



***China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Africa, and the Middle East: Feats, Freezes, and Failures*, by Jean-Marc F. Blanchard (Ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. pp. 291 \$100.85. ISBN: 978-981-33-4013-8**

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Since the inception of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has increased its presence and influence in Africa and the MENA region. Taking advantage of economic opportunities and prioritizing trade concessions over diplomatic relations have recently been of great importance for China. Jean-Marc Blanchard's *China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Africa, and the Middle East* seeks to address such issues by offering a historical overview of China's political and economic bonds with African and the MENA states, and investigates their ties in the context of Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI).

Blanchard, the editor of the book, resourcefully provides a collection of essays that concentrate on MSRI and its implications for African and MENA states. The book consists of 9 chapters,

written by several contributors, who seek to provide an elegant story of China's relations with African and MENA states to help readers understand China's ties with other countries against the backdrop of the MSRI. The most important chapter in the book is the first chapter, in which the author adequately presents the underlying themes running through the chapters. In this chapter, the author maintains that what distinguishes this book from similar literature regarding Belt and Road (BRI), is that it seeks to exclusively focus on MSRI, rather than the entire BRI. The chapter further argues that economic factors play a significant role in the development of this initiative, while at the same time, the domestic factors in the region's countries have shaped their approach to China and its initiatives.

Chapter 2 resorts to a country-level analysis to shed light on challenges regarding physical connectivity in some African countries, which are major participants in the MSRI- including Angola, Djibouti, Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Tanzania, Tunisia, South Sudan, and Uganda. The author believes that the trade imbalances between Beijing and MSRI countries in Africa continue to widen, suggesting that the balance of gains is heavily tilted towards China. The author argues that due to their geographical importance, for connecting Africa with Europe, Asia and the Middle East, MSRI projects are concentrated on East Africa. Therefore, the author puts significant emphasis on East African countries to support the main arguments presented in the book.

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the authors focus on the East African states of Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Tanzania, which traditionally have a long history of economical and political

relations with the Peoples Republic of China. The authors raise serious concerns about China's endeavor to expand its global influence through debt diplomacy and other political instruments. Due to their geopolitical and strategic location, Kenya and Ethiopia are singled out in the study as countries that play a substantial role in the development and future of MSRI in Africa. However, in Chapters 4 and 5, the authors warn readers that the smooth progress of the MSRI in Ethiopia, and its deep economic ties with China give readers the impression that the country is a Chinese client state. Similarly, the authors express a rather reserved attitude toward China's political, economic and strategic interests in the East African nation of Djibouti. In Djibouti, the authors question China's long term peaceful intentions for MSRI in East Africa by having established its first overseas military base in that region, and investing primarily in its ports and railway infrastructure. Indeed Chapter 4 suggests that Djibouti has turned to be an important economic and geopolitical hub of MSRI for China, comparable to China's maritime hubs in Asia, particularly of the Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Conversely in Chapter 5, the author argues that there are tensions and differences in China's approach and intentions for various localities in East Africa. In the case of Tanzania, the author continues that it has witnessed a stark contrast in terms of completing BRI-related projects by China to most other parts of East Africa. The author traces back the roots of this problem to the rise of nationalistic leaders in Tanzania, who are worried about the risk associated with sovereignty and economic independence, posed by large infrastructure projects and loans from China.

Chapters 6 through 9 discuss China's relations with the MENA region, focusing primarily on Iran, Iraq, GCC countries and Egypt,

which play an important political and economic role in the country. The authors discuss the aims and implications of MSRI in the region. These chapters maintain that MENA–China collaboration within the context of MSRI mainly focuses on “China’s 1+2+3 cooperation scheme”, “infrastructure and trade/FDI”, and “cooperation in aerospace, new energy, and nuclear power as three breakthroughs” (p. 20). Most scholars consider MENA important for China due to its geostrategic location and the existence of oil and gas, which are critical for China’s energy security and growth.

In sum, the book provides plausible arguments about the implications of MSRI for Africa, the MENA states and even for China itself. The book suggests that MSRI projects, as well as other major land projects, have advanced significantly in Africa and MENA respectively. Furthermore, the implementation of these projects has met serious challenges including the economic problems of participant countries, the existence of third parties in the aforementioned regions, including US and some nationalistic parties, who associate Chinese presence in these regions with debt trap diplomacy, and increase the dependencies of countries to Beijing. Regarding the implications of this initiative, China considers MSRI as a leverage to bolster its soft power diplomacy globally, increase its geopolitical influence, and realize its objectives of creating a community of shared future and development. For African and MENA states, MSRI provide the regional states an opportunity to expand their immense infrastructure requirements, and most importantly have access to China’s colossal consumer markets.

Over all, the book is well-structured, comprehensive and written in a logical manner, which makes it accessible to an eclectic array of readers and audiences who wish to broaden their knowledge on

MSRI. Additionally, the current volume bridges the gap in the literature regarding African and MENA states' ties with China against the backdrop of MSRI by suggesting China's fluid economic and political relations with these states and the existence of global, regional and national factors that could affect their future collaboration. The strongest feature of the book undoubtedly lies in its editor's attempt at acknowledging important shortcomings, limitations and gaps in the presented studies, which offers various topics for future research.

One of the major shortcomings of the book, mentioned by Blanchard, is that the selective case studies, especially regarding African countries that cooperate with China within MSRI, may not account for Chinese presence and activities in this continent. However, this stance is justified on the grounds that by focusing merely on the experience of an individual country in Africa, we would be faced by heterogenous perspectives, which could offer us a review of states' overall ties with China, rather than a genuine study of MSRI.

Another shortcoming of this book would also be its refusal to argue in detail about Sino-US rivalry in the aforementioned regions. When discussing the presence of foreign states in Africa and MENA states, US and China's roles in shaping the domestic and international policies of these states are inevitable and the existence of such rivalry influences the political and economic ties of these states with Washington and Beijing. The authors could indeed resort to the concept of Tianxia (天下), which has been frequently used by scholars to better illustrate the underlying motivations behind China's BRI in general, and MSRI in particular. According to this traditional concept, China's BRI

highlights multilateralism and win-win cooperation between states, which are the core ideas behind MSRI.

*China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Africa, and the Middle East* is a praiseworthy collection from notable figures, who have great expertise in Asian studies and international relations. The book is therefore a must read for those who are interested in China's foreign policy in African and the MENA states.

