

# Inevitability of the African Century?

## Afro-Asian Infrastructure and Transport Corridors

*The world has undergone a profound transformation, and a new geopolitical phase has started. The edges of the Rimland (Ukraine, Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East, Myanmar, western Indian subcontinent, sporadically Central Asia and possibly Korean peninsula) is on fire; something momentous is about to happen.*

*While Eurasia hindered, African people must be able to seize the opportunity of easing external pressure to enhance their development path. North and South of Africa both do have fairly good infrastructure, while the inland areas are almost completely disconnected. Economic development and social freedom pass through infrastructures and transport networks. The continent's inner core needs greater integration and infrastructure interconnection. The east-west infrastructural axis must be further enhanced, but every project clashes with the harshness of climatic conditions and geography.*

*For now, China but also Russia, India, Brazil and GCC players are pursuing significant projects, especially in the Horn of Africa, and further down to Continent's southeast. In addition to the infrastructure for movement of goods and people, those for energy and water also need to be strengthened—in this case, in the heart of the continent.*

### **The goals of African interconnection projects are:**

1. Socioeconomic integration;
2. Reduction of the currently enormous geographical distances and travel times;
3. Guarantee freedom of movement and trade, especially in the east-west axis;
4. Make every sixteen African countries with no direct access, to connect to the sea and (existing or newly build) ports;
5. Accompany the development of transnational conurbations, especially in coastal areas;
6. Creation of a viable African internal market, with a potential market of around 1.4 billion consumers according to the Trade Africa Market's estimates, through the abolition of customs and tariff barriers;
7. Make the continent self-sufficient in terms of production, as well as energy, and water.

### **Main problems are:**

1. Lack of political stability;
2. Financing difficulties and dependence on external loans;
3. External interferences;
4. Adverse climatic conditions;
5. Geographical adversities.

## **Introduction**

People are still people, even if they are poor. The expression is a dated one, perhaps even a bit adolescent, yet it accurately portrays the multitude of individuals who live without making history or who should solely dedicate their lives to serving the “luckiest” people. Beyond rhetorical emphasis and values written on paper, it is necessary to establish a path for development. So, successful and timely infrastructure development plays a crucial role in Africa.

Only infrastructure has the capability to overcome natural obstacles and circumvent geographical constraints. Natural conditions and geographical distances are often the major impediments to economic development and social integration but also slow down every political power’s development and its external projection; breaking down geographical distances reduces socioeconomic disparities and creates the conditions for complete democracy. Indeed, there are clear correlations between free movement and democratic development.

Far from an exclusively determinist—and so colonial—vision, it is good to be clear that geography is a constant in human history. The strategies of the great powers derive from geography. Deserts, oceans, and mountain ranges influence human history. Anyway, canals, corridors, and roads allow us to connect and overcome natural limits, changing history as in the case of Suez and Panama; those are the crossroads of global trade. Previously, Colbert's waterways network, as in the case of the Canal du Midi, made France a first-rate power. Similarly, the Trans-Siberian Railway—a brilliant idea by Sergei Yulyevich Witte—enabled the colonization of Asian Russia and the very transformation of Russia into a modern power. Numerous previous policy documents (mostly produced by the Intl Institute IFIMES) showed how the North-South Corridor allows us to achieve a degree of integration in the “Asian mass” that was previously impossible.

Classical geopolitics—Mackinder and others—has relegated Africa to a minor role as an infinitely isolated “island”, cut off from the outside and crossed by insurmountable geographical barriers; this resulted in a “perspective error” on the continent, seen only as a base for extraction. What emerges from a more careful examination is that Africa constitutes a sort of the “second heartland”. Africa is vast, populous, and rich in resources but also penalized by its geography, including deserts, mountain ranges, arid areas, and areas subject to floods. In any case, classical geopolitics was tainted by profound racism and must be overcome, not ignored. Africa lends itself to being the center of the multipolar world.

The only point on which classical geopolitics still seems to be right is when it highlights that geographical and climatic conditions—a large part of Africa is in the tropical zone and is extremely dry or extremely humid—limit not only agricultural production but also the birth and stabilization of political power. This condition has resulted in the absence of an indigenous power that can last and exert pressure on the outside. Even after the liberation from the colonial yoke, the scramble for Africa is not over; it continues today, except that it is led by new powers, such as China, Russia, and Turkey, and not by the Western ones anymore. The history of the continent for the current century will be written by the ability of its peoples to establish an autonomous policy and to work for full independence, but also to develop a policy as equals with the new interlocutors for mutual and equal growth.

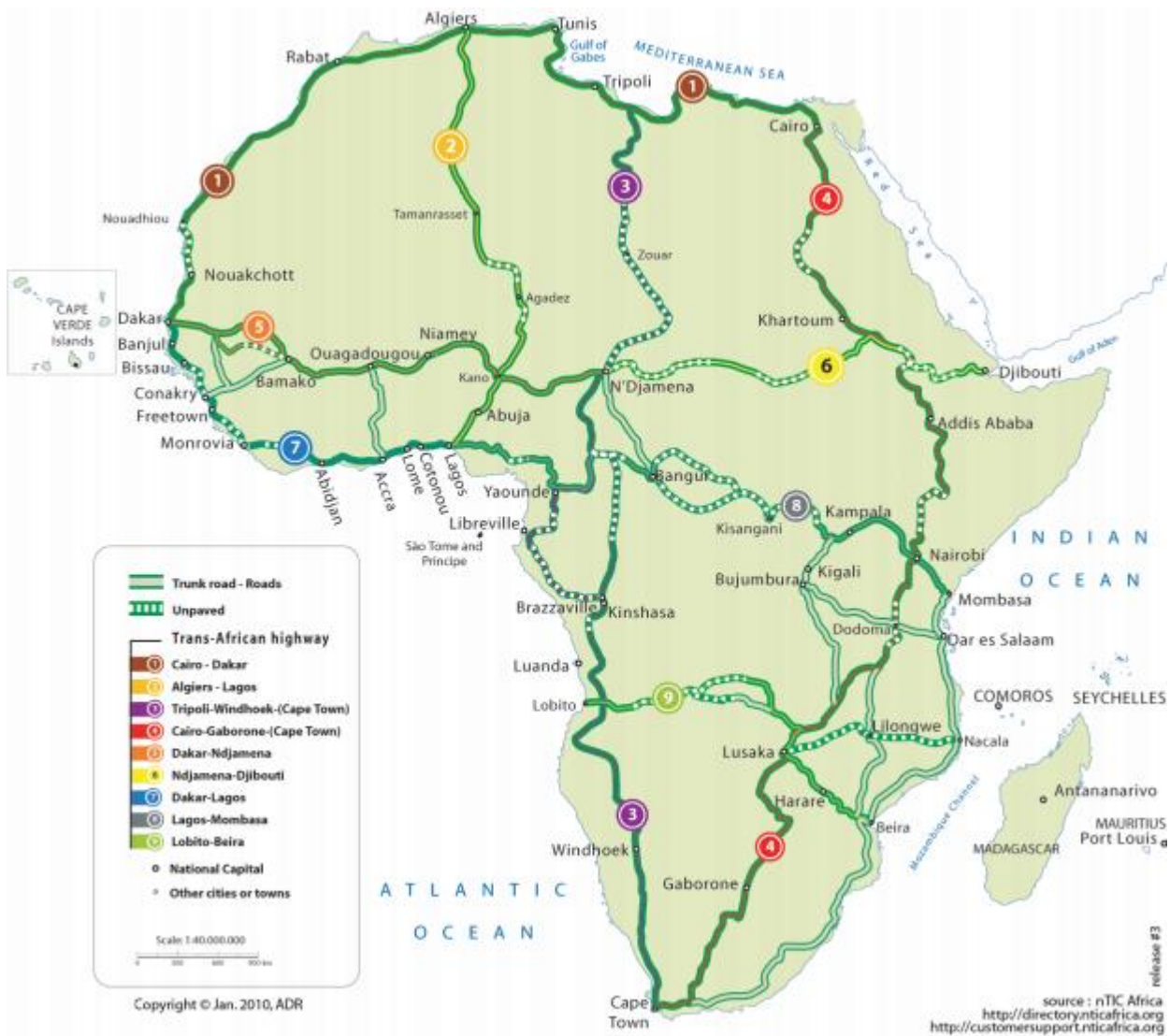
## **The Relevance of Infrastructure for African Development**

As professor Anis H. Bajrektarevic noted in his luminary book on Africa: “By contrast to Europe’s continuously increasing political and security merging, African efforts at building regional peace and security mechanisms will remain improbable, or at best unsustainable, if the continent is unable to secure process on economic development and democratic consolidation. Africa’s excessive external economic dependence, and its resulting sensibility to fluctuations in the international financial systems, leads to the conclusion that its perpetual economic difficulties considerably limit the continent’s potential and capacity to lead itself towards unity and the creation of sustainable regional peace and security structures. Nonetheless, the progress towards building such structures in form of regional peacekeeping and conflict management, which attempt addressing the full range of security factors, (as exercised by ECOWAS, IGAD, etc.) has already started and appears irreversible. Additionally, growing international interest in the continent caused by its vast natural resources provides a unique opportunity to eventually also gain economic independency.

Given these developments and conditions, the very 21<sup>st</sup> century could truly become the ‘African Century’.” (prof. A.B., Africa – Security Structures, 2017)

Is this attainable?

Population growth (25% of the world population in 2050), because of the stably high fertility and progressive reduction in mortality, economic and consumption increasing, and urbanisation (Africa’s cities are the most rapidly growing cities in the world) require a mass connection system. The need to connect with ports in those 16 countries that do not overlook the sea requires infrastructure planning. Now, 80% of goods and 90% of people travel by road, while the railway network is very backward.



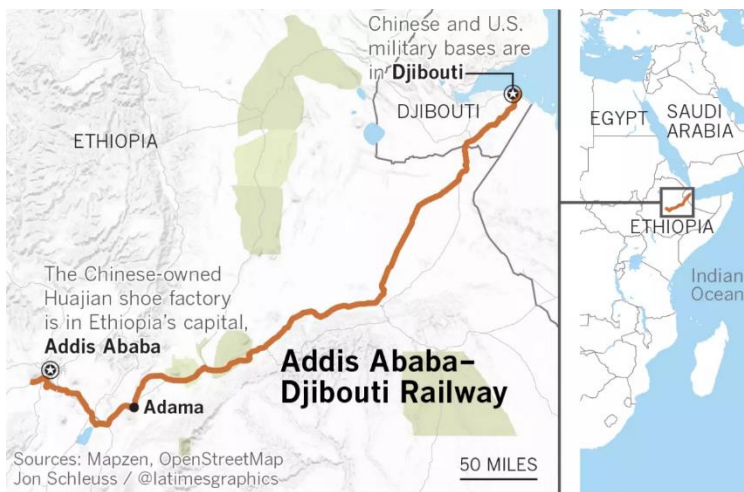
Obviously, talking about Africa as something unitary and defined makes no sense: there are profound disparities, different paths, different decolonization processes, different languages, and religions. What is certain is that numbers in hand, this could be Africa's century. So, it is complex to talk about Africa; it requires better segmentation.

There are some particularly relevant transport and trade routes: one coastal (Cairo-Dakar-Lagos, 8600 km in total), almost completed (except for some missing links), three on the north-south axis and, finally, three west-east routes. The first of the inner-routes connects Dakar with N'Djamena (4500 km) and then Djibouti (4200 km); the second always connects Dakar with Lagos and then Mombasa (with great problems in the Congo River Basin area); the last is the route Lobito-Beira.

For greater integration of an area that has an increasingly greater economic importance in the West African region, the project of a Lagos-Abidjan corridor (the most populous city on the Ivory Coast) is starting in 2025: it is 965 kilometres which will allow the creation of a truly large coastal conurbation overlooking the Atlantic; this also a demonstration of the trend of growing urbanization.

There are also three on the north-south axis: the first one crossing the Sahara Desert Algeri-Lagos route (4,500 km), Tripoli- Windhoek-Cape Town (10,000 km), Cairo-Cape Town (10,000

km). The difficulty in completing these infrastructure projects, in addition to the geo-climatic conditions, is the illegality (with its trafficking of drugs, weapons, migrants) and the general instability of the area.



From this primary examination, it emerges that there are some decisive intersections and checkpoints: Dakar as the hub and starting point of three routes, and Djibouti as the road, rail (thanks to the project implemented by China), and port arrival point, while Lagos rises to the role of a hub between North and South and between the Atlantic coast and the inland heart.

Anyway, there are several critical points: great instability is the first problem because it has repercussions in the difficulty of progressing in projects or carrying out maintenance, the presence of dark points not yet connected, and the need for huge financing. The main critical point is exactly in the center of Africa, where the climate and the floods make it very complex to build and maintain asphalt roads in good condition.

## Railway Networks: Between Backwardness and Innovative Projects

As of now, only 43 percent of the roads are asphalted, but road transport still prevails because the railway networks are profoundly underdeveloped; this has repercussions not only on the economy but also on the environment. In fact, most railways are still single track and not electrified.

In any case, there are significant expansion projects, such as those in Kenya, Tanzania (high speed), Nigeria, Ethiopia, or Namibia, that focus on the railway network to streamline the coal transport from Botswana towards Wallis Bay (which could undermine Richards Bay). Djibouti was also involved in the railway connection project with Addis Ababa, the most successful project in Africa. Particularly in East Africa, there are electrification projects.

The African Union (AU) presented a plan several years ago: the first branch includes 19 projects for 17,000 km, while the second one is made up of 62 projects for 74,000 km by 2063.

One of the partners most interested in African development has been China, which financed the Nairobi-Mombasa railway project; the project for the connection with Kampala has currently remained a dead letter, and Uganda is looking at a Turkish partner. China's current economic conditions may be an unknown for foreign investment, although many African countries have signed memoranda of understanding with China regarding the BRI (Research Fellow at IFIMES/DeSSA Dr Maria Smotrytska described the shifting-balance project in her [detailed analysis](#)). One of the best-received projects is the electrified railway network between Addis Ababa and Djibouti, which has reduced travel time from around 7 days to around 10 hours and





includes two bidirectional passenger trains and three to four freight trains per day. This is the most significant infrastructure project.

In any case, the continent's strong dependence on external investments remains. In the absence of an internal planning capacity and a commonality of interests, the fate of the continent does not appear so clear.

## Water Stability



**Fig.2 Schematic of water pipeline across the Sahel region of Africa (pipeline length is ~8800 km; desalination plants  reservoirs )**

Infrastructure for moving goods and people is a top priority. The availability and distribution of water and energy are no less crucial for development and stability, especially in critical areas of the continent. As in the case of transport networks, access to primary goods, such as water, and stable energy supplies are preconditions for the democratization of society. Water resource management is a crucial issue for African countries. It is good to remember that approximately 45% of Africa is affected by desertification, a constantly growing phenomenon.

Water insecurity particularly affects the heart of Africa and the Sahel region. The Trans Africa Pipeline Initiative, a non-profit project to provide fresh water to 28 million people in 12 countries, is of particular interest. The project route runs for almost 9 thousand km and includes 10 freshwater tanks—to hold it for up to 30 days—along the route and 2 desalination plants on the coast of Mauritania and in Djibouti. According to estimates, the region's requirement is around 600 million liters per day. The production of salt, which is of high quality because it is extracted from water, and the extraction of lithium, an increasingly requested and scarce element, are the sources for financing the operation of this ambitious project.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps for the first time, African peoples have a geopolitical time window, which was triggered by the definitive decline of the former colonial powers and the distraction of other global actors on other scorching sectors. Russia will have to try to break the Western siege; Iran is busy playing the balance in the Middle East scenario; the United States is engaged on two fronts; and finally, China must find a new synthesis of its ambitions and geo-economic global reality.

Considering all of this, Africans (solely or in combination through Afro-Asia or Eurasia) do have the potential to construct an autonomous pathway, commencing the establishment of strategic infrastructure and consequently removing any external interference. However, there is a lack of resources, both financial and political, to make the most of this opportunity, and the fragile institutions do not yet provide the stability needed for medium- to long-term investments like railways or highways.

The clash between the blocs resulting from the “fragmented Third World War” will result in a decrease in foreign investments and their concentration within national boundaries; “nationalism” and “national interest” are part of an era of scarcity. The likelihood that the African Century will remain largely incomplete is significant and real.



## **Lorenzo Somigli**

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