

Sino-Kenya tales: A decade of Belt and Road Initiative partnership

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Introduction

While diplomatic ties between Kenya and China have existed for over 60 years, their friendly relationship dates back even further, to the Ming dynasty era (1368-1644), when the Chinese explorer Zheng He made multiple visits to Kenya. Formal diplomatic relations between China and Kenya were established just two days after Kenya gained independence on December 14, 1963. Since then, diplomatic ties flourished and on August 20, 1964, a Kenyan delegation visited Mao Zedong, the then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Despite a temporary suspension of diplomatic ties in 1967, which were later re-established in 1978, the relationship between the two countries has grown significantly, especially in terms of economic and investment partnerships, making China Kenya's largest trading partner. Notable events include high-profile meetings during President Daniel Moi's tenure in May 1994, followed by visits from subsequent Kenyan presidents like Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta, and the current President William Ruto, who have all pursued a "Look East Policy" towards China.

Over the past decade, Kenya has received substantial foreign aid from China, aimed at developing infrastructure and boosting trade. Kenya has also been a key entry point for China's Belt and Road Initiative into Africa. Through its "China Approach" development assistance, China has made significant contributions to Kenya's infrastructural development, including railways, roads, water sources, renewable energy projects, ports, education, and capacity building, all geared towards enhancing the country's economic and social development.

This analysis is based on policy documents and project reports from both the Kenyan and Chinese governments, aiming to evaluate the progress and current status of Sino-Kenya relations across various sectors, including economic partnership, academic mobility, capacity building, and sustainable development cooperation.

A win-win economic partnership

Sino-Kenyan relations were established in 1978, and the first investment protection agreement was signed in 2001, followed by the establishment of a joint bilateral trade, investment, and economic and technological cooperation in 2011. By 2003, the interaction between China and Kenya had generated trade volumes

exceeding US\$186 million, with China establishing 96 investment projects worth over 4 billion Kenyan shillings. With the introduction of China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI) in 2013, Chinese investments in Kenya have surged to over US\$2.26 billion as of 2021. In 2018, bilateral trade volume reached US\$5.4 billion, marking a 3.3% year-on-year increase. China's exports to Kenya averaged US\$5.4 billion annually from 2015 to 2018, peaking at US\$5.9 billion in 2015. Kenya has also found a new market for its agricultural produce, including tea, coffee, and fresh avocados, with 30% of fresh avocado produce exported to the Chinese market as of January 2022.

China has significantly invested in Kenya's infrastructure, with at least US\$9.8 billion allocated between 2006 and 2007 for projects such as the Nairobi-Thika Highway and the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR). These projects have enhanced mobility for Kenyan citizens and goods. By 2023, the Standard Gauge Railway had transported over 11.16 million passengers and 28.6 million tons of cargo, providing employment for over 2000 Kenyans. Notably, railway cars were manufactured locally, leading to the training and employment of over 250,000 Kenyans, along with contracts awarded to 300 local companies, contributing to a 1.5% boost in the country's GDP. Other major projects under the Belt and Road Initiative include a 50-megawatt solar power farm in Garissa (US\$13.6 billion), the Nairobi Expressway (US\$688 million), the Nairobi Southern bypass (US\$183.6 million), the Nairobi Western bypass (US\$173 million), the Nairobi Inland Container Depot (US\$212.3 million), and the Kenyatta University Teaching, Research, and Referral Hospital (US\$99 million).

Academic Mobility: Higher education scholarship program

China has also prioritized the development of human capital in Kenya, beginning as early as 2000 with the establishment of the Forum on China-African Cooperation. In the early 1980s, China initiated the Chinese government scholarships for Kenyan students to pursue studies in various fields such as technology, business, engineering, and scientific research. According to the China Scholarship Council database, this program has benefitted 1985 Kenyan students. Over the past decades, the Chinese government has introduced additional scholarship programs including the Chinese Ambassador Scholarship program, Belt and Road Scholarship, Alliance International Science Organization, Chinese Scholarship Council, and Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China Scholarship, all of which have provided Kenyan citizens with opportunities for higher education.

Furthermore, educational institutions between the two countries have collaborated, with the Chinese government establishing the first Confucius Institute in partnership with the University of Nairobi and Tianjin Normal University in 2005. This collaboration aimed to provide Kenyans with the opportunity to learn the Chinese language and culture. In September 2011, the Sino-Africa Biodiversity Research Conservation directorate was established to facilitate collaborative research and promote biodiversity conservation through training and research. This initiative led to the establishment of the Sino-African Joint Research Center (SAJOREC) at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Juja campus. Through this project, the Chinese government invested over Ksh. 3 billion for the construction of the JKUAT botanical garden and offered fully-funded scholarships for Kenyan students to pursue Master's and Doctoral programs at various research institutes under the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences.

In 2017, the Chinese government, through the China Road and Bridge Corporation and the contractor of the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, provided at least 100 scholarships to Kenyan high school graduates to pursue bachelor's degree courses in railway engineering at Beijing Jiatong University. With the recent increase in Chinese initiatives in Kenya, we anticipate significant progress in both Chinese language proficiency and vocational skills through academic cooperation.

Capacity Building

Over time, the development of human capabilities has reached unprecedented levels under the influence of China-Kenya relations. The Chinese government has prioritized human resource training as a fundamental aspect of bilateral cooperation. Since the initiation of the China-sponsored human resources training program in 2001, more than 10,000 Kenyan government officials have traveled to China to participate in vocational training and seminars. As of March 2024, China had provided training opportunities to at least 60,000 Kenyans in various fields such as skilled technical workers, managers, doctors, teachers, and industry personnel. Through collaborative initiatives, China has also established technical and vocational education and training institutions, such as Tianjin City Vocational College and Huawei, located in Machakos University, offering ICT talents and cloud computing skills to students and the community. Additionally, China has contributed to the upgrading and transformation of 144 universities and colleges in Kenya.

The Sino-Africa Joint Research Center has conducted workshops, seminars, and training sessions for Kenyan citizens, held both in China and Kenya. In partnership with government research organizations such as the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), the Chinese government has organized training programs for university lecturers and laboratory technicians, focusing on molecular laboratory techniques at Wuhan Botanical Garden and Wuhan University of Virology. Through mutual partnerships between China and Kenya, there are plans to modernize the Kenya Railway Training Institute and establish the China-Africa Teachers College of Vocational Education. The skills and training programs facilitated by Sino-Kenya cooperation are expected to have a significant impact on the economic and social development of both countries.

Sustainable development cooperation

Significant efforts have been made under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), where China has launched global development initiatives aimed at realizing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Kenya, serving as the entry point for the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, occupies a strategic position to benefit from numerous partnerships and projects under the Initiative. For instance, Nairobi presents direct investment opportunities for Chinese firms and serves as a gateway to the rest of Africa, while also facilitating the export of its resources.

China's poverty alleviation efforts have led to the upliftment of over 800 million people worldwide in the past three decades. Since the establishment of Sino-Kenya ties through the Belt and Road initiative a decade ago, Kenya has witnessed remarkable socio-economic development across various sectors such as education, agriculture, healthcare, housing, transportation, and industrialization. Numerous development projects are underway to ensure a stable economy in Kenya, with the current President, like his predecessors, advocating for increased collaboration with China to further enhance infrastructural development such as the extension of the Standard Gauge Railway from Suswa to Malaba, highways, aviation, renewable energy, and water resources, aligning with the vision outlined in Mwai Kibaki's Vision 2030.

Therefore, for the Sino-Kenyan relations to reach its full potential, it is important to recognize that positive outcomes can be achieved when the leadership and populations of both nations appreciate and effectively utilize cooperation through constructive dialogue, trust, and enduring friendship.

Conclusion

The interactions between China and Kenya have resulted in consistent economic and social development within Kenya. In the past decade, China's approach to aiding development through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative has led to a substantial increase in bilateral trade volume between the two countries. China has become Kenya's primary trading partner, with significant foreign direct investment and

over 400 Chinese companies actively involved in infrastructure development in Kenya. Furthermore, China has enhanced science and technology and improved the livelihoods of Kenyan citizens through vocational training, educational exchange programs, and scholarships. These efforts demonstrate China's commitment to fostering mutually beneficial partnerships, not only with Kenya but also with other developing countries worldwide.