risk sharing" ("Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road" n.d.). In October 2023 at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi reaffirmed the BRI's core guiding principles for high-quality cooperation, highlighting the "principle of 'planning together, building together, and benefiting together,' the philosophy of open, green and clean cooperation, and the goal of pursuing high-standard, people-centered and sustainable cooperation" (Xi 2023).

According to Li and Wu (2019), the BRI enhances global economic development, and African development in particular, in several key ways: First, the construction of international economic and trade cooperation zones provides the foundations for a unified, global market, which will subsequently lead to development spillovers and regional integration. Second, China's experience in national economic development can provide valuable knowledge for other Global South countries in the BRI, as they enhance their manufacturing and construction capabilities. Lastly, the BRI presents an opportunity to strengthen South-South cooperation and collectively enhance the status of developing countries in the global economic structure. In particular, African ports, islands, and maritime routes play a key role in the BRI. It is envisioned that China-Africa cooperation will enhance African countries' industrialization processes, participation in the international division of labor, and integration into the global industrial chain (94-98).

In the decade following the BRI's inception, numerous African nations have achieved substantial infrastructural development and industrialization as a result. For example, the Abuja-Kaduna railway is the first Chinese-constructed railway in Nigeria, undertaken by the China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC), and consists of a 116-mile single track standard gauge railway that connects the Federal capital of Abuja to the state capital of Kaduna (Chen 2021b). The project generated approximately 4,000 local jobs in construction, and hired 500 Nigerian workers in management and operation, highlighting the CCECC's localization strategy to hire local staff (ibid). The BRI has also built railway projects from Djibouti to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, and from Mombasa to Nairobi in Kenya, to promote economic

cooperation and regional integration (Yalew and Guo 2020). However, the question of whether the BRI has been successful in Africa faces widespread debate amongst scholars, state officials, and media outlets between the Global South and North. There is clear criticism and skepticism regarding China's diplomatic approach and debt model, and there are also growing concerns regarding the actual and potential negative environmental impacts that accompany China's increasing investment in Africa's development.

As part of China's efforts to promote sustainable development and enhance its reputation as a responsible great power, the Xi administration has aimed to highlight green development as a critical component of the BRI. For instance, the administration has increased investments in renewable energy and low-carbon transition through the BRI International Green Development Coalition (Qi and Dauvergne 2022), and China's 14th Five-Year Plan (FYP) emphasizes that the CCP "will persist in giving priority to the ecological environment" and promote "high-quality economic development and high-level environmental protection in a coordinated manner" (Murphy 2021, 95). Accordingly, the BRI contains numerous policies and guidelines for green development, such as "The Belt and Road Ecological Environmental Cooperation Plan" and "Guidelines for Ecological Environmental Protection of Foreign Investment Cooperation and Construction Projects" (Wang n.d.). Moreover, the Chinese government encourages its SOEs operating overseas to follow environmental norms, though this approach can undermine efforts at advancing sustainability if the host country's standards and regulations are weak, thus contradicting China's professed commitment to green development. While China is expanding the BRI's collection of environmental guidelines and policies, and communicating an overtly environmentally conscious narrative, the measures often lack essential details regarding implementation, monitoring, and enforcement.

Moreover, China proactively embraces a soft-law approach with BRI host countries, meaning that nearly all BRI-specific regulations are voluntary, legally non-binding informal documents that mainly outline aspirational goals for ecological protection and cooperation, but do not provide regulatory provisions for achieving said goals (Coenen et al. 2020). The BRI presents a critical opportunity for African nations to advance sustainable development with the assistance of Chinese resources and funding; however, it is also equally plausible that economic priorities will override green initiatives and result in the exacerbation and expedition of irreversible environmental damage.

Another key component of China's approach to the BRI and African development is the intentional avoidance of the donor-recipient dynamic. Chinese rhetoric strategically employs inclusive phrases such as "common prosperity" or "mutual development" to reinforce the win-win narrative that builds on the idea that China and Africa need one another to develop (Corkin 2014, 60-61). By positioning itself and its aid in direct opposition to the traditional Western dominated aid system that is historically characterized by a paternalistic relationship between the "donor" and "beggar" (Brautigam 2011, 25), the CCP aims to project the image of a friendly developing power with intentions to enhance both Africa's and China's self-reliant capabilities in solidarity (Xing and Farah 2013, 29). Xi stated at the 2018 FOCAC that China will always be "Africa's good friend, good partner and good brother" (Xi 2018), which particularly reflects the broader narrative that China aims to advance, in which China, as a developing country and responsible great power, represents a significant opportunity for Africans to determine their own development through a new type of global relationship predicated on mutual respect and win-win solidarity; though, this proposition is often critiqued as an overly idealized narrative that intentionally overlooks the explicit power imbalance between China and other developing nations, masking underlying power dynamics and dependencies that potentially limits African states' development autonomy, rather than empower it (Devecioglu and Akçomak 2024).

China invokes a sense of commonality due to the shared sense of unjust treatment by the West, and utilizes this sentiment to defend their non-interference centered approach. Western donors loudly criticize China's non-interference principle, claiming that it undermines democratization, good governance, human rights, and environmental protection, most of which Western donors ostensibly claim to be the objective of their aid (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010; Shinn and Eisenman 2023). Because China and some African states regularly receive criticism for their human rights practices or environmental management, especially from Western countries, critics emphasize that China's increasing influence in African development and pronounced non-interference policy could result in serious ramifications for the international liberal order and advancement of global sustainability. Accordingly, China's approach to aid and development in Africa has been met with widespread skepticism, largely from the Global North.

Criticisms of Chinese Engagement in Africa

China has been accused of neo-colonialism and debt-trap diplomacy in African countries, which is where China intentionally lends large amounts of money to low-income states that have a low likelihood of being able to repay the debt. Therefore, the borrowing state will relinquish their strategic resources to decrease its debt burden towards China (Himmer and Rod 2022). Evidently, China holds a significant amount of debt in countries with large deposits of high-grade rare earth minerals, such as Namibia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, etc., and are well positioned to obtain rights to mining those minerals as part of debt relief negotiations (Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 171). Critics argue that because China offers such attractive loans without additional conditions, African countries are becoming economically dependent on China and losing control over their own resources (Devecioglu and Akçomak 2024). Moreover, China does not promote the notion of universal human rights and instead follows a relativistic approach that respects each country's unique history, culture, and political system, thus refraining from criticizing any human rights abuses occurring in host countries or interfering in African states' internal issues (Shinn and Eisenman 2023, 35). This approach, however, is accused of enabling or disregarding states with serious human rights issues and discouraging recipient governments from addressing or criticizing issues that are considered China's core interests, such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, Tibet, and human rights, due to the precedent of non-interference (22).

China's approach to development aid also carries significant implications for environmental sustainability. The environmental outcome of such development activities requires in-depth analyses of the specific state and particular contexts that may either facilitate or prevent green development, the political environment, which includes the presence or absence of a strong civil society, and the extent to which domestic institutions and regulations prioritize and enforce environmental standards. Regardless, China's non-interference principle poses significant obstacles to implementing robust environmental standards, as many Chinese policies urge companies to adhere to the regulations and laws of host countries to avoid interfering in domestic politics or infringing on state sovereignty (Coenen et al. 2020). Moreover, a lack of transparency from China on the details of its investments has garnered serious criticism from Western donors and local citizens of recipient countries.

In 2019, the municipal authorities of Bobo Dioulasso (a city in Burkina Faso) authorized the declassification of 16 hectares (ha) of the Kua Forest, which contains vital sources of farming

and drinking water for the local population and numerous species of plant and wildlife, for the construction of a Chinese-funded hospital (Belem 2023).[18] The declassification sparked fear among the local citizens that the national authorities would continue to declassify other forests in the future, threatening the already arid country. Despite increasing pressure from civil society to preserve the forest and select a different location for the hospital (Melandis 2020), the Chinese partners did not take any proactive role in negotiations and the Chinese embassy neutrally stated that they were committed to environmental protection and would abide by the decision of the national authorities and citizens of Burkina Faso (ibid). The outcome of the Kua Forest preservation movement was ultimately successful in reversing the initial decision; however, the whole ordeal highlights the Chinese collaborators lack of concern over the environmental implications of the construction project, seemingly conflicting with China's broader narrative of green development.

Moreover, Western donors typically have due diligence standards and procedures that ensure the process of designing projects and allocating resources is guided by economic criteria, such as some form of a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate candidate projects (Dreher et al. 2019, 46). China, however, is more flexible and project selection is typically initiated by the borrowing country, and dependent on their preferences, priorities, and circumstances (ibid). Chinese aid follows a demand-driven approach in which for a project to proceed, the recipient country's government must provide a formal request to the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) and all agencies that report to the Ministry of Commerce, such as the Agency of International Cooperation and the Academy for International Business Officials, and line ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Environment, and Ministry of Education (Lynch, Andersen, and Zhu 2020). Unlike organizations such as the WB, who typically negotiates projects with government technocrats in the line ministries of recipient countries, Chinese projects are negotiated directly with the country's political leaders (Dreher et al. 2019, 47). As a result, there are limited opportunities for actors, such as opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society organizations (CSO), to raise concerns or criticize proposed projects that may be politically motivated or environmentally damaging (ibid).

[18] A classified forest means that it is legally protected and managed for ecological preservation (Melandis 2020). Declassifying 16 ha of the Kua Forest is particularly concerning for Burkina Faso as it is a Sahelian country and the rate of desertification has been accelerating in the past few decades, with approximately 233,193 ha of forest lost every year between 2002 to 2014 (Belem 2023).

Another major criticism of China's development model is the implications it has for the spread of democratic values. For institutions such as the WB, democracy, transparency, and human rights are considered critical elements for prosperity; meanwhile, the Chinese model highlights social and political stability as the key to development (Gehring, Kaplan, and Wong 2022). Because stability is a crucial part of China's domestic development approach, it has been accused of financially supporting repressive governments and exporting authoritarianism (Hackenesch and Bader 2020). Coupled with its demand-driven approach, Chinese aid is argued to endorse and legitimize authoritarian regimes and subvert the current liberal international order. Moreover, aside from Western institutions, democratic advocates and activists are often from the civil societies of the host countries and criticize the lack of transparency between China and their government, arguing that economic changes serve Chinese interests, rather than domestic (Iacoella et al. 2021).

However, the accusations towards China of debt trap diplomacy, neocolonialism, and the erosion of democratic values often suffer from Western-centric biases that denies the agency of African nations and reduces them to helpless victims that are constantly vulnerable to exploitative colonial forces (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010). Additionally, criticism of Chinese engagement in terms of sustainable development must also take into consideration the domestic political, economic, and social contexts of the host country, which will be shown in the following chapters to play a key role in the facilitation or inhibition of proper ecological management. Chibuzo Nwoke, professor of international relations at Oduduwa University in Nigeria, highlights how African countries increasingly prefer China's funding model and loans, mainly to avoid the constricting neoliberal conditionalities that accompany IMF and WB loans ("China Vs the IMF" 2017). Brautigam (2009) also highlights how China gives Africa more agency by explicitly discouraging conditionality and dependency in their aid practices and offering opportunities for African nations to reduce their dependence on Western donors (148; 284).

A representative from the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of China noted that "Africa is a huge continent with lots of people needing development and basic services…They do not need charity or lectures" (Corkin 2014, 54). Former President of China Exim Bank, Li Ruogu called out the hypocrisy of Western states, criticizing the US for "[consuming] most of the products that are being produced in China under the conditions they purport to criticize," and arguing that

"when Western countries talk about democracy, equality and human rights, it is generally according to their own internal situation…" (ibid, 55). Li also notes that "Western colonialism over 400 years in Africa did not bring development and wealth," and "Western countries talk about human rights and freedom every day, but if the people there can't watch television or listen to radio, how can they enjoy human rights and freedoms?" (*Reuters* 2007). Li's sentiments are reflective of China's domestic narrative that legitimacy hinges on a state's economic performance and provision of public goods, and that a population's material conditions should be prioritized over civil liberties (Corkin 2014).

These points are not meant to shield China from criticism regarding its approach to development and aid. China's approach to African development is certainly deserving of criticism and skepticism, particularly in terms of potentially harmful environmental and geopolitical implications. Moreover, the dominant perspectives on the China-Africa relationship often overlook the impact on civil society, presenting narratives that largely represent state interests. While African states may favor China's no-strings approach and non-interference model, civil society's position in this relationship must be considered to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese engagement. However, critics may be too quick to frame China's presence as a neocolonial agenda intended to spread authoritarianism and communist propaganda, exploit Africa's resources, and tilt the balance of power in their favor. It is also crucial to remember that the West has not been able to offer African nations the resources and support that China is providing.

The wealth and prosperity of the Western nations is fundamentally linked to colonial exploitation and appropriation of the same countries they now aim to assist (Bhambra 2021). China's experience with poverty alleviation and rapid industrialization also demonstrates to developing countries that Western models of development are not universal nor fixed. A key aspect of the China-Africa relationship is China's commitment to exchanging knowledge in order to facilitate inclusive and sustainable economic development. Former President of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, noted that "China's approach to [their] needs is simply better adapted than the slow and sometimes patronizing approach" of the West (Brautigam 2009, 135). While certain features of Chinese aid directly conflict with the efforts of Western donors in terms of transparency and the promotion of Western values, it is clear that a significant reason why

China's alternative path is so attractive to African state leaders is because it strives to respect their autonomy and agency, unlike previous Western powers.

The various perspectives presented in this chapter present a complex, and largely contradictory narrative regarding Chinese engagement in Africa. The next two chapters will delve into the selected case studies for this thesis and explore how the domestic contexts of Kenya and Ethiopia conflict and converge with Chinese interests, consequently shaping the environmental outcome of Chinese-funded development projects under the BRI.

Chapter 5: The case of Kenya

The chapter will begin with a brief overview of Kenya's current political and civic landscape to establish the context for Kenya's engagement with China. China and Kenya's diplomatic and economic relations will be explored in the following section, primarily in terms of the core interests that characterize the relationship, and the attitudes and perceptions of Chinese engagement from both state and civil society discourses. This chapter focuses on the Kenya SGR to gain insight into how civil society and state discourses interact and influence the ecological outcome of Chinese-funded development projects. The SGR is a particularly prominent development initiative as it faced numerous controversies regarding its social and environmental impact. The analysis of the project will identify key themes within the discourses in an effort to understand how Kenya's political landscape, civic space, and engagement with China are mediated through forms of African agency at the state and civic levels. This chapter examines media from Chinese and Kenyan state and non-state outlets, government speeches, official documents, reports from various African think tanks, and academic articles. The data analysis reveals that despite Kenya's relatively more open and expressive civic space, the degree to which non-state actors can mobilize and enact change is still significantly limited by the state, and can only marginally affect the outcome of the SGR. Moreover, discontent with the environmental and social impact of the SGR is directed more towards the state, than Chinese influences, suggesting that local citizens in Kenya place higher expectations on their state to manage and mitigate potentially harmful implications of major development initiatives.

Kenya's Political and Civic Landscape

In 2022, William Ruto was elected President and promised to strengthen Kenya's democratic system by running an open and transparent government and working with the opposition to secure oversight over his administration (Ruto 2022a). The 2022 election demonstrated the extent to which Kenya's democratic institutions have evolved since the restoration of multiparty politics in 1991, and the degree to which past practices continue to persist (Cheeseman et al. 2024). For instance, the 2022 campaign and election saw a comparably peaceful transfer of power compared to previous multiparty elections that had significant pre- and post-election violence; however, when Raila Odinga, the opposition candidate, disputed his defeat, an action that previously prompted mass unrest and violence during the 2007, 2013, and

2017 elections, the announcement of the Supreme Court's decision to uphold Ruto's victory passed without major dissent (241). However, despite the seeming progress of Kenya's evolution as a democratic state, issues with ethnic conflicts and the independence of civil society remain.

For instance, at face value, the 2022 election signaled that Kenya was moving beyond ethnic politics, which the British colonial government initiated through divide-and-rule policies (Osman, Yousaf, and Rasool 2024), as major candidates largely avoided ethnic stereotypes and aimed to present themselves as national politicians. Nonetheless, ethnicity still played a notable role in voting patterns, as, for instance, communities with a competitive presidential candidate often supported the one from their own ethnic group (Cheeseman et al. 2024, 251). Moreover, while Kenya's traditional media is known as one of the most independent and vibrant in Sub-Saharan Africa, with nearly 200 radio stations, 92 television channels, and 100 print publications, the 2022 election left the sector weakened due to its failure to remain independent (252). Several media conglomerates dominate the sector, such as Nation Media Group, Standard Media Group, and Royal Media Services, and all have ties to the political and business interests associated with Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta, the outgoing President who backed Odinga's candidacy (ibid). As a result, the major newspapers tended to report more critical coverage of Ruto's coalition, Kenya Kwanza, and allotted more space to Azimio la Umoja, Odinga's party (ibid).

While the process of democratization is complex, prolonged, and fundamentally prone to setbacks, Kenya's democratic institutions have remained relatively stable since the signing of its new constitution in 2010. Hailed by the nation's political leaders as a "second republic" (Greste 2010), the constitution established the country's first citizens' Bill of Rights, devolved power and resources to 47 counties, introduced an independent Supreme Court and stronger constraints on executive power, and contributed substantially to the expansion of its civic space ("The Constitution of Kenya" 2010).

Kenya's key democratic institutions have developed significantly over the past two decades with an increasingly educated and vocal electorate, a robust private sector, and a more independent electoral commission and judiciary (Cheeseman et al. 2024). However, despite Ruto lauding the "maturity of [Kenya's] democracy" (Ruto 2022b), the country's political landscape and civic space continue to be afflicted with corruption, police brutality, and the systemic repression of protests and protesters. These issues are exemplified in the state's response to mass

protests beginning in May of this year, following the proposal of a new finance bill that will increase taxes to raise $2.7 billion, disproportionately affecting the poorest, in an effort to reduce the nation's substantial debt load (Lynch 2024; Mureithi and Kimeu 2024).

Ruto, whose campaign platform largely concentrated on Kenya's working poor, met widespread discontent and anger from Kenya's young population in the face of increasing taxes, rising costs of living, and punitive tax reforms (Wambua-Soi 2024). On June 25th, protestors attempted to storm parliament to protest the bill; however, after teargas and water cannons failed to disperse the crowd of thousands, police began shooting live bullets into the crowd, killing at least five people (Mureithi and Kimeu 2024). Police have been accused of using excessive force during the protests, fueling further unrest among protestors as they demand that Ruto step down for misgovernance, corruption, and the deaths of dozens of protestors during earlier anti-government rallies (*Al Jazeera* 2024).

Kenya's civil society is regarded as one of Africa's "bravest and most vocal" (Nalwoga, Wakabi, and Wanyama 2017) and due to the British colonial legacy in particular, Western journalistic practices and media models, such as watch-dog journalism, have significantly influenced Kenyan media (Li and Wang 2023, 7). However, civic space has administrative hurdles, such as sporadic deregistration, increasingly limited access to foreign funding, and mandatory approvals for activities ("Country Brief: Kenya" 2022; Allison 2016).

The Public Order Act regulates the conduct of public gatherings and requires organizers to notify the police of intentions to hold a public procession at least three days in advance (Public Order Act, Cap. 56 2012). Critics argue that law enforcement misuses the act to unconstitutionally grant or deny permission to peacefully protest at their discretion ("Country Brief: Kenya" 2022). Moreover, during the recent protests and unrest, the Kenya National Commission of Human Rights (KNCHR) reported 50 deaths, 413 injuries, and over 680 cases of arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances (Odero 2024). While these actions reflect increased state suppression of Kenya's civic space, there are legislative efforts to safeguard the rights and freedoms of civil society through, for instance, the Public Benefits Organization (PBO) Act.

The PBO Act was approved in 2013 to replace the Non-Governmental Organizations Coordination Act (1990), which Ruto said put civil society through a "chaotic mechanism" (Mwende 2024), and introduced a new legal framework for the establishment, operation, and

regulation of public benefit organizations (Nalwoga, Wakabi, and Wanyama 2017).[19] The PBO Act aims to create a cohesive identity for a diverse range of civic organizations operating under a single act, promote cooperation and shared responsibilities between the government and private sector, and establish the state's duty to provide an enabling environment for PBOs (Amnesty 2024a; Nalwoga, Wakabi, and Wanyama 2017). Despite being passed in 2013, however, the PBO Act was not fully implemented until May 2024 as previous governments were reluctant to operationalize the act and attempted to impose further limitations and amendments to restrict civil society organizations (Gionco 2018).[20] Ruto seems to express greater appreciation for civil society, claiming that "for development to be meaningful, it must be a whole-of-society coalition, bringing politicians, government officials, opposition leaders, civil societies and NGOs into one space" (Mwende 2024). However, this sentiment palpably conflicts with the state's violent and brutal response to protestors who criticize the Ruto administration's failure to fulfill the promises of its campaign and instead exacerbate standards of living for the country's poorest and most vulnerable through punitive reforms.

The misalignment of discourse and action is not uncommon within the Ruto administration. In the case of environmental responsibility, Time Magazine named Ruto as one of the world's 100 most influential leaders on climate action, noting he is an emerging leader in green investment for Africa (*Time* 2023). At his inauguration, Ruto announced ambitious plans to achieve 100% clean energy by 2030, asserting that "Kenya is on a transition to clean energy that will support jobs, local economics, and sustainable industrialization" (Ruto 2022b). He has also stated that Kenya is committed to the conviction that "enduring economic prosperity is founded on environmental health and vibrant natural ecosystems," indicating a harmonious interdependence between capitalist economic growth and ecological sustainability (Ruto 2024b). Further, Ruto explicitly affirms that "growth, development, and living within planetary boundaries do not need to be at odds," and that "greening global production and consumption is not only key to avoiding a climate catastrophe, but it is also becoming economically rational" (ibid).

[19] Public benefit organizations are voluntary membership or non-membership groups consisting of individuals or organizations. A PBO is autonomous, non-partisan, and non-profit, and is organized and operated locally, nationally, or internationally ("Nonprofit Law in Kenya" 2024).
[20] For instance, in 2014, the Convener of the Civil Society Reference Group (CSGR) reported that 54 amendments were proposed to narrow the scope of the PBO Act (Gionco 2018).

Ruto emphasizes the urgent need to "mobilize and attract adequate financing and investment" to achieve the elimination of energy poverty and facilitate a green transition to a renewable-based economy, as set out in Agenda 2063 (Ruto 2023a). Within official state discourses, environmental sustainability is often discussed in terms of economic transformation and green financing. According to Ruto, the "crucial question is how to urgently unlock the capital needed for climate adaptation" (Ruto 2024a). In his speech at the 2023 Africa Climate Summit, Ruto demanded a "just multilateral development finance architecture, to liberate [Kenya's] economies from odious debt and onerous barriers to necessary financial resources" (Ruto 2023b). He also highlights in this speech, and several others regarding climate action, the "untapped potential" of the millions of young Kenyans who are "educated, skilled, motivated, innovative, ready and willing to drive the enterprises and industries" that will unlock the possibilities of Kenya's immense natural resources and "unleash opportunities and prosperity for Africa and the world" (ibid).[21]

Moreover, Ruto frames Kenya's capacity to tackle climate change in relation to financial opportunities, reinforcing the declaration that "Kenya is open for business," and calling on potential investors to capitalize on the nation's energy, labor, and raw materials to advance global sustainability and green transition, and simultaneously develop the Kenyan economy ("President Ruto: Kenya Is Open for Business" 2023). Ruto embraces a distinctly ecologically conscious narrative within official state discourses that also insists on the notion that sustainability and economic growth are not inherently incompatible, a contentious idea among environmentalists (Qi and Dauvergne 2022; Braungart, McDonough, and Bollinger 2007), rather, they are mutually supportive. Consequently, Ruto has faced criticism from Kenyan civil society for championing environmental advocacy while authorizing contradictory policies, such as lifting a ban on logging while promoting a tree-planting campaign (Omuka 2023), with some naming him a "consummate opportunist" who is "peddling Africa to the highest bidder" (Hicks 2023).

Since 2012, Kenya's GHG emissions have remained relatively steady, fluctuating between 100 to 112 million tonnes between 2012 and 2022 ("Data Page: Annual Greenhouse,"

[21] This sentiment is also mentioned in speeches at the 2024 Shared Climate Solutions Event (Ruto 2024b), the 2023 Committee of Heads of State and Government on Climate Change (Ruto 2023a), and the 27th COP (Ruto 2022b).

2024a), contributing only 0.21% to global emissions ("Data Page: Share of Global," 2024b). Moreover, Kenya has a predominantly green energy mix, with geothermal, hydro, wind, and solar energy steadily increasing since 2009, accounting for roughly 85-90% of generation in 2023 ("Kenya - Country Commercial Guide" 2024). On the other hand, there has been a significant rise in emissions from fossil fuels and industry, increasing from 6.7 to 24.85 million tonnes by 2022 ("Data Page: Annual CO2 Emissions" 2023a), with emissions from transport nearly doubling from 4.9 to 10.4 million tonnes in the same time span ("Data Page: CO2 Emissions From Transport" 2023a). Considering transportation is a key component of Kenya's development ambitions and Chinese investments are targeting large-scale infrastructure in railways, emissions mitigation is a crucial area of concern for policymakers. The sharp increase in emissions also correlates with the timeline of several Chinese-funded initiatives, suggesting that the discourse on environmental sustainability struggles to be manifested in concrete mitigation or reduction measures.

Kenya-China Relations: State and Civil Society Discourses

China is one of Kenya's largest trading partners and a major source of FDI, with Chinese exports and imports reaching $753 million and $42.4 million, respectively, in 2022 ("Trade," n.d.). Over the past few decades, China's investments and loans in Kenya's infrastructure have rapidly expanded, with China being Kenya's leading bilateral creditor by the end of 2021, representing approximately 67% of Kenya's external debt (Otele 2022, 59). As of 2023, Chinese loans account for roughly 64% of Kenya's stock of bilateral debt (Kell 2023; "Statistical Abstract" 2023).

The Kenyan Investment Authority (KenInvest) has also registered and facilitated 313 Chinese investment projects at a total value of $1.55 billion since 2005; bear in mind that because the law does not mandate registration with KenInvest for foreign investors, the data does not reflect all Chinese investments in the country (Otele 2022, 58). Because China positions its aid framework in direct opposition to traditional Western models, its low-interest loans that are free of political or economic conditions pose an attractive source of funding for Kenya's development program (Xing and Farah 2013, 29).

Kenya is largely dependent on China to finance and expedite its national development strategies outlined in its Vision 2030 plan, which is a long-term development program that aims

to create a "globally competitive and prosperous country with a high quality of life by 2030," transforming Kenya into a "newly-industrializing, middle-income country" ("Kenya Vision 2030" n.d.). One of the core national interests outlined in Kenya's Vision 2030 is developing the country's fast-growing sectors such as infrastructure, horticulture, and tourism, for which the government is enthusiastically seeking private investment to underpin economic development, making the attraction of FDI a clear policy priority (Richards 2012, 12;33). Moreover, China presents an opportunity for Kenya to diversify its external sources of development aid and reduce dependence on Western donors, while also enjoying economic cooperation from China with no strings attached (Otele 2022, 60).

Kenyan political elites generally regard China's engagement positively, with former president Kenyatta lauding China for "opening their eyes and meeting Kenya, and indeed the rest of Africa at their point of need…offering financial packages which [the country] can afford" (Kenyatta 2018). Three of Kenya's former presidents, Daniel arap Moi, Mhai Kibaki, and Kenyatta embraced a "Look East" policy which emphasized collaboration with China and other Eastern countries over its Western counterparts, attracting significant Chinese capital to fund several major infrastructure projects, such as railways, ports, and highways (Rarieya and De Vicente 2024; Procopio 2019, 178). Under Kenyatta, Kenya further solidified relations with China through the construction of major development projects such as the SGR, the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor, and Nairobi Expressway. However, since Ruto's inauguration as President, he has demonstrated a comparatively keener interest in engaging with the US than his predecessors.

In May 2024, Ruto met with US President Joe Biden in Washington D.C., marking the first state visit by a Kenyan president to the US in two decades and an African leader since 2008 (France-Presse 2024). The visit is regarded as an opportunity for US and Kenyan policymakers to strengthen the foundations of its partnership, as the US' reliance on Kenya as its main security, diplomatic, and economic partner in the Horn of Africa has steadily increased, and Kenya's mounting debt calls for increased external investment to alleviate domestic pressure (Elias 2024).

During his campaign, Ruto promulgated a distinctly critical attitude towards China, reportedly stating at an economic forum in June 2022 that "Chinese nationals are roasting maize and selling mobile phones…[and] [w]e will deport all of them" ("Kenya's Policy Reversal,"

2022), and railing against the Chinese-financed loans that were agreed by his predecessors, which he blamed for contributing to Kenya's growing debt (Clynch 2023). He also promised voters that he would publish government contracts with China, deport illegal Chinese national workers, and not restructure the country's Chinese debt, asserting that "Kenya has the capacity to handle its debt situation" (Houreld and Miriri 2022). However, Ruto immediately softened his position after taking office, proclaiming at a meeting with Liu Yuxi, China's special representative on African affairs, that the "robust friendship that Kenya enjoys with China" is cherished, and Kenya will "step up and expand these relations" (Clynch 2023). Several Kenyan political and economic analysts claim this is an unsurprising turn, as China is still one of Kenya's largest creditors and trading partners and Ruto is pursuing more pragmatic policymaking (Clynch 2023; "Kenya's Policy Reversal" 2022; Bartlett 2022). Ruto further cemented this sentiment by asserting that "[Kenya] has interests as a nation and if our interests lead us to work with China we will work with China. If our interests dictate that we must work with the West, we will work with the West" (Nyabiage 2023).

In comparison to the overall positive sentiment by Kenyan state actors, those within civil society tend to have mixed perceptions and attitudes toward Chinese engagement. According to an Afrobarometer survey in 2021, around 23% of respondents in Kenya believed China would be the best model for future development, while 43% selected the US, and when asked whether China or the US had a positive or negative economic and political influence, 65% of respondents selected China as having a positive impact, and 72% chose the US (Sanny and Selormey 2021, 6;9). Kenyans have generally mixed perceptions of China's presence in the country, with some welcoming the new jobs and infrastructure, and others expressing skepticism and criticism towards the lack of transparency and cost of Chinese engagement, which will be further explored in the following analysis of the SGR.

The obvious advantages highlighted by Kenyans is China's pivotal role in advancing the development and modernization of major infrastructure and agricultural technologies (Cheng 2022; Rarieya and De Vicente 2024). Moreover, the Chinese state discourse does not shy away from promoting an overtly favorable depiction of Kenyan-Chinese relations, publishing news articles highlighting cheerful cultural exchanges (Mutethya 2020), and successful Kenyan students who praise the advantages of the Chinese education system, community, and culture (Opali 2024). However, concerns raised within Kenyan civil society discourse can, at times,

overshadow the clear effort from the Chinese state to portray a positive and friendly narrative of China's presence in Kenya – although it will be demonstrated that the discontent from Kenyans is actually better understood as being targeted at their own government rather than the Chinese.

The project analysis below will first examine the ways in which civil society perceives and constructs the impact of the project, identifying core themes within the discourse relating to how environmental concerns are expressed and interpreted by non-state actors, and the extent to which discourse can mobilize action and enact policy change. State discourse will then be examined to explore how state actors, both Kenyan and Chinese, express and interpret environmental sustainability and respond to concerns from civil society. Key themes will be identified to explore whether, and to what extent, discourse can shape state and non-state behavior in substantial ways and influence the environmental outcome of this specific Chinese-funded development project.

The Kenya Standard Gauge Railway (SGR)

I. Background

In 2014, former president Kenyatta and former Chinese premier Li Keqiang signed a $3.8 billion contract to build the first phase of the Kenya SGR that, once completed, will connect Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and South Sudan to replace the century-old colonial track built by the British (Moore 2014). The 472km railway is Kenya's largest and most expensive infrastructure project since independence from British colonization (Oluochi 2018, 742). The construction of the SGR consists of several phases: the initial phase, completed in 2017, is the Mombasa-Nairobi SGR, linking Kenya's Indian Ocean port to its capital, and was funded by the China EXIM bank which provided 90% of the total financing and contracted to the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) (Wang and Wissenbach 2019). The second phase is subdivided into three segments: Nairobi-Naivasha, Naivasha-Kisumu, and Kisumu-Malaba, Uganda (Andeso 2019). During the 2015 FOCAC, the China Communications Construction Group (CCCC) and Kenya Railways Corporation signed a framework agreement for the second phase of the SGR ("CCCC Signed the Framework Agreement" 2015), with China EXIM bank agreeing to cover 85% of the financing with a $1.5 billion loan for the Nairobi-Naivasha segment, which was completed in 2019 (Huang 2022). Currently, only the Mombasa-Nairobi and Nairobi-

Naivasha sections are completed and thus, this chapter focuses on those lines specifically. Any references to the SGR in this chapter pertain solely to these completed sections.

The railway is expected to "revolutionize development across the African region" and boost Kenya's gross domestic product (GDP) by at least 1.5% (Kagwanja 2020). In terms of its economic value, the SGR is expected to play a critical role in increasing freight, strengthening passenger transportation capacity, generating employment opportunities, stimulating the regional economy, and facilitating trade unification in Kenya and the East African region (Oluochi 2018, 756). However, despite electrification of the line, making it Kenya's first green transport, the most severe environmental costs of construction according to stakeholders[22] involve the disruption and loss of ecologically sensitive areas, and disturbances in wildlife migration patterns (Nyumba et al. 2021). Critics also raise concerns over debt sustainability, with some fearing that the projected benefits will not compensate for the high cost of the project (Redd 2020).

Local responses to the SGR are mixed, with concerns mainly revolving around corruption, Kenya's rising external debt, and the potential impact on the surrounding environment. While the issues of corruption and debt are significant and relevant aspects of the SGR, they fall outside the primary focus of this thesis, which centers on environmental sustainability. As such, they will be addressed only briefly in the following section, though their significance to the broader discourse is fully recognized.

When Kenyatta inaugurated the Mombasa-Nairobi SGR in 2017, he proclaimed that the railway is "one of the key cornerstones to Kenya's transformation to an industrialized, prosperous middle-income country" and it would create "new [opportunities], new jobs, and greater shared prosperity" for Kenya (Ruto 2017). However, when Kenyatta failed to secure a proposed loan of $3.6 billion from China for the third phase of the SGR in 2019, discontent began to rise among Kenyans, decrying the railway as an embodiment of greed and corruption among the political elite (Dahir 2022a). Only recently in May 2024, China agreed to fund the remaining segment from Naivasha to Malaba (Anami 2024); however, prior to the latest

[22] Nyumba et al. (2021) conducted interviews and meetings with a diverse range of stakeholders from corridor institutions (e.g. KRC and Kenya Ports Authority), government institutions mandated with natural resource conservation and management (e.g. NEMA, Kenya Forest Research Institute, Water resources Authority, and KWS), community groups (e.g. Community Forest Associations, local farmers, and pastoralists), non-governmental and research organizations, and county governments along the SGR.

agreement between the two governments, progress on the railway was stagnant and onlookers became critical of the government's management of the project.

II. Civil Society and State Discourse

Despite Kenya's media landscape experiencing frequent assaults on press freedom, the SGR project has nonetheless drawn extensive scrutiny from civil society. Some argue that there was a lack of economic planning and foresight by the Kenyatta administration when commissioning the railway, noting that independent reports, including from the WB, recommended upgrading the existing rail network, rather than building a new one (Dahir 2022a; CPCS 2009). Moreover, the feasibility study for the project was criticized for being conducted by the CRBC rather than the Kenyan government, presenting a conflict of interests according to Busia Senator, Okiya Omtatah, who also argued before Parliament that the SGR did not qualify as a public project, denouncing the billions borrowed at the expense of Kenyan taxpayers (Muthoni 2023; Nyamasyo 2024).

Criticism was also directed towards the process through which the project was negotiated, in which the initial agreement on the Mombasa-Nairobi railway sets out that the contract will be governed by Chinese laws with all disputes being arbitrated in Beijing, and also contains a confidentiality clause which inhibits Kenya from publicizing the deal without China's written permission (Okoth 2019). James Shikwati, expert in African development economics and director of the Inter Region Economic Network (IREN), claims that China's negotiation approach with a country depends on how the leaders present themselves, in terms of leadership strength, unity, and strategic priorities, and blames Kenya's "tenderpreneur" culture for the unfavorable agreement (ibid).[23] The contract also stipulates that any goods purchased from the proceeds of the railway would preferably be sourced from China, and if Kenya defaults on any other external loan, the default clause on the railway loan would automatically be triggered, requiring Kenya to immediately repay the loan with all accrued interest, while also granting China the right to stop further disbursements (Dahir 2022b). Kenyan economist, Tony Watima, notes that despite being negotiated as an ostensibly symbiotic, government-to-government project, all the risks are taken by the Kenyan taxpayer (ibid). Based on this discourse, there

[23] Tenderpreneur is an individual who profits by manipulating government tender contracts, often through personal connections and corrupt relationships, and occasionally outright bribery (Georgieva 2017).

appears to be a high level of skepticism from civil society regarding the degree of agency the Kenyan state maintains in its relationship with China.

While the economic concerns with the SGR are a central theme within the civil society discourse, activists also responded aggressively to the controversy surrounding the proposed route of the railway's first and second segment, as it would cut through the Tsavo Conservation Area, which supports approximately 40% of Kenya's entire elephant population, and the Nairobi National Park ("Super Tusker Elephants," n.d.). Environmentalists unsuccessfully attempted to protest the construction of the SGR's first phase, arguing that the line interferes with elephant migration (Ombuor 2018). Because the SGR traverses through the ecosystem and creates a barrier to the movement of terrestrial animals, some locals observed animals congregating along the highway (Nyumba et al. 2021, 8). SGR contractors provided underpasses and bridges to enable freer movement; however, residents observed the proliferation of illegal settlements within the underpasses, further blocking the movement of wildlife (ibid).

The government ministry, Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) also criticized the SGR's impact on wildlife movement and collaborated with Save The Elephants, a research and conservation organization headquartered in Nairobi, to monitor and track the movement patterns of elephants, in hopes of the data being utilized by the Kenya National Highway Authority to plan more efficient roads and passes for wildlife and people (*The East African* 2016). The report highlighted the need for further research and development of policies requiring closer collaboration between transport managers and civil engineers on the one hand, and wildlife ecologists and conservationists on the other to avoid or mitigate the effects of habitat fragmentation (Koskei et al. 2018). However, it is unclear whether these recommendations were taken into serious consideration by policymakers and contractors, especially when considering the wider controversy surrounding the Nairobi National Park.

In 2016, the Kenya Railways Corporation (KRC) and the National Land Commission decided to run part of the SGR through Nairobi National Park, which is considered an "absolute jewel to the Nairobi citizens and all of Kenya" (Ombuor 2018), and the "world's only wildlife capital," to avoid costly land compensation hurdles in Nairobi's urban areas (Mutu 2017). A total of seven routes were considered, two of which did not pass through the park; however, the government asserted that the current design was most cost-effective and technically feasible (Ombuor 2018). Environmentalists and conservationists responded forcefully to the proposal,

with around 100 activists marching through the streets of Nairobi in 2018, contesting the railway's construction and demanding that it be rerouted in consideration of the park's vital ecology (ibid). The Africa Network for Animal Welfare released a statement denouncing KWS Director-General Kitili Mbathi for his "ridiculous" claim that the project will not interfere with the park's ecological system ("Building the SGR," n.d.). Akshay Vishwanath, chairman of Friends of Nairobi National Park also criticized the KRC, stating that its claims are "unsubstantiated by any facts" and "not based on reliable science" (Mutu 2017). Vishwanath refers to the findings of the 2016 report by Save The Elephants, authorized by the KWS, arguing that the lack of consideration for the environment in the Tsavo Park case is being repeated for Nairobi Park (ibid).

Unlike the case with the Tsavo Conservation Area, the KWS did not respond as critically to the construction of the railway through Nairobi Park, despite similar complaints being put forth. Richard Leakey, former chairman of the board of the KWS, noted the national importance of the railway and assured the park route was a "pragmatic alternative" (ibid). Activists attacked the KWS for its hypocritical endorsement of the proposed route despite its mandate to uphold Kenya's strict environmental and wildlife laws ("GoK's Commitment to Wildlife," 2016). Several environmental organizations began campaigns against the construction, pushing petitions and pursuing legal action in hopes of mobilizing enough pressure against the government and contractors. Petitioners railed against the proposal, with some explaining that they support the SGR overall, but decry its encroachment on the park and assert that development cannot forsake the nation's natural environment ("Voters' Comments" 2016). Others attacked the Kenyan state for destroying the environment in the name of progressive development ("KENYA: Protect Nairobi National Park" n.d.).

However, despite vehement protests and complaints, the KWS, KRC, and the Kenyan Ministry of Transport announced that the SGR will go ahead and cut through the national park. Within the state and civil society discourses, there was a clear conflict in the priorities being highlighted by both groups of actors. While conservationists and activists acknowledge the economic benefits of the SGR and are generally welcoming of infrastructure projects, it is clear that conservation of the park is their foremost priority, with the general sentiment being that the environment should not be sacrificed for the sake of development. However, state discourse surrounding the project's environmental and social impact was scant, aside from the Chinese

state's effort to promulgate a green narrative, claiming that the railway is in harmony with wildlife conservation because the "animal passages," which are the contentious bridges and underpasses highlighted in Nyumba et al.'s 2021 study, boost animal welfare and accommodate the habits of Kenya's wildlife (*Xinhua* 2022).

The core themes within the Kenyan state discourse revolve around the necessity of the SGR for Kenya's overall development, supplemented with nationalistic rhetoric, and the significance of Kenya-China cooperation. Leakey endorsed the controversial route, claiming it as the "best of all the bad" alternatives and emphasized that Africa, and Kenya more specifically, should not be afraid to "aspire to greatness in construction" (Rajab 2016; Kahumbu 2016). In 2014, Kenyatta declared that the SGR is a "project for all Kenyans," and urged all citizens to "serve the good of Kenya, rather than their own self or the interests of partisanship" (Kenyatta 2014). Moreover, the SGR is emphasized as a "Kenyan railway," unlike the British-built one, and not a project imposed upon by China (Wang and Wissenbach 2019, 295). Accordingly, Kenyatta negotiated that the SGR would locally source 40% of construction materials, which is 10% higher than China EXIM Bank's typical requirement of sourcing 70% Chinese materials in overseas infrastructure projects (296); however, Kenyan state discourse does not diminish China's assistance and frequently lauds the BRI and China for expediting Kenya's economic development. Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi asserted that Kenya must "engage robustly with the people of China" and spur the growth of critical economic sectors (*Xinhua* 2023c).

Unlike the narrative in civil society discourse, where the railway is largely seen as an embodiment of Kenya's greed and corruption, the state promotes the SGR as a representation of Kenyan independence and modernization, and demonstration of the "speed and high quality of the China-Kenya cooperation" (Ndegwa 2019). Unfortunately, within state discourses there is very little acknowledgement or response to the environmental concerns raised, despite many of the complaints from civil society being the lack of public participation and inclusion of local knowledge in the planning and construction process. In spite of the completion of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the first and second phase of the SGR, the state did not alter either of the proposed routes. Activists argued that "doing an EIA based on a wrong idea does not make the project right" and re-aligning the SGR to pass through the national parks

"cannot be rectified by doing an EIA" ("Building the SGR," n.d.).[24] Moreover, it is unclear whether the EIAs were made available or readily accessible to the public at the time of publication.

Although most criticism from civil society was directed towards the state, complaints towards the Chinese contractors were also present within the discourse. Observers criticized Kenya's ostensible lack of agency in the negotiation of the SGR and with China in general, with some commenters urging the Kenyan state to stop "handing…land over to the Chinese" ("Voters Comments" 2016). Christopher Murithi, chair of the Oloolua Community Forest Association, claims that the way China approaches construction in their own country is not the way they are doing it in Kenya, claiming that in China, if the environmental impact of a proposed project is expected to outweigh the development projects, the project will not be pursued (Mbugua 2023). However, he goes on to argue that destructive development projects are still taking place in Kenya because "[Kenyans] lack the value of seeing [the] environment as important as [one's] own life," insinuating that a lack of will from civil society is partially to blame (ibid). While the majority of unrest is directed toward the Kenyan state for failing to protect the park and ignoring the demands of civil society, some activists note that civil society also plays a critical role in ensuring laws are implemented and the state meets its obligation.

CEO of WildLifeDirect, Paula Kahumbu warned that the disconnect between people and nature leads to a lack of public concern for conservation and ecological protection, resulting in a collective failure to respond cohesively to environmental issues that arise in the development process (Kahumbu 2017). As a testament to this sentiment, some of the public petitions circulating online failed to garner even 5000 signatures, while others with over 10,000 signatures lack clear details on next steps; moreover, activity on these petitions sharply declined after 2020 and 2022, potentially due to Ruto's inauguration and new sense of optimism regarding his proclaimed green aspirations.[25] Kahumba further argues that conservationists failed to respond with a clear vision that makes wildlife conservation relevant to all Kenyans and provides

[24] Kenya's Environmental Management and Conservation Act (EMCA) (1999) is the framework law on environmental management and conservation, and provides the legal guidelines for the SGR's second phase. The main body to implement the EMCA is the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) ("Environmental Act (EMCA):," n.d.).

[25] Petitions referenced include: "The President of Kenya: We Call on You to Enlist Nairobi National Park as World Heritage Site" (2016); "KENYA: Protect Nairobi National Park" (2018); "Save Nairobi Park" 2020; "ReGreen Nairobi National Park" 2021.

opportunities to be part of its achievement (ibid). However, while Kenya does have environmental laws embedded in its constitution, enforcement of those laws is often impeded by political interference and failure to respond to court orders (Mbugua 2023).

Many activists cite Article 69 of the constitution, which states that "every person has a duty to cooperate with State organs and other persons to protect and conserve the environment and ensure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources" ("The Constitution of Kenya" 2010; "The President of Kenya," 2016.). Robert Kibugi, an expert in environmental law, emphasizes how the constitution includes a series of obligations on the Kenyan state to realize the human right to a clean and healthy environment, and failure to meet those obligations means the people can use their constitutional right to go to court (Mbugua 2023). In 2016, the National Environment Tribunal ordered a temporary pause to construction on the second phase of the railway in response to a petition from a group of environmental organizations led by the Kenya Coalition for Wildlife Conservation and Management, arguing that the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) irregularly granted the KRC an EIA license without consulting institutions responsible for wildlife and environmental conservation, or facilitating adequate public participation (France-Presse 2024; Oirere 2016; Ogemba 2017). However, the Kenyan government attempted to amend the law that requires an automatic stop to projects under legal dispute, burying the charge in an unrelated act which then led conservationists to complain to the high court (France-Presse 2024).

Although activists recognize their own degree of failure to effectively mobilize public interest in conservation, state interference remains a major obstacle in ensuring Kenya's constitutional rights are upheld and enforced. Moreover, the discourse from civil society does not direct the majority of blame towards the Chinese; rather, when criticism does lament Chinese involvement, it is often in the context of the Kenyan government's disregard for civic concerns. In terms of the Chinese actors, the discourse does not clearly indicate whether the Chinese partners assumed a more active or passive role in dictating the railway's contested route; though, CRBC's external relations and co-operation manager, Julius Li, does acknowledge the project's inevitable ecological impacts, noting that "sustainability is at the center of every project…and [the company] continuously adhere[s] to the highest standards of environmental and wildlife protection, energy conservation and emission reduction" (Mwltl 2016).

The EIA for both the Mombasa-Nairobi and Nairobi-Naivasha line further explicates that it is the contractor's responsibility to implement mitigation measures for the majority of potential negative environmental and social impacts; however, selecting the preferred path through Nairobi Park was ultimately the Kenyan state's decision for cost and feasibility reasons, and mitigation measures are to be approved and supervised by the KWS (AWEMAC 2012; Habitat Planners 2016). Given the state's emphasis on the SGR as a "Kenyan" railway, the state likely played the central role in determining its final route, highlighting the ongoing struggle to balance development and ecological preservation in Kenya's modernization efforts.

The tension between the Kenyan state's development ambitions and civil society's environmental and social concerns reflects broader challenges within Kenya's democratic landscape. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing rights such as environmental protection and civic involvement, the SGR case demonstrated that state decision-making largely sidelined public participation. This case directly supports the central hypothesis as neither Chinese nor Kenyan state and policymakers prioritized ecological considerations, but rather privileged economic growth in their decision-making, ultimately dismissing concerns from civil society regarding the SGR's impact. Many activists warn that allowing the SGR to pass through Nairobi National Park sets a dangerous precedent that reinforces the notion that economic growth is more important than environmental conservation and sustainability. Kahumbu (2016) notes that by prioritizing economic interests over environmental ones, the state and KWS lose the moral authority to protect other national parks facing similar threats, damaging Kenya's ecological reputation and potentially reversing decades of conservation successes. Regardless, the Kenyan state made little to no concessions to the demands of local activists, and the response from Chinese partners, despite making some effort to acknowledge environmental concerns, was primarily a reaction to unrest from civil society rather than a proactive effort to implement substantial mitigation measures. The disconnect between state and civil society discourses demonstrates the challenges inherent in democratic landscapes, where legal frameworks and public discourse are not always sufficient to influence state-led initiatives. The next chapter will examine Ethiopia's political environment, which is comparably more centralized and authoritative, to further develop an understanding of the relationship between state authority, Chinese engagement, and environmental sustainability.

Chapter 6: The case of Ethiopia

Like the previous chapter, this one begins with an overview of Ethiopia's current political and civic landscape, including Ethiopia's framework for climate action and sustainable development, followed by a discussion of the Ethiopia-China relationship. The focal BRI project this chapter focuses on is the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway (AADR). It examines the discourse from state and civil society regarding its economic, social, and environmental impact. This chapter focuses predominantly on discourse available in online Ethiopian news articles, speeches, policy documents, and academic literature, as well as from international think tanks and NGOs in Ethiopia. Because of Ethiopia's more authoritarian characteristics, there must be a distinction drawn between state-affiliated media outlets and independent ones. This chapter will also address some challenges in acquiring sufficient data from independent Ethiopian sources due to restraints on civil society and freedom of the press. Similarly to the case of Kenya, Ethiopian and Chinese decision-makers ultimately prioritized economic considerations over environmental concerns. Due to the repressive civic space in Ethiopia, critical perspectives on the AADR are rare and attempts from civil society to pressure policy-makers were futile.

Ethiopia's Political and Civic Landscape

Ethiopia's political system has been identified as having authoritarian tendencies such as centralizing power at the federal level, repressing civil society and the media, and marginalizing opposition (Yimenu 2022). Following the collapse of the communist Derg regime in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) consolidated power as a multi-ethnic coalition consisting of four ethnically defined parties: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP, previously known as the Amhara National Democratic Movement), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP, previously known as the Oromo People's Democratic Organization), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) (Lyrons 2021). In 1995, a new constitution was adopted and specifically declared itself a federal political agreement among nations, nationalities, and peoples (i.e. linguistic groups) and proclaiming their sovereignty (Abebe 2024, 231). The 1995 constitution established the foundations for Ethiopia's federal, parliamentary, and democratic system, instituting a governance structure based on ethnic federalism where political and administrative divisions are drawn along ethnic lines (González 2022). However, the EPRDF was also founded on the

principle of democratic centralism, in which decisions and political positions at the regional level are determined at the national level, disregarding the supposed autonomy of regional states and making Ethiopia more centralized in practice (Abebe 2024, 232).

Despite the vast difference in constituency size, each party had an equal number of representatives in decision-making institutions, and the TPLF, which represented the smallest popular constituency but strongest militarily, exercised disproportionate influence in politics, security, and the economy, dominating key federal posts (236; Burke 2020). For the two decades following the EPRDF's inception, it propagated a form of performance legitimacy based on state-led growth that mimicked the developmental state rhetoric prevalent in the economic successes of the East Asian Tigers (Abebe 2024, 234). However, despite the initial economic success in GDP from massive state investments in public infrastructure projects (ibid), a large segment of the population still lived in abject poverty, leaving Ethiopians discontent (Kirby 2021).

In 2015 and 2016, the government faced mass popular protests over human rights abuses, corruption, inequality, and the TPLF's disproportionate grip on power (Gettleman 2016). The protests emboldened the ODP and ADP, who together represented more than two-thirds of the Ethiopian population, to challenge the TPLF-dominated leadership. Ultimately, in February 2018, former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced his resignation, triggering an acrimonious succession battle with candidates emerging from all four member parties of the EPRDF (Abebe 2024, 235). Under party rules, the prime minister is appointed by, and accountable to, the House of Peoples' Representatives (HPR), and must be approved by a two-thirds majority vote of confidence (236). In April 2018, Abiy Ahmed Ali was elected as Prime Minister and represented a new, optimistic chapter for Ethiopia that many hoped would be the beginning of a true democratic transition.

In his inauguration speech, Abiy projected himself as a proud Ethiopian and maintained a distinctly pan-Ethiopian rhetoric that rejected ethnic oppression and promoted national unity (Yimenu 2024), emphasizing how the "[Ethiopian] identity is interwoven and intermingled" (Abiy 2018). He also sought to develop a political culture of democratic competition and cooperation, claiming that "competing parties outside of EPRDF [are viewed] as competition and not as opposition, not as enemies but friends" (Abiy 2018). Abiy went on to implement various progressive reforms, signaling a substantive liberal democratic shift in Ethiopia's political

landscape through, for instance, nominating the first woman president, appointing women to half his cabinet, releasing thousands of political detainees, and nominating a former opposition exile as the first woman chair of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (BBC News 2019; Gardner and Rosser 2018). He also dismissed several controversial and previously untouchable civil servants, such as the head of Ethiopia's prison service who received repeated allegations of widespread torture, and lifted various bans on websites and other media (Burke 2018). In June 2018, the government announced plans to allow full and partial privatization of state-run firms, and, for the first time, open state-owned telecoms, electricity and logistics, and the national airline to foreign investors (*The Economist* 2018).

Not only did Abiy establish himself as a liberal reformer in Ethiopia's political landscape with his patently democratic and harmonious rhetoric, but he also gained significant political clout both domestically and internationally as a "visionary peacekeeper" for achieving a historic peace agreement with Eritrea in 2019 (Gardner 2024). Abiy was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2019 and, in his acceptance speech, touted his guiding philosophy for peace, "Medemer, an Amharic word, that signifies synergy, convergence, and teamwork for a common destiny" (Abiy 2019). He went on to proclaim that "[Ethiopians] must neutralize the toxin of hatred by creating a civic culture of consensus-based democracy, inclusivity, civility, and tolerance based on Medemer principles" (ibid). Most Ethiopians were highly enthusiastic and receptive to Abiy's ambitious reforms, celebrating the democratic shift in Ethiopia's political environment and proclaiming Abiy as their "miracle" who is "making the country democratic" (Gardner and Rosser 2018).

Within domestic politics, Abiy aimed to reform the EPRDF which he viewed as parochial and inequitable due to its ethno-linguistic foundations and principle of equal representation among coalition member parties, regardless of size (Abebe 2024, 240). In late 2019, Abiy replaced the EPRDF with an individual membership-based party, the Prosperity Party (PP), which amalgamated regional incumbent parties to form a united national party and aimed to limit the power of the TPLF. The TPLF opposed the change, interpreting it as Abiy's attempt to consolidate federal power at the expense of regional and ethnic autonomy, and declined to join the PP (Kirby 2021). Furthermore, the TPLF-led EPRDF accumulated significant wealth since assuming power in 1991, and retaining that economic power was a central motive behind the TPLF's opposition to changes to Ethiopia's political economy (Borago 2020).

Tensions between the TPLF and PP rapidly intensified between 2018 and 2020, ultimately culminating in a bloody civil war between the federal government and Tigray rebels that lasted two years from November 2020 to November 2022, resulting in roughly 600,000 casualties, mass rape, ethnic cleansing, widespread famine, and catastrophic economic damage (Gardner 2024). Consequently, Abiy, who was once lauded as a symbol of liberal democratic reform and peacemaking by international and domestic audiences, faced widespread condemnation for his presiding role in the conflict and increasingly authoritarian tactics to suppress and control mass unrest.

In terms of Ethiopia's civic space, Abiy initially asserted a dedication to fostering an open and free environment; however, in reality the federal government continues to silence and oppress dissenting voices and the media. Some Ethiopian journalists express concern regarding the initial reforms that Abiy implemented, cautioning that the changes are not legally nor constitutionally guaranteed; rather, they are secured only by the "goodwill" of the government which may change as political dynamics shift (Mumo 2019). Moreover, the Ethiopian Press Freedom Defenders found that since 2019, around 200 journalists have been arrested and face state authorities routinely violating constitutionally protected press freedoms through arbitrary arrests and the spread of disinformation, depicting the media workers as "spies, traitors, and threats to national security" (Ethiopian Press Freedom Defenders 2024). Addis Standard, an independent news magazine based in Ethiopia was temporarily suspended by Ethiopia's media regulator due to accusations that it was advancing the TPLF's agenda (Mackintosh 2021).[26] Ethiopian journalists continue to operate within a repressive, authoritarian environment which actively discourages freedom of speech, and thus, commonly adopt more pragmatic approaches to their work that avoids confrontation or criticism of authority (Dirbaba and O'Donnel 2015, 926).

CSOs are also experiencing an encroaching state presence, evidenced in 2024, when the Ethiopian Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO) reportedly dissolved 1,504 CSOs for failing to submit their annual reports, a requirement outlined in the Civil Society Organizations Proclamation of 2011; however, CSOs have struggled to comply with the ASCO's

[26] Tsedale Lemma, founder and editor-in-chief of Addis Standard was an early critic of Abiy's government and warned that the initiatives he was gaining recognition for, such as the peace agreement with Eritrea and ambitious political reforms, sidelined the TPLF, a key stakeholder in Ethiopia's political landscape (Lemma 2019).

heavy administrative requirements largely due to underfunding (Human Rights Defenders 2024a). Moreover, Ethiopian security and intelligence forces have increasingly cracked down on independent domestic human rights organizations through the use of physical and digital surveillance, verbal harassment, intimidation, and threats (Human Rights Defenders 2024b).[27] In sharp contrast to the distinctly positive sentiment held by many Ethiopians in the initial stages of Abiy's leadership, there is now a sense of betrayal and disappointment towards the Abiy government, exemplified in former senior Ethiopian diplomat, Berhane Kidanemariam's statement of resignation:

> "With the emergence of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, I, like many other Ethiopians, had big hopes for genuine reforms that could transform our political environment. In the beginning, Prime Minister Abiy inspired millions of Ethiopians with talk of reconciliation and change. However, instead of fulfilling his initial promise, he has led Ethiopia down a dark path toward destruction and disintegration. Like so many others who thought the Prime Minister had the potential to lead Ethiopia to a bright future, I am filled with despair and anguish at the direction he is taking our country" (Kidanemariam 2021).

Despite these political tensions and conflicts however, Ethiopia has made notable strides in integrating environmental sustainability as key objectives in national development plans and sector strategies and addressing sustainable development through various government initiatives. Annual emissions from fossil fuels and industry have nearly doubled from 8.11 in 2012 to 19.07 million tonnes in 2022 ("Data Page: Annual CO2 Emissions" 2024b), and GHG emissions have steadily increased from 210.61 to 303.88 million tonnes ("Data Page: Annual Greenhouse," 2024b); however, Ethiopia's contributions to global climate change is negligible, accounting for only 0.56% of global GHG emissions, mainly due to lack of economic development, low levels of industrialization, and reliance on renewable energy ("Data Page: Share of Global," 2024a).

Emissions from transport have also grown at a lesser rate, from 3.25 million tonnes to 7.4 in 2022 ("Data Page: CO2 Emissions from Transport 2023b). Globally, it has one of the greenest electricity mixes, with hydro consisting of roughly 97% of installed generation capacity ("Ethiopia - Countries and Regions" n.d.). However, due to its dependence on rainfed

[27] For instance, several employees at the Ethiopian Human Rights Council Organization (EHRCO) have reported numerous incidents of being followed or harassed by government security officials. In November 2023, a staff member from the North Ethiopia Region office was reportedly physically assaulted by three armed men wearing government security uniforms. In April 2024, a head employee reported being followed and threatened by government security personnel who took photographs of him and left threatening phone calls ("Concern At Increasing Crackdown 2024).

agriculture, location in the Horn of Africa—a region prone to droughts and floods—, and high levels of poverty and rapid population growth, Ethiopia's vulnerability to climate change poses significant threats to its economic development goals (Simane et al. 2016). One key area of concern is Ethiopia's rate of deforestation; 36.2 kilohectares (kha) of natural forest and 96.5 kha of humid primary forest has been lost from 2002 to 2023, making up 20% of total tree cover loss ("Ethiopia Deforestation Rates & Statistics" n.d.).

These concerns prompted the federal government to develop a policy framework that aims to build a "climate-resilient green economy" and contribute to realizing Ethiopia's ambition of reaching middle-income status by 2025 outlined in its Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) (Narain et al. 2024, 36).[28] The Climate Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) strategy was launched in 2011 under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), and the Ethiopian Development Research Institute, and is based on four key pillars: 1) enhance crop and livestock practices for higher food security and farmer income; 2) protect and re-establish forests; 3) increase renewable energy generation for domestic and regional markets; and 4) leapfrog to modern and energy-efficient technologies in transport, industry, and infrastructure ("Ethiopia's Climate-Resilient Green Economy" 2011, 2).

The Ethiopian state acknowledges the need to pursue its economic development goals sustainably, noting that "if Ethiopia were to pursue a conventional economic development path…the resulting negative environmental impacts would follow the patterns observed all around the world" (1). While Ethiopia does not have dedicated climate change legislation that establishes a framework for climate governance for the public and private sectors, there have been efforts to institutionalize climate responsibilities and authorities. For instance, Proclamation 1263/2021[29] vests responsibilities in the Ministry of Planning and Development (MoPD) to initiate laws, policies, and strategies on climate change, and to coordinate, support, and follow up on climate activities (Narain et al. 2024, 35). These responsibilities, previously with the EPA, shifted to the MoPD in an effort to include key adaptation ministries in the climate policy decision-making processes, and mainstream climate change coordination responsibilities in a

[28] Ethiopia's first GTP 2010-2015 delineates goals to evolve the economy away from subsistence agriculture, and towards industrialization and value-added agriculture in an effort to become a middle-income country by 2025 (Cheru and Oqubay 2019, 296).

[29] Definition of Powers and Duties of the Executive Organs Proclamation No. 1263/2021. A Proclamation to provide for the definition of the powers and duties of the Executive Organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) ("Environmental Impact Assessment Guideline Document 2000).

federal institution (ibid). Moreover, Article 92 of the constitution asserts that the "[g]overnment shall endeavor to ensure that all Ethiopians live in a clean and healthy environment" (FDRE 1995).

Abiy has also reaffirmed Ethiopia's dedication to environmental responsibility and sustainable development, particularly through the launch of the Green Legacy Initiative in 2019, a national campaign to plant seedlings in cities and rural areas, raise awareness about Ethiopia's environmental degradation, and educate society on the importance of adopting green behavior ("Green Legacy," n.d.). The Country Representative in Ethiopia for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Farayi Zimudzi, lauded the initiative as a demonstration of "Ethiopia's level of ambition…[and] serious commitment" to addressing the global climate crisis (*ENA* 2024). The state evidently recognizes the severity of the climate crisis and expresses a strong dedication to integrating ecological sustainability into its overall development agenda. However, those outside the state have highlighted several gaps and limitations in Ethiopia's approach to sustainable development, particularly regarding environmental policies that fail to adequately integrate sustainability and economic development.

Ethiopian scholars highlight how national development policies and strategies primarily focus on poverty reduction and rapid economic growth, and inadequately address the potential environmental implications of these policies (Dejenie and Kakiso 2023). For example, Ethiopia's economy relies heavily on agriculture, which includes a variety of farming systems that come with multifaceted environmental impacts, such as fertilizer and chemicals, and irrigation water quality (6). Ethiopia's Environmental Policy, however, only vaguely states in the Sectoral Environmental Policies section its intent to "[t]o safeguard human and environmental health by producing adequate regulation of agricultural (crop and livestock) chemicals" ("Environmental Policy of Ethiopia" 8). Some have also criticized the Green Legacy Initiative for overlooking previous afforestation issues, such as introducing damaging non-native plant species, by promoting mass plantings to meet a national quota (Hadero 2019). However, given the repressive civic space and outbreak of conflict and ethnic violence in the past few years, it is unsurprising to find few direct attacks on the state's approach to sustainable development.

As part of Ethiopia's efforts to mainstream environmental sustainability in its development agenda, investment in green infrastructure and technology is crucial and China, one of Ethiopia's largest sources of FDI and development partners, plays a significant role in

facilitating Ethiopia's green transition. According to the UNDP, Ethiopia is also among the top ten recipients of funding for climate-related initiatives from China ("International Development Cooperation," 2023). China is also funding Ethiopia's Riverside Green Development project, launched in 2019, which aims to clean the city's rivers and create a walkable, green public realm (Students Reinventing Cities n.d.). Both Ethiopian and Chinese discourses present the project as a demonstration of the "implementation of the development philosophy of both sustainable symbiosis and human-nature harmonious coexistence" (Zhiyong 2022). However, the project has received backlash from residents who were ordered by the government to relocate as villages were demolished in preparation for the new developments (Terefe 2020). Others have critiqued the project's inadequate consideration of the design risks in terms of urban infrastructure needs (Tsegaye 2019). While both Ethiopia and China employ rhetoric that emphasizes green transition and environmentally responsible initiatives, there is a gap between these narratives and the reality that local communities face, raising concerns about whose interests are prioritized in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Ethiopia-China Relations: State and Civil Society Discourses

Contemporary Ethiopia-China relations substantially evolved after the EPRDF gained control of state power in 1991 and embarked on a strategic shift in economic policy. As the EPRDF was determined to pursue a development path tailored to its national context, the Chinese model of development, which is based on principles of South-South cooperation and the promotion of economic and social development with cautious political reform (Tesfaye 2020, 34), was particularly attractive to Ethiopian leaders who were reluctantly embracing the neoliberal policies of the IMF (Archibong, Coulibaly, and Okonjo-Iweala 2021, 149).

Ethiopian state policymakers recognize that economic growth cannot be achieved without sustained technological and industrial upgrading, and a fundamental transformation of economic activities, in which China's development assistance is viewed as critical for sustaining Ethiopia's agriculture-led industrialization path (Tesfaye 2020, 38; 44). China, on the other hand, is keen to engage with Ethiopia due to its strategic location in the Horn of Africa, both security- and

market-wise,[30] and preferable investment environment as the government has eliminated most of the discriminatory tax, credit, and foreign trade practices for the private sector, simplified administrative procedures, and established a clear and consistent regulatory framework for business activities ("2010 Investment Climate Statement," 2010). Since 2005, China has poured roughly $26 billion into Ethiopia, mainly in the form of grant assistance and interest-free loans (American Enterprise Institute 2024.; Tesfaye 2020, 47).

Ethiopia's approach to Chinese engagement is largely pragmatic as China is viewed as an alternative source of economic assistance and investment, and inexpensive technologies that will assist in alleviating poverty and fast-tracking economic growth, while also diversifying Ethiopia's foreign and economic relations to reduce dependence on the West. Ethiopia also demonstrates a considerable degree of agency in its approach to foreign development assistance by selectively choosing elements considered conducive to core national interests and adapting them to local contexts. For instance, policymakers emphasize taking the proper steps to industrialization, prioritizing efforts in road connectivity and stable power supplies, to establish a conducive environment for achieving more ambitious industrial goals and leapfrogging technologically (Cheru and Oqubay 2019, 298). Moreover, in the infrastructure sector, the Ethiopian state and public enterprises are often the actors taking the lead in proposing projects to their Chinese counterparts (Lauria 2022). Ethiopian state officials also, at times, strategically leverage China's loan flexibility by delaying repayment of Chinese loans and prioritizing others, such as payments to the WB or African Development Bank, because "China causes less trouble" according to a project manager (600).

Overall, perceptions and attitudes toward Chinese engagement are highly positive among official state discourses. Ethiopia's Ministry of Finance (MoFED) asserts that the "Ethio-China economic cooperation is comprehensive and strategic, [and] highly contributes to Ethiopian growth and development" ("Ethiopia-China Economic Cooperation" 2023). Abiy also asserts that "China's policies toward Ethiopia fully demonstrate equality and mutual respect" (*CGTN* 2024), and describes China as "Ethiopia's most trustworthy partner and friend" (*Africa News*

[30] Ethiopia's military is among the strongest in Sub-Saharan Africa, standing at around 138,000 armed forces personnel in 2020 ("Armed Forces Personnel," n.d.). Ethiopia and China also have a shared interest in maintaining political stability in South Sudan, as the oil being refined there by China is critical for its energy demands, and land-locked Ethiopia would like to utilize the oil through a cross-border pipeline (Tesfaye 2020, 36).

2023). Furthermore, state actors have also expressed gratitude and confidence in China's development assistance, as an official from the Ethiopian Investment Commission stressed: "[Ethiopia] cannot succeed without China's help" (Hairong and Sautman 2023, 237). The BRI is considered a key pillar in the Ethiopia-China relationship and has "improved the lives of many Ethiopians," according to Melaku Mululalem, a senior researcher at Ethiopia's Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) (*Xinhua* 2024). Within state discourses, China is recognized as a model of development and a critical driver of Ethiopia's economic growth, while also being a key strategic partner that does not infringe on Ethiopia's core national interests.

Similar to the state discourse, the narrative within civil society reflects a generally positive perception of China; however, due to the repressive landscape for media and civil society, critical coverage of Chinese engagement is rare, as journalists are aware that criticizing the Chinese is an implicit attack on the Ethiopian state as well (Li and Wang 2023, 14). Moreover, many articles commenting on Chinese engagement that are published on private, non-state affiliated news outlets, such as The Reporter and The Addis Standard, are written by actors embedded in state-affiliated institutions. For instance, Melaku Mulualem contributed an article to The Reporter commending China's approach to foreign policy that focuses on a "shared future for mankind," unlike the US who proclaims "America First," and notes that relations between Ethiopia and China have reached the level of a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" (Mulualem 2021). However, Mulualem is Head of the Office of Project Coordination and Partnership Affairs at the Institute of Strategic Affairs (ISA), an autonomous foreign policy and security organization accountable to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Girmay 2021).

Nonetheless, a common theme within civil society discourse regarding Chinese engagement is an emphasis on Africa-China relations serving mutual interests and benefits better than the relationship between Africa and the West, which is widely characterized by hierarchy and imbalance (Lemma 2022). Positive depictions of Chinese engagement tend to frame China as a preferable development partner to the US, often emphasizing how China's non-interference approach respects Ethiopia's sovereignty and ability to decide for itself (*Africa News* 2024). Ethiopians also show significant appreciation for China's contribution to the economy and infrastructure, with some workers claiming that "the Chinese have changed [their] lives" by bringing jobs and cheap products (Onyulo 2015). Some NGOs in Ethiopia, such as the National

Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD) and Hope International, have also expressed eagerness to partner with, and/or obtain, Chinese funding, noting that there is substantial potential for knowledge and skill transfers (Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath 2016, 429-30).

While Ethiopia's engagement with China is characterized by a generally positive outlook among both state and civil society actors, it is important to take into account the underlying political contexts that shape these perceptions. Considering how both the Chinese and Ethiopian states demonstrate strong authoritarian tendencies, particularly in terms of prioritizing state control and stability, this commonality fosters a political environment where direct critiques of China or the Ethiopian state are heavily discouraged or suppressed. However, Ethiopia-China relations are not invulnerable to criticism from civil society. In the next section discussing one of the BRI's flagship projects, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway (AADR), concerns and critiques from civil society emerge from the discourse, reflecting broader environmental and social implications of Ethiopia's development path.

Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway (AADR)

I. Background

The AADR was officially inaugurated in 2018 and marks the initial stage of the BRI in the Horn and Eastern Africa. The AADR serves as the main transport corridor for Ethiopia to the port of Djibouti which handles over 90% of Ethiopia's international trade, and is the first cross-border electrified railway in Africa run completely according to China's railway standards (Global Infrastructure Hub 2020, 77). In the early 2000s under then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, plans for a modernized railway network began being formulated as part of a broader export-oriented industrialization strategy that would utilize improved transportation connections to attract foreign investment and develop industrial zones (Oqubay 2019, 611). The railway replaced the French-built diesel line built in the late 19th century that had deteriorated due to poor maintenance and management, and thus, could not support Ethiopia's rapidly growing economy (Tesfaye 2020, 103).

After failing to secure enough funding from European partners to rehabilitate the old railway in 2011, Ethiopia opened up negotiations with alternative partners and eventually struck an agreement with China to finance a package of new infrastructure investments, with the

condition that Chinese contractors and locomotives would be procured (Chen 2021). The total cost of the project was approximately $5.09 billion (2011 value) with 70% financed through concessional loans from the China EXIM Bank, China Development Bank, and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, and built by the CCCC and China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) ("Connectivity Across Borders," 2020). The AADR is expected to considerably increase trade volume between Ethiopia and Djibouti through reduced transport costs and delivery time and enhance long-haul transportation of freight (75).

The AADR is widely portrayed as a cornerstone of Ethiopia-China relations and an integral component of Ethiopia's long-term development strategy to structurally transform the national economy into an industrial and manufacturing powerhouse (Chen 2021). According to Ethiopia's Minister of Finance, Ahmed Shide, the railway is an "example of the ever-flourishing Sino-African relations[...] and marks a brighter and strong future" (*Xinhua* 2023a). While the project was not free from controversy, the discourse depicts a generally favorable narrative regarding the AADR's local impact and demonstration of Ethiopian agency; however, closer examination of the slight cracks in Ethiopia's restrained civil society reveals several significant concerns in terms of the social and environmental implications of the AADR.

II. State and Civil Society Discourses

Within official state discourses, the narrative surrounding the AADR is unsurprisingly positive and enthusiastic, with accounts from the Ethiopian and Chinese states lauding the project as a flagship project of China-Africa cooperation under the BRI (Brlie 2023b). Several key themes identified among state discourses include the AADR being emblematic of Ethiopia and China's strategic partnership, promulgating a distinctly pro-China narrative in the context of Ethiopian development, and an emphasis on the critical importance of the railway for Ethiopia's core national interests. The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure, and Equipment of Djibouti, Hassan Hamad, describes the "railway [as] a symbol of cooperation and progress, and an engine for…economic development and regional integration" (Brlie 2024b). A similar sentiment is echoed by Abiy, who asserts that the AADR is a "showcase for the connectivity principle" of the BRI (*ENA* 2019). Tagesse Chafo, Speaker of the HPR, highlights how the objectives of the BRI are "fully aligned with Ethiopia's prosperity" and the railway has become an "open, comprehensive, mutually beneficial, and win-win cooperative platform between Ethiopia and

China" (Brlie 2024a). The BRI is also framed as a catalyst for Ethiopia's overall growth, as it provides "financing, technical know-how and modern infrastructure," and "helps fill critical gaps that have long held back economic development and improvements in people's lives," according to Dareskedar Taye (2023), lead researcher at the Addis Ababa Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA).

Moreover, the discourse promotes the notion that despite complications that may arise in construction and operation, the advantages of the project will ultimately serve the interests of Ethiopians. Arkebe Oqubay, special advisor to the Prime Minister noted that the railway will have a "significant contribution to the country's economic development" and "improve the competitiveness of industries in Ethiopia" (*Xinhua* 2016). In a briefing memorandum, presented at an Infrastructure Consortium for Africa (ICA) meeting in 2007, it is noted that the railway is the "only rail line connecting landlocked Ethiopia with Djibouti," and is expected to contribute to poverty reduction by improving market access and transport conditions (ICA 2007, 3-4). The rail is framed as a "game-changer" for Ethiopia's economy (France-Presse 2016), and a "vital infrastructure project" that will lead regional development and connectivity, transforming not only Ethiopia's economic capabilities but the East African region as a whole (Brlie 2024a).

Ethiopian and Chinese accounts often stress the quantitative achievements of the project, while rarely commenting on the tangible benefits or negative impacts for local citizens. Yan Anwei, deputy manager of CCECC-CREC Joint Venture project reports that transportation revenue over the past six years of operation has increased by more than 35% annually, and the revenue in the first half of 2023 increased by 76% compared to the same period the previous year (Brlie 2023). In 2023, several articles published on FanaBC, a state-owned Ethiopian media company, detail how the AADR generated vast amounts of revenue in the fiscal year, earning approximately $20 million in the first five months (Brlie 2023a), and ending with a total of $60 million in revenue (Yoseph 2023).

In terms of environmental sustainability and green development, the state discourse does not address the ecological dimensions of the project in much depth. According to Ethiopia's EIA Guideline Document (2000), an EIA is mandatory for specified categories of development activities and any new development activity requiring an EIA cannot proceed without the authorization of the EPA (AFDB 2019, 2). In the briefing memorandum on the AADR, there is a

vague statement that "an [EIA] is to be carried out jointly by CDE[31] and the selected concessionaire (ICA 2007, 4). However, there does not appear to be any available EIA or ESIA that is accessible to the general public; rather, the closest document is a Revised 2024 Plan of the project, prepared by the Ethio-Djibouti Railway Shared Company (EDR), which includes a brief section on improving the quality and environmental protection contribution of the railway under Objective 5: improving safety of railway transport services and infrastructure (EDR 2024, 27).

The activities listed are vague and, rather than provide reassurance that environmental considerations are being addressed, elicit further concern and skepticism as there is little to no detail on how and when they will be achieved or monitored. For instance, one of the activities is "[to] conduct sound, vibration, and radiation [EIA] analyses every quarter," and another is "[to] prepare and get approval for 4 safety, quality, and environmental standards" (ibid). It is unclear how these analyses are being conducted and under what framework, and it is also unclear what the standards are for safety, quality, and environment. Moreover, these analyses and assessments do not appear to be available to the public, and thus, the lack of transparency further diminishes any attempted credibility of said ecological intentions.

While there is not an available EIA for the AADR, there is an assessment for the Ethiopia-Djibouti Transport Corridor Project Phase I, which is not funded by China nor directly related to the AADR, but may provide some insight into how responsibilities are allocated by Ethiopian policymakers in terms of green development. The report highlights several adverse environmental and social impacts and delineates in the section on Environmental and Social Management and Monitoring Plans, that the contractor will be responsible for addressing the majority of issues, excluding site selection, and resettlement and compensation processes which are handled by the Ethiopia Roads Authority (ERA) (AFDB 2019, 11). In the case of the AADR, assuming the same obligations apply, there is little evidence of any activities undertaken by the Chinese firms in terms of sustainable development other than brief and vague statements that the contractors "did their best not to alter the original landscape along the railway," and spent over $4 million to build overpasses for safe animal crossing (Xiangjiang, Shanggang, and Yuan 2016).

The EIA for the Transport Corridor further acknowledges that "in terms of biophysical and socio-economic impact, the 'no project' option is preferable…since it would avoid the

[31] French for the Djibouti-Ethiopia Railway, Chemin de Fer Djibouti-Ethiopien (CDE).

occurrence of adverse impacts associated with the project construction and operation; however, the potential socio-economic benefits…would be foregone," and because the existing road is considered inadequate for supporting the growing traffic and load volume, the no-project alternative was not considered a viable option (AFDB 2019, 6).

While the Transport Corridor is a separate project from the AADR, the EIA provides valuable insight into how sustainable development is approached and prioritized within official discourse, potentially reflecting more broadly on the Ethiopian state's view of, and approach to, green development. As demonstrated in the EIA for the Transport Corridor, the benefits of the upgraded road are framed as vital to the overall economic benefits at national and local levels, and thus, worthy of being prioritized over ecological concerns. Similarly in the discourse surrounding the AADR, the emphasis largely revolves around it being a symbol of Ethiopia's strategic partnership with China, and that the AADR is a pivotal, and necessary, driver of industrialization and urbanization, implicitly suggesting that environmental considerations are secondary or inconsequential (Brlie 2024).

Within civil society discourses, critical coverage of the AADR is limited and the common narrative continues to praise the overall benefits of the initiative. One senior editor at The Reporter cautioned that "any negative news in local media about the [AADR] is like a slap in the face to the Ethiopian government… [and m]ost Ethiopian journalists would not write those negative stories that damage the country's image" (Li and Wang 2023, 14). Instead, the media expresses gratitude and excitement towards the Chinese-funded initiative, emphasizing how "China…has surpassed any of Ethiopian economic partners" in terms of infrastructure development (Anberbir 2016). Locals also note how the "economy of [Ethiopia] has grown following the completion of the two rail lines" (Onyulo 2015), and that it could make a "huge difference" in moving goods (France-Presse 2016). Similarly to the state discourse, the railway is discussed in the context of its economic significance, with articles noting that the advancements in transportation infrastructure and diversified access to the Red Sea yield a positive impact on employment, and "lay a solid foundation for a more interconnected and resilient regional economic landscape" (Teshale 2024). The AADR is also framed as a "long-overdue" and critical initiative that establishes sustainable sea outlets to improve Ethiopia's economic performance and global trade presence (Tafesework 2024).

However, despite the repressive media landscape, several key criticisms from civil society manage to emerge in the discourse, particularly regarding the unfulfilled promises that were boasted about to local citizens during and after the railway's construction. One of the primary grievances is related to land displacement. According to the former chief executive of the ERC, each of the stations along the AADR requires around 300 ha, most of which is farmland in the Oromia region, home to Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, who have historically faced dispossession and arbitrary expropriation (Tura 2018). Residents expressed anger at the construction, with one worker stating that "more than 300 people…lost their land…[and] are not seeing benefits" (Gardner 2018). Another resident claimed that three ha of his land was taken, but he was only compensated for one, which is around $830 and "almost worthless" (ibid).

Other developments in Addis Ababa, such as corridor development, infrastructure, and riverside enhancement, have led to the displacement of residents who are ordered to quickly vacate their homes with insufficient provision of replacement housing, compensation, and essential services (Solomon 2024). The mayor of the city, Adanech Abiebie, is aware of the discontent yet minimizes the issue and instead emphasizes the scale and necessity of the projects, exhibiting a similar approach to that of Ethiopian officials on the balance of progress and the well-being of citizens (ibid).

Another key concern with the AADR is the occurrence of animal collisions, with at least fifty animals killed in the first month of operations, causing pastoralists to demand compensation for the loss of valuable livestock (*The Economist* 2018; *BBC* 2019). Camel herders have reported more incidents during trial operations, with one nomad claiming his family lost thirty-five camels in a bloody collision (*The Economist* 2018). In an attempt to mitigate dangerous animal crossings, level crossing and tunnels were built, as well as a fence along some sections of the track (EDR 2024, 27); however, herders complain these measures are insufficient, or that their camels refuse to use them, and fences have also been torn down by nomads due to suspicion and resentment toward out-of-touch officials (*The Economist* 2018).

In response to the grievances of local communities residing along the railway, the Director General of EDR shifted the responsibility of mitigation towards the community, noting that "[people and animals] are just crossing the railway line unintentionally…[and] some infrastructures are stolen by illegal people" (*Xinhua* 2020). He declares that these safety issues

are “controllable with the real participation of the community” and does not mention whether the EDR will implement any further mitigation measures (ibid). During construction, Chinese contractors claimed to have “[taken] into account the national conditions of Ethiopia and Djibouti” and to have followed Ethiopia’s ecological standards (Xiangjiang, Shanggang, and Yuan 2016). However, according to interviews with respondents from the ERC and other Ethiopian government agencies, there was a level of distrust in the CIECC, which was responsible for monitoring environmental impact management, due to claims that the company was more biased toward Chinese contractors (Chen 2021, 15). By contrast, the management of social and environmental impacts for the second segment of the AADR, the Awash-Weldiya (AKH) line, funded by a Turkish contractor, adhered to more stringent standards due to the participation of European creditors. European lenders for the AKH sent twelve supervisors to the project site for quarterly inspections to monitor the implementation of environmental and social management plans (ibid).

A resident in Awash National Park even notes that the railway being built by the Turkish firm “[benefits] the people [and] even those who lost their land [get] compensation” (Gardner 2018). To some locals, the AADR is perceived as an “Addis-based elite project” and they lament the replacement of the previous railway, noting that the “old train had so much importance for the city,” particularly for the local establishments, such as restaurants, hotels, and markets, that relied heavily on the stream of passengers” (ibid).

Critical themes within the discourse from civil society primarily revolve around the social impacts of the AADR, rather than ecological ones, and focus on the growing discontent among residents who, despite initial excitement over the potential economic benefits of the railway, feel misled and marginalized. While there are fewer critiques emanating from civil society, principally due to Ethiopia’s authoritarian context, the concerns that do emerge highlight a gap between state-led development priorities and the needs of local communities that are directly affected by large-scale infrastructure projects. In the case of the AADR, the Chinese construction companies appear to have played a minimal role in mitigating potential social and environmental impacts and responding to local grievances. However, similar to the situation in Kenya, civil society discourse does not direct much criticism towards the Chinese partners; rather, there is greater discontent with the state and its failure to adequately address the negative impacts on residents.

The following chapter will review the key findings from each case study and examine the mechanisms that contributed to the outcome of each respective BRI project, to shed light on how environmental sustainability and green development are perceived, articulated, and enacted by the state and civil society in different political landscapes.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The central hypothesis for this research presumes that, in spite of the green development narrative touted by African and Chinese state officials, economic interests will trump concerns regarding environmental sustainability in the context of the China-Africa development relationship. Based on the analysis of the Kenyan SGR and Ethiopian AADR, this claim has largely been confirmed. For both case studies, economic growth and infrastructural development ultimately dominate official state discourses and decision-making processes at the expense of environmental considerations. Despite the pronounced rhetoric revolving around green development and sustainable growth from both African and Chinese official discourses, these concerns are often secondary to more immediate economic imperatives.

However, this thesis also highlights the role played by non-state actors and the degree to which they managed to influence the environmental management and outcome of the Chinese-funded projects. For Kenya, despite the relative openness of Kenyan civic space, its civil society was still weak in its ability to exert sufficient pressure on policymakers to enhance mitigation measures, and the government went ahead with construction despite its interference with the Tsavo Conservation Area and Nairobi National Park, and protests from environmentalists. President Ruto advances the notion that economic growth is not only compatible with sustainable development, but also necessary to facilitate Kenya's green transition. A developing country should not be expected to prioritize sustainable development over economic growth, considering the disparity with developed nations in contributions to global climate change; however, the majority of economic development goals, particularly large-scale infrastructure projects, involve explicit drivers of environmental degradation and are often prioritized over environmental sustainability and/or conservation. In the case of the SGR, state discourses heavily promote the project as a transformative force in economic development and regional connectivity, while sidelining concerns regarding ecological and social implications, demonstrating that the impact of civil society advocacy was ultimately insufficient.

The government did conduct EIAs for the initial phases of the SGR and insist that environmental sustainability is a pillar in its long-term development ambitions; however, civil society actors have expressed discontent with the project's environmental outcome and resentment towards the state for pursuing development at the expense of the local environment. Because of Kenya's more open civic space compared to Ethiopia, non-state actors have greater

capacity to exert pressure on the Kenyan state and Chinese officials by directly criticizing the project, organizing protests, and circulating petitions. However, since the EIAs for the SGR stipulate that the responsibility for environmental issues falls largely on the contractor, the Kenyan state is able to minimize its own accountability for addressing the environmental and social concerns raised by locals.

On the other hand, the discourse also demonstrates how Chinese contractors are, to some extent, susceptible to local pressures, as there has been a discernible effort from the Chinese partners to acknowledge and respond to criticisms from civil society in terms of the project's environmental implications. While the Chinese partners most likely have no authority in changing the railway's route, they do have the responsibility to implement mitigation measures based on potential impacts. In response to complaints regarding the railway's passage through Nairobi National Park, endangering wildlife and the local ecology, Chinese authorities released statements detailing various interventions put in place to "ensure that the railway is in harmony with the wildlife" and defend the company's adherence to high environmental standards (*Xinhua* 2022; Mwiti 2016).

By comparison, civic space in Ethiopia is significantly more constrained and critiques against the state or Chinese-funded development initiatives are actively discouraged, while the agency of non-state actors to exert pressure on state actors is severely reduced. As a result, the Chinese partners of the AADR faced much less scrutiny compared to the Kenyan case regarding the environmental and social impacts of the railway during and after construction, and thus had little reason to adhere to stringent environmental standards or implement more comprehensive mitigation measures. In the case of Ethiopia, the more centralized, authoritarian state prioritized rapid development as part of its ambitions to transform the country into a middle-income nation, and primarily focused on economic growth, both in its decision-making and official discourse for the AADR. In its official state discourses, the AADR is portrayed as a crucial asset for national development, with emphasis on its necessary role in Ethiopia's economic transformation.

As the Ethiopian government's primary focus remains on achieving rapid growth and infrastructural development, environmental considerations for the AADR were far less extensive compared to the SGR in Kenya. For instance, an EIA for the railway is not available, and the state did not give any clear indication an EIA had been conducted. Although the Ethiopian state does highlight sustainability and green development throughout its official discourses, when

faced with the opportunity to advance its core economic interests, environmental concerns are ultimately sidelined. Because of Ethiopia's authoritarian tendencies, its approach to sustainable development reflects the government's top-down, centralized model of decision-making, with minimal input from local communities. While Ethiopia promotes green development in its discourses, the actual implementation of green measures appears to be largely performative, designed to promote the image of an environmentally responsible, prosperous nation, yet suffering from a lack of transparency, limited public participation, and insufficient consideration of local impacts by state actors.

Taken together, the secondary hypothesis that the nature of the relationship between the state and civil society plays an equally significant role in determining the environmental outcome has not been confirmed. To some extent, Kenya's civil society managed to exert pressure on railway officials, leading to greater acknowledgement of concerns and implementation of mitigation measures compared to Ethiopia's civil society; however, the response from Chinese contractors in Kenya was criticized for being insufficient and a passive attempt to placate concerns, demonstrating that even with a relatively open civic space, the capacity of non-state actors to mobilize meaningful change is limited. In Ethiopia, where civil society was largely unable to voice concerns or exert pressure on the state or railway officials, the ecological dimensions of the AADR were scarcely addressed in public discourse, aside from a few mentions of measures to mitigate animal collisions. Even in those instances, however, responsibility for mitigation was largely deflected onto local communities by Ethiopian officials. While Kenya's comparably more democratic and open civic space did provide non-state actors greater agency in bringing attention to the environmental impacts of the SGR, the relationship between state and civil society was too weak to alter the state's ultimate prioritization of economic imperatives over ecological considerations.

While the outcome in both cases highlights similar conclusions regarding the role of civil society, the differences in the extent to which non-state actors played a role in the process of influencing the balance between ecological and economic priorities does highlight a more nuanced interpretation. While Kenyan civil society was unable to sufficiently pressure state actors to change the railway's routes, the Kenyan state did respond with comparably greater acknowledgement of ecological implications than the Ethiopian state. While there was not an available EIA for the AADR or general discussions of its environmental impact within the state

discourse, the SGR did have an accessible EIA that covered mitigation measures and efforts at integrating local participation.

Moreover, the Chinese actors involved in the SGR appeared to put more effort into maintaining an ecologically conscious image and narrative compared to their role in the AADR. This suggests that Chinese actors may be relatively susceptible to pressure from non-state actors in host countries, especially when considering how maintaining legitimacy and avoiding interference in domestic affairs are key principles that China upholds. In democratic countries with more vibrant and independent civic spaces, there may be greater opportunities to pressure Chinese actors to better address civil society's concerns, due to China's goal of maintaining stability and promoting the image of a mutually beneficial partner. Another factor to consider for future research is the role that competing Western influence in host countries can play in leveraging greater environmental awareness from Chinese actors. In Kenya, civil society's attitudes towards China and the US appeared to shift in greater favor of US influence, suggesting that this additional source of pressure to appease to an already skeptical population contributed to Chinese contractors' comparably more driven efforts at environmental responsibility than in Ethiopia, where critical attitudes from civil society are largely repressed and silenced. Therefore, while civil society was incapable of effecting meaningful change on the outcome of development projects, Kenyan civil society's role in the process of negotiating greater environmental awareness sheds light on the ways in which non-state actors can impact and shape the ecological impact of Chinese engagement, despite broader state-level constraints.

China's role in both cases sheds light on the ways in which Chinese engagement impacts, and is impacted by, the particular domestic contexts of the host country. The dominant narrative in the West often portrays Chinese presence in Africa as an exploitative, neo-colonizing force that imposes polluting infrastructure and extracts valuable resources. In both cases however, for better or worse, the Chinese actors appeared to play a more passive role in shaping the environmental outcomes of the respective development projects and demonstrate that Chinese engagement is largely impacted by more complex dynamics between local state and non-state actors. For instance, Chinese partners typically act according to the host country's environmental regulations or lack thereof, rather than actively impose destructive practices, suggesting that the environmental consequences are, in large part, a reflection of the priorities and policies of host governments. Moreover, the Kenyan case demonstrates that China's response to environmental

concerns largely depends on the extent to which civil society has the capacity to exert significant pressure on state actors, connecting to the secondary hypothesis regarding the nature of the relationship between state and civil society.

Civil society's dissatisfaction with the environmental and social impacts of the projects, for both countries, was also primarily directed toward their respective government, rather than at China or Chinese companies. Locals often looked to the state to take greater accountability in managing and mitigating project impacts, indicating that actors within civil society may feel they have greater agency in pressuring their government, rather than their foreign counterparts. While it may seem intuitive that because of Kenya's more open civic space and pronounced pressure on the government, civil society had the potential to significantly influence the outcome of the SGR as key stakeholders; unfortunately, the relationship between civil society and the state was weak and though the government did pay more lip service than Ethiopia, non-state actors were unable to significantly alter the Kenyan government's decision-making. In Ethiopia, the role of civil society was presumed to be weaker because of the authoritarian context and this claim was demonstrated to be true. Although Ethiopian non-state actors also directed their grievances to the state, the restrictive political environment suppressed any efforts to mobilize and enact change, and the relationship between Ethiopia's civil society and state remains severely constrained.

While responsibility for mitigation does rest with Chinese contractors—though this is less transparent in Ethiopia due to the lack of available documentation—the ultimate responsibility for oversight and approval lies with the host government. If the Kenyan or Ethiopian authorities had demanded stronger environmental standards, due to either internal regulations or pressure from civil society, it is likely that the contractors would comply, as China officially encourages its overseas companies to comply with the environmental standards and regulations of host countries. The cases demonstrate that the dynamic between Chinese actors and the host country's civil society is relatively insignificant in terms of determining ecological priorities; rather, it is the extent to which civil society can pressure its own state to address environmental concerns and subsequently assert stringent development standards which Chinese partners must adhere to.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the blame for weak environmental management cannot be placed entirely on the Kenyan or Ethiopian state. As developing nations who contribute so minimally to global climate change, with each country responsible for less

than one percent of global GHG emissions, it is unfair and ignorant to demand they compromise their development ambitions and prioritize sustainable development while developed nations—which are historically responsible for the current state of the widespread ecological devastation—continue to benefit from decades of environmentally destructive practices. While this does not necessarily grant developing countries the right to pursue whatever development approach they desire, regardless of how destructive or unsustainable, it does highlight that discussions revolving around environmental responsibility must take into account differing capabilities, particularly in the context of the developing nations.

China, on the other hand, prominently presents itself as a climate leader and responsible great power in its official discourse. If this is the case, Chinese SOEs operating overseas should not only adhere to environmental standards but actively exceed them, especially in contexts where local regulations may be lacking. Furthermore, there should be a proactive effort to engage with local actors and elevate environmental practices beyond the minimum requirement to align more closely with China's self-proclaimed leadership in global sustainability. In Kenya however, the efforts by Chinese partners to enhance mitigation measures and acknowledge environmental concerns were driven primarily by local pressure and the need to maintain stability in an already tense political atmosphere, rather than a commitment to green development. In both cases, it becomes evident that while Chinese contractors do make some attempt to manage negative environmental impacts, these measures are often minimal and superficial, designed to placate local concerns rather than genuinely prioritize sustainable development.

It is important to note some key limitations of this research. Due to the language barrier, the research was limited to available English or English-translated sources. While the Kenyan data was not impacted by this limitation, the Chinese and Ethiopian sources were more constrained due to the elimination of non-English language sources. This particularly impacted the amount of data on non-state Ethiopian discourses, as there may have been more available data from less official sources, such as local media outlets, community organizations, and blog posts that are in Amharic or other regional languages. Consequently, this research could not fully capture the depth of non-state Ethiopian discourses, especially grassroots environmental concerns or local critiques of the AADR project that may have been discussed in non-English forums.

Moreover, because of the time constraints for this project, a systematic content analysis of social media posts (particularly tweets) could not be carried out. Social media discourse, as opposed to more official sources such as news articles or think tank reports, offer more insights into public opinion; unfortunately, conducting a textual analysis of social media commentaries would require extensive data collection and translation, which was beyond the scope of this thesis.

Nonetheless, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on China-Africa relations and its intersection with global sustainability and climate action efforts. Through an examination of the domestic political, social, and economic contexts of the selected cases, this thesis provides valuable insights into the complex mechanisms that contribute to the outcome of Chinese engagement from a more nuanced and less state-centric position than the dominant empirical literature. The data reveals that China's role in managing the environmental impact of its overseas development initiatives is more passive than active, suggesting that China's proclamations of climate leadership and green development are limited in its foreign activities, largely due to lack of political will from both China and the government of the partner country, undermining the narrative it promulgates in official discourses. The broader implications of this research are significant in the context of global climate politics, as it prompts critical questions regarding the role of developing countries in pursuing sustainable development while simultaneously balancing economic development.

Moreover, this thesis demonstrates the advantages of pursuing a combined realist-constructivist approach that centers both material and ideational factors in its analysis. While realist interpretations are valuable for analyzing China and African states' pursuit of material goals, particularly in terms of economic development priorities, there is an insufficient grappling with environmental issues and the ways in which state and non-state actors discursively pursue their interests. Constructivism enables this study to better understand how environmental and sustainability narratives are expressed and leveraged from both Chinese and African state actors to pursue core national interests, and how non-state actors in Kenyan and Ethiopian civil society react and, attempt to, influence Chinese engagement. When examining the mechanisms that influence how environmental issues are prioritized in China-Africa development initiatives, a balance of realist and constructivist frameworks enable this study to comprehensively examine the interplay of material interests, ideational motivations, and active role of civil society.

Developing countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, with such minimal contributions to rising emissions, embark on a development path that has the opportunity to discover alternative approaches to sustainable development that does not demand sacrificing ecological considerations for economic prerogatives. This research does not advocate for developing countries to bear the burden of climate change while bearing the burden of prioritizing environmental sustainability; however, the scale and speed of growth cannot be ignored either, especially when considering how rapidly the climate crisis is intensifying and causing severe, and too often fatal, destruction for already vulnerable populations. Moreover, it is equally harmful to disregard the agency of developing nations in a patronizing narrative that they do not have the capacity to mitigate the implications of their progress.

When considering the challenges of sustainable development in the China-Africa context, it is easy to automatically point the finger at China and overlook the particular contexts in which Chinese engagement takes place, failing to recognize the complex realities of internal, domestic-level contestations and dynamics between state and non-state actors. While this thesis does not aim to provide comprehensive policy analysis or recommendations, it does urge future research to consider the nuances of China-Africa relations and move beyond a purely state-centric approach that reduces China and Africa to monoliths with a single prerogative. As China's role in African development will continue to grow and proliferate, it is imperative that further research evaluates the socio-economic and environmental dynamics of Chinese-funded initiatives in less-explored African contexts, where varying degrees of civic freedom, varying governance models, and acute economic pressures shape differing outcomes.

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