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# Europe's Global Gateway Policy: The European Response to BRI in Africa

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## Abstract

In 2022 European Union has released a new policy to foster trade and transport connections globally, including a specific focus on Africa, by selecting 11 priority transport corridors and a revision of external funding and financing sources. It was also quite clear from the statements that this policy aims at fostering European trade and position in Africa and elsewhere to balance the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other external influences. Given the current economic and geopolitical situations, this strategy is becoming relevant in achieving transport connections also in order to foster the project of Africa trade union and get access to essential mineral resources that are necessary to mitigate climate change and achieve carbon emission reduction targets. The paper aims at providing an analysis of this policy in regards especially of the transport corridors strategy, inherited from the PIDA strategy, and to confront it with BRI initiative on transport corridors in Africa with a specific focus on railway corridors.

**Keywords:** global gateway, transport corridors, belt and road initiative, Africa, PIDA, European Union.

## 1 Introduction

The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by Chinese president has certainly represented a turmoil in the international arena, given the pace and ambition of China to become a key player on global trade and foster international relations, considered as a privilege of Europe and US since the Bretton Woods agreements after WWII. While Chinese and other influences in developing countries have been established since the cold war era, including in Africa, the role of China in Africa was already increasing since WTO agreements and the change in Chinese economic policy that resulted from that [1]. China growing economy has been looking for resources globally (including minerals, land and crops) and also for potential markets to foster its trade balance and its national industry export. This has become evident in Africa since the beginning of the new millennium, exacerbating competition with former colonial powers, such as France and Britain in particular. New terms as "*Chine-Afrique*" has been used by journalists [2] to replace the common slogan of "*France-Afrique*" for instance, to show how far China new position was replacing the French traditional influence in Western and Central Africa. While Europe and US criticized China aggressive approach to what they considered as their own sphere of influence, emphasizing the lack of respect of human rights and potential damage to environment, cultural heritage and social context, China progressed by promoting infrastructure development with little regard to political considerations. At the same time, international donors (such as IMF and World Bank) alerted on the growing debt of African countries that resulted from financing agreements with China EXIM Bank [3]. Infrastructure provision was also criticized regarding several issues: the planning and technical choices that resulted in so-called white elephant projects with limited impact for economic growth and population welfare, lack of technical capacity in providing maintenance and services on new built infrastructure, environmental and social impact regarding the influx of foreign workers, and in some circumstances episode of gender-based violence for which some responsibilities of local or foreigner contractors were assumed . Nevertheless, it should be noted that Chinese investments in Africa has been important in size and boosted some sectors of country's economies [4]. Chinese relations with African countries have been reinforced and China has also reconsidered some investment's policies to better adapt to African context [5]. The BRI initial focus on central Asia has been spread globally and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has been founded with the support of European countries to better manage infrastructure projects including greater considerations for environmental and social factors. Considering China impact on Africa only as negative would be a mistake, as well as the impact of European and US policies in Africa has not been always positive. This paper, while informative, aims at showing the "Global Gateway" policy recently proposed by European Union to show its relation to the BRI with particular reference to African context and railway development. In particular, the paper analyses the role of international lenders and organizations in providing transport connectivity in Africa in the last decades and its implications on international relations. Moving forward, this research aims at identifying key issues and goals that would improve regional and global connectivity for Africa, taking into account a more sustainable development dimension, such as the construction of a continental railway network.

## 2 International strategies on transport corridors in Africa: from PIDA to BRI

The development of transport corridors in Africa and other developing countries is widely analysed in literature regarding the potential spill over effects of transport investment on trade and economic growth [6,7]. However, while the economic geography is relatively a new discipline, penetration of the Africa continent has always been a major issue since the establishment of colonial power in the nineteen century. This resulted in a scattered network of railway lines with different gauges, connected to port and river transport, in order to export resources and allow the import of manufactured goods from Europe. As a result, after independence, most African countries inherited a transport network with specific characteristics and lack of technical support and capacity to provide maintenance and essential services to their economy. During the eighteen and nineteen, World Bank along with IFM and other donors, supported the restructuring and privatization (or concession) of several infrastructures (railway network, ports and other facilities) to introduce more efficient private sector management with limited result [8,9]. Given this context, the backlog of maintenance and lack of regional interconnectivity in Africa is among the highest in the word, resulting in high transport cost to import and export commodities, and limited intra-regional trade. Recently, African Union, has promoted the establishment of a single market area, to foster regional trade and boost economic growth. Nevertheless, this ambition is constraint by the lack of resources to connect African countries by promoting the development of an efficient transport network within the continent. Several factors explain this situation:

1) First of all, African Union ambition is to provide a reliable network of highways, railways and airports/ports facilities, allowing the free movement of people and trade such as in the European Union. A consensus has been found in defying a list of potential corridors and technical characteristics such the standard gauge (UIC[1]) for railway lines.

2) Secondly, a competition between external strategies reflecting influence of Europe, US, China, Russia and other countries (such as Turkey and middle east countries), has hampered the consolidation of a clear strategy, moving priorities and shifting investment decisions based on political considerations and financial opportunities.

3) Finally, the lack of resources, coupled with the lack of transparency, governance, technical skills and various issues, has definitively hampered the result and effects of several investments, providing limited welfare for local population and greater disparity among people.

While this situation seems very negative, it is also true and evident that infrastructure provision is necessary to economic growth and several projects requires a substantial external donor support in the context of Africa. In 2010, a Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) was designed as part of the New Partnership for Africa's Development Program (NEPAD) promoted by Africa Union.

[1] UIC is the international union of railways, an association based in Paris, France. Standard gauge is 1435mm distance between the two rails, which is the common standard in Europe, US and China. Nevertheless, it should be noted, that the most common railway gauge in Africa is the Cape Gauge (1076 mm), inherited from the British colonial era especially in southern Africa.

Initially focused on the establishment of a network of Trans-African highways (see figure 1), the program was designed to connect all Africa countries with several corridors of paved roads, in particular unlocking countries that are far from seaside and to boost regional trade. Achievement of the first phase (Priority action plan 1), consisting in about 400 projects amounting at 68 billion USD, has been limited, as proven by the mid-term review. Adaption to the 2063 African Union agenda, with a greater focus to climate change, has required an update of the second-phase (2020-2030), to include more intermodal transport connections, including railways and river transport (see figure 2).

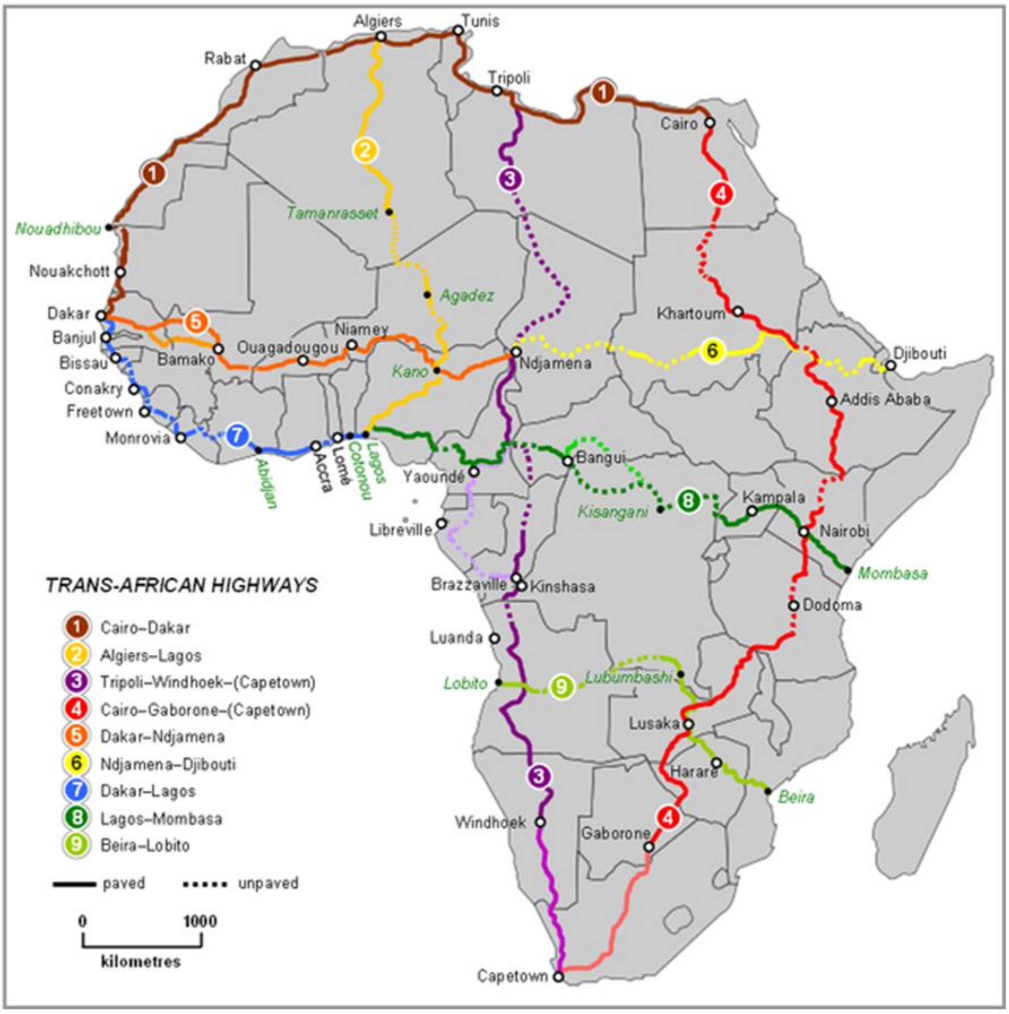


**Figure 1.** The trans-African highways network proposed in PIDA initial program (source: Africa Union)

BRI initial focus in Africa was concentrated in eastern and north Africa (Egypt) as part of the maritime road between Asia and Europe through the Suez channel. Chinese investments were concentrated mainly on ports facilities and railway connections between ports and internal hubs, such as Nairobi-Mombasa in Kenya and Djibouti-Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. Several agreements have also been signed with Western and

Southern Africa countries, to develop similar infrastructure in Angola, Nigeria, Guinea, Congo Republic and Cameroun. Other projects, such as the Dakar-Bamako railway, has been envisaged but then abandoned because of lack of political support or financing needs. Chinese investments in ports, roads and railways have been heavily criticized because of their rationale and specific focus on access to mineral resources [10], such as bauxite (Guinea), oil (Nigeria, Angola, Gabon, Congo Rep.) or other mineral resources like copper (Zambia, DRC). Competition with externals partners, such as Turkey, Russia or Europe and US has also been exacerbating political instability in some countries, resulting in riots, violence and several regional crises (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroun, CAR, DRC, Mali).
Finally, these investments have been also criticized by donors, NGOs and civil society because of several factors. Technical choice, such as the standard gauge, were justified more by giving access to Chinese firms and import of Chinese rolling stocks than interoperability and regional interconnectivity [11]. Some projects experienced social or environmental issues, including some case of gender-based violence in Uganda and DRC. Moreover, Chinese investments were also limited to the construction and provision of infrastructure and services, with little or limited transfer of technical capacity and skills to local workers, providing limited impact on the long run.

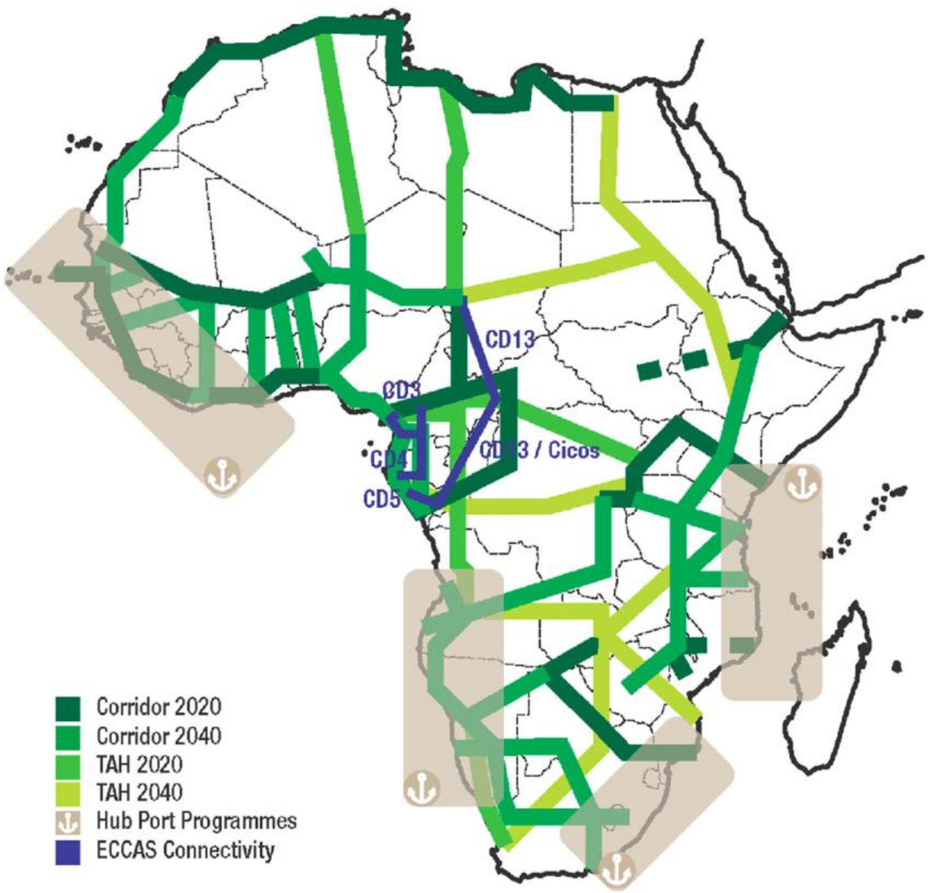


**Figure 2:** PIDA’s transport network plan (PIDA, 2012)

## 3 Global gateway: European ambitions and realpolitik

The reaction from Europe to the opening of Africa to external influences have been also criticized by African governments and local populations, considering this reaction like a reminder of colonial influence. Nevertheless, European sustain to Africa has been substantial and continuous since African countries' independence around 1960. European Union founders (France, Germany, Italy and Benelux) along with UK, US and other western countries have been financing infrastructure and economic development with the support of international financial institutions (IFIs) or directly. The European Union created several instruments since the sixties, providing finance and technical support to several infrastructure projects. While the effects of these projects have been various and largely analysed, it is also true that such financial support has been essential in achieving several goals, including the provision of basic infrastructure including roads and transport facilities. Positioning Europe has a global gateway for transport and trade shows for instance a change in this paradigm [12]. The new policy, as presented, focus more on Europe position in the world than provide an external support to Africa or other development countries [13]. While this policy is largely based on previous external policies and achievements, the narrative shifts the key focus on Europe and its connections globally [14]. However, it should be noted that among half of the resources would be dedicated to Africa, resulting from a clear strategy to foster economic development in the continent [15], as a way to reduce migration flow to Europe guaranteeing access to mineral and natural resources that are essential to European economy. The recent energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine has also exacerbate this need of energy provision, while geopolitical tension in Africa and elsewhere has also increased meanwhile. Nevertheless, the global gateway policy, still lacks clarity in terms of objectives and means associated, as analysed further.

### *3.1 Selection of priority corridors in Africa*

Lacking clear objective and strategy, the initial proposal of Global Gateway focused on Africa by selecting a list of 11 priority corridors to concentrate investments that were initially planned and spread all around the continent thought traditional EU and bilateral support. Initial statement from EU commission president, Ursula Von der Leyen, was specifically addressing the Global Gateway as a response to the BRI initiative [16], proposing an alternative way of reinforce cooperation instead of dependencies[2]. But critics raised from inside and outside EU because of the lack of selected projects and a clear strategy to achieve these targets. To overcome this issue, the EU commissioned the EUJRC (*European Union Joint Research Centre*) to conduct a study in order to identify, among several transport corridors in Africa, the most prominent in terms of development impact, taking into account several socio-economic parameters, such as population, health, safety, economic development, etc. Among these corridors, most of them were already selected as part of previous

[2] Ursula von der Leyen's statement on the state of the EU (2021), stating, among other things, that "we are good at financing roads. But it does not make sense for Europe to build a perfect road between a Chinese-owned copper mine and a Chinese-owned harbor. We have to get smarter when it comes to these kinds of investments."

strategy and investment plans, including in particular PIDA projects. Another criterion was also to balance the selection among all regions of Africa, providing support to several areas instead of focusing to a specific zone. The result of this selection, that was shared during the Africa-EU summit in Brussels in February 2022, was quite "natural" in the sense that the list of corridors comprises almost all the historic and traditional route to unlock several countries, especially in west and central Africa. It should be also noted that this selection and the Global Gateway policy were designed during the period of *Brexit*, stressing a clear separation from the influence of UK in Africa with an evident impact on this choice. A more balanced result between eastern/southern Africa and western/central Africa could have resulted in a different scenario, while several corridors in southern and eastern Africa were also part of the selection. Moreover, the EU strategy on Africa corridors seems pursuing the same objectives that were formalized in PIDA with a specific focus on multimodal corridors that connect maritime ports with landlocked countries. However, because of the choice or the limitations in number, several areas in Sahel (Mali) or Central Africa (DRC, Angola) seems less covered than in the past strategies, also because of the lack of political support and security issues. Other corridors, such as Abidjan-Ouagadougou and Cotonou-Niamey, are facing similar issues because of the recent increase of instability in Burkina Faso and Niger. But the main critics to such strategy is the fact that nothing new is really proposed, considering previous investments policies and financed projects along these corridors.

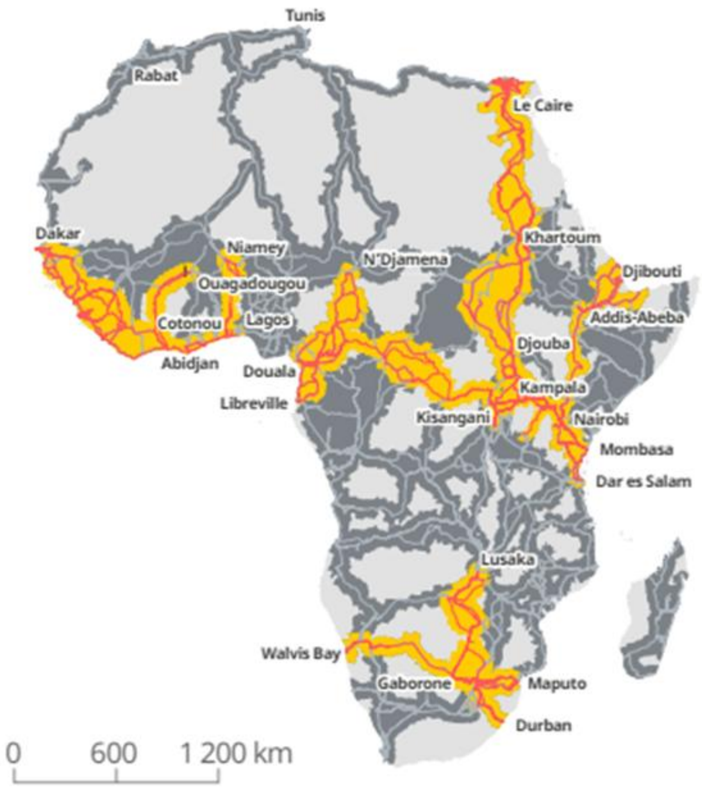


**Figure 3:** The location of priority corridors proposed by EU during the Africa – EU summit in Brussels, 2022 (source: *Office des publications de l'Union européenne*, Luxembourg, 2022 ISBN 978-92-76-59596-0 doi:10.2775/357139).

*3.2 Financial instruments associated*

The second issue addressed to the Global Gateway policy is the lack of ambition in terms of resources dedicated to this strategy [17]. While half of them are focused on Africa, the total amount of 300 billion euros for the period ending in 2027 seems quite unrealistic to achieve successful projects along different corridors in order to balance BRI strategy. The EU strategy is also aiming at leveraging private capital finance, restructuring its financial instruments, but this has proven difficult in the past. This has been the result of a new regulation, approved on June 2021, called NDICI [18]: *Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe*, that gives a new repartition of objectives organised around three pillars (geographic, thematic and rapid response):

- *having at least 93% of the expenditure under the Instrument fulfil the criteria for official development assistance, established by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD);*
- *focusing at least 20% of official development assistance expenditure on human development;*
- *dedicating 30% to fighting climate change;*
- *indicatively dedicating 10% to migration-related activities,*
- *ensuring that at least 85% of actions have gender equality as a principal or significant objective, of which at least 5% should have gender equality as a principal objective.*

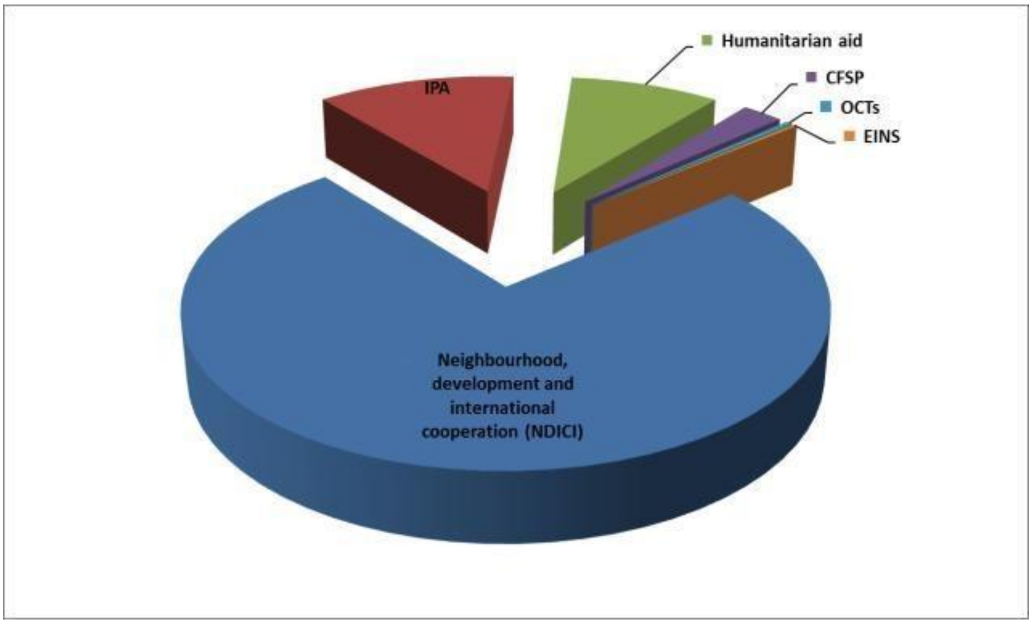


**Figure 4:** NDICI amount compared to other EU external financial instruments: Instrument for Pre-accession assistance (IPA) - Humanitarian Aid Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) - Overseas countries and territories (OCTs) incl. Greenland - European Instrument for Nuclear Safety (EINS)

The instrument contains an investment framework, a basis for financing external action from the geographical pillar to raise additional funds for sustainable development from the public and private sector. It consists of:

- the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+); and
- the external action guarantee.

*3.3 Governance*

Finally, governance issue seems to be more problematic in achieving the strategic objectives of the Global Gateway policy [19]. First of all, the EU commission seems to privilege a more politic and strategic role in conducting foreign policy and international relations abroad, also to balance member state influence and assume a leadership role on this policy. However, achievement of specific projects and infrastructure finance has been traditionally delegated to IFIs, including the European Investment Bank (EIB), The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and bilateral agencies such as French Development Agency (AFD), Belgian Development Agency (ENABEL), German Development Agency (GIZ), etc. The EIB is particularly seeking a more prominent role abroad, increasing its investement share outside Europe, also to balance a relative reduction of lending requests within EU. Moreover, the technical skills and capacity to manage this kind of projects is historically hold within IFIs for which EU could assume a political and strategic leadership, leaving the operational management to IFIs staff. The global coverage of the Global Gateway policy, with an increased focus on central Asia [20], but also on Latin America, is also challenging the leadership and coordination of several IFIs and agencies with traditional and specific geographic scope. For instance, the recent study on Central Asia connections has been conducted specifically by EBRD, while other agencies could have a more prominent role in Africa or Latin America. The role and attribution of the newly created DG INTPA within EU, replacing former DEVCO, in coordinating several initiatives among different IFIs and influences, would be really critical in successfully achieving the policy objectives. While Global Gateway has been often presented in opposition to the BRI, there is no reason why these two policies could not complement each other, improving their effects and results for Africa infrastructure provision [21]. Moreover, US has also presented a similar initiative called "Build Back Better World" and Japan has always been very proactive in Asia and Africa through its development agency (JICA). As stated by different authors, this project could become a way to "internalise the logic of strategic competition" in the decision-making process and allow the EU to increase its visibility in the geopolitical landscape. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, following the G20 meeting in India (September, 2023), a new declaration opposing EU, US and China has emerged, including a joint partnership between Global Gateway and Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) [22] to develop an alternative corridor between Europe and India through the middle east. Along with declaration, EU and US has also declared to give more financial support to the Lobito corridor between Angola, DRC and Zambia, which wasn't include in the Global Gateway initial selection for Africa.

# 4 Sustainable development of transport corridors in Africa: the case of railway

Moving forward, a more comprehensive and coherent approach in delivering transport infrastructure in Africa is urgent, given the backlog on routine maintenance, the need of new infrastructure especially in growing urban area and the threat of climate change that is increasing in several area of the continent. The case of railway transport is particularly challenging given several factors that are inherent with railway transport:

i) Railway investments are generally complex, both for technical and financial aspects: railway technology is complex by nature, requiring specific skills and competencies that are limited in the Africa context. Railway investments, such as the Nairobi-Mombasa and Addis-Djibouti, are managed and operated by Chinese firms, requiring a long and complex transfer of human skills to be sustainable on the long run. Moreover, railway infrastructures are capital intensive, both for the construction or renewal of lines and rolling stock. Few Africa countries have both the technical and financial capacity to afford such kind of investments.

ii) Railway has an important political dimension, including some social and historic factors that are often cited in the debate: most of the railway network are inherited from the colonial era, and sometimes associated in a negative way to it, as for example the construction of railway lines that has provoked important human losses. Railway workers were also associated to social and political fight for independence and in most countries' railway lines are necessary to serve specific area both for passenger and freight, with an important impact on the informal economy that is developed around railway lines and stations.

iii) Finally, railway investments are also associated with economic development and in particular with the exploitation of mineral resources. Railway lines are essential in connecting mining area with seaport to export minerals, while very few mining potential areas justify this kind of investment.

Structuring the transport corridors along with railway investments will provide several positive impacts on the regional integration strategy reducing the carbon footprint of transport industry and increasing the resilience of infrastructure to climate change.

**Figure 5:** The Kenyan Standard Gauge railway line crosses several natural parks.
Photo Credit: KRC

Nevertheless, two different approaches are emerging in the development of railway infrastructure in Africa: on the one side, the Africa Union, backed by BRI investments in railway infrastructures, privileges a continental approach by defying a list of corridors for which standard gauge lines should be developed in line with the former PIDA strategy. This objective, while relevant, has little chances to materialize in a next future, given the pace and ambition to develop such a large network of new railway line at continental scale. On the other side, EU, US and other IFI's privilege a more pragmatic approach, while considering the importance of developing a continental network of railway infrastructure in line with PIDA corridor strategy. This approach is more tailored on the existing situation of most African countries, in which several standards and gauges are still operating, in particular in southern and eastern Africa (Cap Gauge). While this strategy would be criticized because of lack of ambition, it is true that this strategy could provide an effective way of revitalizing railway transport in several area of the continent, while pursuing modernization efforts to attract more railway traffic to cope with climate change.
A compromise could be founded by developing an intermediate approach depending on the current situation of railway network and a solid cost-benefit analysis of several options. For large homogenous area such as cap-gauge network in southern Africa, it is very unlike that developing standard gauge lines could represent an efficient way of modernize railway transport, while scattered isolated line in bad shape could be improved to standard gauge if the traffic analysis confirms an important potential. Finally, it should be noted that modern metric gauge rolling stock could be adapted to existing line such as in the case of South Africa (figure 6).

**Figure 6:** A new rolling stock, developed by Alstom, is introduced in the existing cap-gauge network in suburban area of Johannesburg, South Africa in 2023. Photo Credit: Federico Antoniazzi

# 5 Conclusions

Infrastructure provision in Africa has been challenging since the establishment of colonial powers in the nineteen centuries, resulting in a scattered network of roads, railway lines and river transport with different technical characteristics and lack of coordination among countries after independence. More recently Africa Union with the support of external partners has been in charge of providing a strategy, named PIDA, to connect Africa countries and foster regional trade, despite conflicts and tensions in several areas driven or exacerbated by geopolitical considerations. The BRI initiative, while focusing marginally on Africa, has been effective in providing some infrastructure specially to connect mainland mineral rich area to maritime ports mainly along the sea connection between Europe and China. The EU Global Gateway policy, while conceived as a response to the BRI, is assuming a significant role in positioning Europe as a global player in Africa, competing with China, Turkey and Russia on providing reliable infrastructure connections and trade supports to Africa. At the same time this strategy is facing several critical challenges, regarding its scope, definition of objectives, means associates and operational issues. Among them, governance seems particularly problematic in this phase to achieve a track record of successful projects, increasing private sector participation and leveraging additional financial resources. Moreover, there are two key issues that this policy brings: first of all, Europe, as a former colonial and historic power, should redesign its relation to Africa, bringing specific support to several policies, such as green transport, transparency and human development. Secondly, Europe, should also redesign its specific position related to other external partners (US, UK) and competitors (Russia, China) in promoting development and infrastructure provision globally. Finally, increasing competition between BRI (China), Build Back Better World (US), Global Gateway (EU) and other initiatives would harm Africa development instead of promoting cooperation and increase the amount of resources dedicated to development by harmonizing best practices and contribute to common goals. Africa Union and African countries should assume a leadership role in better defining priorities and target objectives that are achievable in a more efficient way and include a more sustainable dimension in infrastructure to fight against climate change. The case of railway investments in Africa is particularly challenging and showing the difficulties and lack of cooperation among countries and external powers in providing better solutions that could achieve these targets.

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