Book Review: China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism[1][2]

Marcell Pintér[3]

Written by Bob Wekesa and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2023 as part of the Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies, *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism* tackles how China's growing presence is perceived within East African Community (EAC) countries. In this book, the author endeavours to employ a standard academic method as well as what he calls "informal" approach in which he draws on his own experiences, conversations, and observations regarding the subject matter. The book intends to explore the various narratives and frameworks that shape the Sino-African relations on the ground. This analysis focuses on the six core member states of the EAC – namely Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

In the book, Wekesa distinguishes three "perceptual categories" used to view China's footprint on the continent:

- "Optimism" views China as a benevolent partner and a worthwhile development model. The usual tropes characteristic of optimism includes the benign "win-win" nature of cooperation, China's policy of non-interference in domestic affairs, and the speed and efficiency with which Chinese projects are delivered. For many African leaders, China offers an alternative to the Western way of cooperation and investment without imposed political conditions. Wekesa likens this perspective to the liberal school of thought in international relations.
- "Pessimism", as Wekesa explains, is a more "anti-China" perspective often fuelled by Western narratives as well as the everyday concerns among the population. This view characterises China as a neo-colonial force and a hegemon. The themes of pessimism include the debt-trap diplomacy, Chinese cheap goods flooding the market, poor labour standards, environmental degradation, and that China's underlying intent is the general exploitation of the continent for its resources. Wekesa argues that these views are largely fuelled by myths and rumours, and that it best aligns with realist thought.
- Lastly, "pragmatism" is an in-between position and views the Sino-EAC relationship as a glass half-full and half-empty, acknowledging elements from both aforementioned sides. Pragmatism, the author argues, recognises the tangible benefits of Chinese investment – such as the Standard Gauge Railway

[1] DOI: 10.12700/jceeas.2026.6.2.527

[2] Wekesa, Bob, *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. ISBN: 978-9819952670. pp. 357. $ 134,83.

[3] PhD-Student at Óbudai University; Junior Researcher at Africa Research Institute, Óbudai University, Budapest, Hungary; ORCID: 0000-0002-8949-0821; pinter.marcell@gmail.com.

(SGR) in Kenya –, while also being critical of other issues, such as the unequal trade balance. Pragmatism emphasises African agency and interests first and foremost, without necessarily falling into one camp or the other.

Wekesa then explains how history is utilised to serve modern diplomatic ends. Discourse regarding China often mentions first and foremost Zheng He's voyages in the 15th century to the East African coast as a way to give legitimacy to China's current presence and frame it as a return to an ancient, peaceful friendship rather than a newer, imperialist endeavour.

The People's Republic of China, throughout the latter half of the 20th century, sought to rally African countries behind its ideological banner, leveraging anti-Western and anti-colonial views. Wekesa describes this as the forerunner of the anti-global-north sentiment among the countries of the global south today. The author argues that the PRC's early dealings with, among others, EAC countries stemmed from pragmatism and gradually gave way to optimism. However, China also had to realise that it needed a more pragmatic approach than ideology.

In the case of Tanzania, China has historically maintained very close and rather optimistic relations, largely stemming from ideological proximity, albeit it suffers pessimistic setbacks at times which China has been keen to mend. An advantage for Tanzania is the fact that the Chinese ambassador to the EAC doubles as the ambassador to Tanzania, thus, Wekesa argues, the two countries' relations can affect the region and beyond as well.

As for Kenya, relations were not always fraternal and turned very pessimistic following the country's independence as Kenya at that time was looking Westward rather than to the East. However, in the last decade, Sino-Kenyan relations started to ameliorate and have since become a rather close ally to China with Nairobi becoming a regional hub for Chinese firms.

While Tanzania swung East and Kenya swung West during the Cold War, Uganda sat somewhere in-between, occupying a fully pragmatist position, argues Wekesa. Cooperation started to pick up, and investment went on to overtake that of the UK by the early 2010's.

Burundi started out in a similarly positive way like Tanzania; however, it quickly became volatile between regimes. took a turn for the worse like in Kenya's case and relations would cease altogether at one point. By the turn of the millennium, however, Sino-Burundi relations stabilised and now the country is largely reliant on China in its struggle against poverty.

Lastly, Rwanda, as the author explains, had for a decade after its independence been only beholden to the US both economically and politically, with marginally no room to manoeuvre left for Beijing in the country. For this reason, the PRC supported its Tutsi minority with weapons against the Hutu-dominated government during the Cold War. For these reasons, the outlook remained pessimistic towards China, which over the years have turned to pragmatism.

As Wekesa points out, before the EAC solidified, China was relying on bilateral agreements for which multilateral avenues were only auxiliary. This changed in 2011, after which Sino-East African investments became also regional. As a whole, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as the flagship for Chinese expansion into the EAC, since these countries seek funding for large-scale projects that might otherwise be neglected by Western investment.

The book goes on to detail how infrastructure became the most visible element of China's footprint in East Africa. China has committed to building many infrastructure projects in the EAC, including motorways like the various projects spanning more than a thousand kilometres in Tanzania alone, railways like the Tanzania Zambia Railway or the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya. These projects worked towards fostering optimism, however, cases like the Bagamoyo Port project in Tanzania, the largest Chinese port project in East Africa that fell through, or the failed new airport building project in Nairobi that was lost to a massive corruption scandal, only increased pessimism towards China.

As Wekesa goes on to explain, what best describes Sino-East African relations in terms of investment is ambivalence – for example, in a 2012 street protest against Chinese traders in Nairobi, the protesting locals still viewed infrastructure projects from China as positive. Indeed, while China is sometimes blamed for outbidding local firms, indigenous contractors are observed to often cut corners and leave projects incomplete, which as a byproduct has contributed to a more optimistic outlook on Chinese projects.

In terms of natural resources, the author argues that the image is even more complex, as while Chinese projects have enabled resource extraction, it has also sparked fears of short-term exploitation not dissimilar to the colonial era. As Wekesa points out, East Africa, save for Tanzania, is not necessarily known for its rich mineral deposits like other regions of Africa, China nevertheless is increasingly present in the region, securing deals by playing the long game. Since the region's natural resource deposits have only recently started to be discovered, belatedly compared others, there is a lot of opportunity for the EAC to take advantage of. Tanzania, for example, sits on massive natural gas reserves which could solve part of its energy needs, however, it requires further investment.

As for popular perception, the image of the East Asian nation in the heads of East Africans is difficult to gauge due to mixed signals coming from Beijing, as Wekesa explains China constantly paints itself as a still developing country that, at the same time, also wants to appear superior and able to help other developing countries. The author states that because of this confusing situation, optimist rhetoric from Beijing will always be met with its opposite, as will the pessimism being sown by Western geopolitical competitors, rendering both to be unable to establish primacy. As Wekesa points out, investment from China increases optimism, but increasing imports of low-quality products decrease it, furthermore, if the matters of democracy and human rights are brought up, locals tend to favour the West and oppose China.

In shaping these perceptions, media and communications also play an important role. Wekesa analyses how Chinese state media, specifically CGTN and Xinhua News Agency, attempt to sway opinions to counter Western pessimism. Conversely, soft power tools like Confucius Institutes are often met with suspicion over possible cultural imperialism yet still deemed essential for business and cultural exchange.

Lastly, the author presents the cultural aspects through a trove of empirical examples. As he explains, East African countries do not have meaningful programmes for spreading their culture in China and rely solely on the latter's unilateral agenda setting to bridge gaps between cultures. This comes as a pragmatic solution but forces East Africa into a passive role at the same time, leading to the aforementioned claims of China's cultural imperialism.

Wekesa finally concludes that China's footprint in East Africa is now a permanent reality. He argues that the perception about China is inextricably mixed between optimism, pessimism and pragmatism, and trying to view it through an absolute dichotomy is unhelpful. Instead, he continues, the future of Sino–East-African relations depend on the ability of local leaders and citizens to exercise pragmatic agency, leveraging Chinese interests to achieve sustainable development while redressing significant trade imbalances.

In conclusion, Bob Wekesa's *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism* is a timely and nuanced contribution to understanding Chinese and East-African relations and realities. In contrast to popular interpretations of the geopolitical struggle for Africa, the author's analysis establishes a much more functional framework for the subject matter. This makes the book an essential read for students and scholars of international relations, journalists, and policymakers to better understand the competing perceptual frameworks that beset the China-East Africa debate. It rightfully differentiates between and categorises attitudes relating to China on multiple levels. The interdisciplinary method of combining facts with empirical data and personal experiences allows a much-appreciated holistic approach to understanding the finer details of the subject matter.

However, the book does suffer from redundant wordage and editorialising, occasional loss of scope, and overall verbosity. One further downside is the deliberate choice to exclude charts and infographics. Wekesa justifies this by saying that Chinese data is often opaque and disputable. Instead, he argues that the perception of economic engagement is often more politically potent than the exact monetary figures themselves. This, however, forgoes some extra clarity and grounding to the topics discussed. Despite this, it is still an important collection of what is to know about the East African countries' relationship with a China.