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Analysing functions of interregionalism as catalysts of integration in Eastern African Community: The case of China-EAC relations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand how China's interregional relations with the East African Community (EAC) may promote regional integration in the region (EAC). Although previous studies highlighted the importance of regional integration of the EAC, the present study applied the Rüland approach of the functions of interregionalism to explore how China-EAC interregionalism can enhance the integration process within the EAC region. The paper used a qualitative method based on the desktop approach to review the body of literature (published articles and books) to identify interregionalism's functions as drivers of regional integration of the EAC. The findings indicated that out of six functions of interregionalism, three (balancing, institution-building, and promotion of development) were found to be catalysts

to promote regional integration in the EAC region. The study recommends that Rüland's functions of interregionalism should be considered when assessing the impact of EAC relations with its external partners in furthering the integration of EAC.

Keywords: *Interregionalism, China, EAC, hybrid-interregionalism, regionalism, regional integration*

Introduction

Africa's quest for socioeconomic development has been challenged by a lack of adequate social infrastructure, corruption and bad governance, and poor policy formulation and implementation, all of which have hindered African regional integration efforts. The socioeconomic transformation of the continent lies in the effective integration of African economies through regional integration. That said, the African Union (AU) recognises regional economic communities (RECs) as the building blocks to establish the African Economic Community (AEC) by 2034. To this end, the AU has reinforced the role of RECs as drivers of regional integration (AU, 2021, Pugliese, 2014). To enjoy the benefits of integration in East Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania established the East African Community (EAC) in 1967. However, the organisation was re-established again in 1999 after having collapsed in 1977 due to a war between Tanzania and Uganda (and strained Kenya-Tanzania relations), to promote regional cohesion and synergy regarding social, economic and political issues. The membership of the EAC has grown to six, with the new member states being Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan, which joined as full EAC members in 2007 and 2016, respectively.

As part of their efforts to promote integration, the EAC and China signed a Framework Agreement in 2011. The purpose of this Framework Agreement is to enhance cooperation between China and EAC in a variety of areas, including trade, infrastructure development, business exchanges between EAC and China, and human resource development and training. In recent years, China's involvement in Africa has gone beyond bilateral government relations to include regional bodies such as the AU and EAC. The new layer of relations is classified as a hybrid type of interregionalism where a regional organisation, like the EAC, engages in bilateral interactions with a single major state (China). Considering the low levels of regional integration in the EAC, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how and in what ways China's interregional relations with

the EAC promote regional integration in the region. Specifically, this paper aims to provide insight into how interregionalism can be used as a mechanism for promoting regional integration within the EAC region. The paper attempts to understand how the functions of interregionalism can enhance integration efforts for the mutual benefit of EAC member countries in the case of China-EAC relations. The paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge related to China's approach to regional cooperation with Africa, and in particular with the EAC. The paper argues that the functions of interregionalism may impact regional integration differently, depending on the internal dynamics within the region and the ability of the region to act as a collective entity. This paper adopted a qualitative approach and relied on secondary data. This paper is structured as follows: The first section provides the background of the paper. The second section discusses the conceptual framework of the paper, which is based on regionalism, regional integration and interregionalism. In the third section, an overview of China-EAC interregionalism is given. The fourth section discusses the functions of interregionalism by Rüland, which were then applied to the case of China-EAC relations. The conclusion summarises the China-EAC hybrid-interregionalism.

Conceptual Approach

The conceptual approach followed in this paper is based on regionalism, regional integration and interregionalism. The term “regionalism” has no commonly accepted definition. According to Mansfield and Solingen (2010, 147), regionalism entails policy coordination through formal institutions. Lee (2002) takes regionalism to mean the actions of a group of countries to strengthen their political, cultural economic, and social interactions. In addition, Lee (2002) states that these efforts cover different forms, such as regional cooperation, market integration, development integration, and regional integration. For Acharya (2012, 3), regionalism is a deliberate engagement, whether formal or informal, involving governments and non-state entities in each area, aimed at achieving common external, domestic, and transnational goals. Furthermore, Agnew (1999) and Fawn (2009) view regionalism as an ideal that embodies state endeavours to collaborate. However, regionalism can also be understood as a political ambition to construct regions that are not always driven by governments as sole players, but

rather by competing and overlapping non-state actors (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2006).

These attempts at finding a clear definition imbue regionalism with some degree of ambiguity and pluralism. This further demonstrates its contested and flexible nature. There is also a divergence of views as to whether or not regionalism is an effective or desirable organising mechanism in international politics (Fawcett, 2013). This view has produced several debates among scholars. Some of them focus mainly on the functional dimensions of regionalism, such as economic and security issues, as this literature is predominantly centred on Western-centric concerns (Barbieri, 2019, Higgott, 2007). Other debates have covered numerous issues ranging from what constitutes a “region” or who its members represent, including the motivations and interests that drive regionalism worldwide (Jiboku, 2015). Throughout this paper, regionalism can be described as the efforts by governments to deal with cross-border socioeconomic challenges, such as poor intraregional trade, inadequate cross-border transportation infrastructure, climate change and terrorism within a specific region.

EAC region: From “old” to “new” regionalism

With this background, scholars of regionalism often distinguish “old” from “new” regionalism. According to Hettne and Söderbaum (2018), old regionalism began to emerge in the cold war era. It was a function of state-driven initiatives and primarily concerned with trade and security issues. In contrast to this, the new regionalism that emerged in the post-Cold War era is more open and has a greater focus on economics, politics, security, and cultural issues (Kitipov, 2012). In the same vein, Söderbaum (2018) contends that new regionalism has become an integral part of global politics with influence into other policy activities. In this view, new regionalism as opposed to old regionalism has broadened its focus beyond the conventional emphasis on trade and security, encompassing a wide range of concerns such as health, the environment, social policy, and other policy activities (Söderbaum, 2018). For example, in considering the EAC as old regionalism, it started off as an alliance of three countries, namely Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and they shared a common colonial identity as they were all colonised by the British. However, this alliance collapsed due to internal differences based on a protectionist ideology, as one member followed the capitalist approach (Kenya), another member a socialist approach (Tanzania), and the third member a mixed economy approach (Uganda) (Nuwagaba, 2020). These

distinctions confirm the inward-looking and introverted nature of old regionalism. One of the distinguishing features of new regionalism is its open membership and multifaceted nature (Söderbaum, 2018; Hettne and Söderbaum, 2006). From this perspective, there are two ways to illustrate the EAC as a new regionalism. On the one hand, it has expanded its membership to include countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, and more recently the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the other hand, as suggested by Söderbaum (2018), the EAC has developed policies that target various areas such as infrastructure development, trade, industrialisation, tourism, good governance, peace and security, and natural resource management (EAC, 2015). These aspects demonstrate the shift from old regionalism to new regionalism in the EAC region. It is important to note that regionalism plays a key role in stimulating regional integration.

Overview of regional integration initiatives in Africa

The definition of regional integration (RI) remains elusive despite significant academic efforts. Since there is no consensus among scholars regarding its definition, RI has acquired multiple meanings (Bolaños, 2016; Sesay and Omotosho, 2011). Since RI can mean different things to different people in different contexts (Söderbaum, 2013), it could be argued that the meaning of the term may change from context to context. According to Schulz, Söderbaum and Ojendal (2001), RI involves a shift in the relationship between relative heterogeneity and a lack of cooperation toward a state of integration, convergence, cooperation, and identity in an array of fields, such as culture, security, economic development, and politics within a given geographical space.

RI may also be defined as an outcome of the reorganising of a particular geographical space along clearly delineated economic and political lines (Gamble and Payne, 1996). The term RI can also refer to a variety of different types and aspects of economic integration initiatives, such as free trade agreements, common markets, and policy harmonisation at the regional level, for instance the African Economic Community (AEC) and at the sub-regional level through structures like the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Onwuka and Sesay as quoted in Sesay and Omotosho, 2011).

According to Biswaro (2011, 69), RI refers to the creation of common institutional structures and comprises some form of shared

sovereignty. In this regard, RI goes far beyond economic integration, since it encompasses aspects such as human rights, regional security, research, health, education, and technology, as well as management of natural resources. The existing literature suggests that there is no widely accepted definition as to what RI is and what it does not include, but the shared factor is that RI represents a fluid term comprising a wide range of elements including infrastructure development, regional security, technology, politics, and economic as well as social and cultural fields. These elements can be considered as drivers of RI, enabling the interaction between African RECs and their external partners.

In addition, Krishnan and Dhal (2013) contend that, besides regionalism, the concept of interregionalism has emerged as an alternative arrangement in the international system. Considering the challenges related to RI in Africa, as outlined earlier in this paper, the occurrence of RI will require RECs to intensify their efforts to build alternative partnerships through interregionalism, which is considered in this paper as “hybrid-interregionalism”. The following section elaborates more on various types of interregionalism approach to support RI.

Types of interregionalism

In the international system, interregionalism signifies interactions between or among diverse actors across regions. The European Union (EU) has played a central role in elevating the prominence of interregionalism, fostering dialogues with regional organisations and countries worldwide. As South-South relations gain significance, emerging powers increasingly leverage interregionalism to enhance their global presence and influence. Scholars, including Mattheis and Wunderlich (2017) and Gardini and Ayuso (2015), have delved into interregionalism, particularly as a relationship between two regional organisations. Mattheis (2015) categorises interregionalism into three groups: pure interregionalism, exemplified by relations between two regional organisations like EU-AU or MERCOSUR-SADC; transregionalism, involving relations between two regions lacking internal cohesion, as seen in the Africa-South America Summit (ASA); and quasi- or hybrid interregionalism, which encompasses relations among regional organisations and a major state. For instance, the relationship between India and the AU can be classified as a form of hybrid interregionalism (Krishnan and Dhal, 2013). This conceptual framework illuminates the diverse nature of inter-regional dynamics and the evolving role of regional collaborations in shaping the global order.

Kotsopoulos and Goerg (2015) characterise the United States (US) and the AU relationship as hybrid interregionalism. This relationship was formalised in 2006 with the establishment of a permanent US mission to the AU in Addis Ababa. Similarly, China's opening of a permanent mission to the AU aligns with the concept of hybrid interregionalism, where a single major state engages with an African regional organisation (Lammich, 2014). Notably, interregionalism serves as a strategic tool for external powers to expand their influence in Africa, impacting the region's political and economic dynamics on the global stage. While these relations offer opportunities, the objectives sought by African elites, including in the China-Africa partnership (Oqubay and Lin, 2019), remain uncertain, limiting Africa's unified voice globally. This paper adopts Hänggi's (2000) definition of hybrid interregionalism, involving interactions between a regional organisation and a single major country, as is the case of the relationship between the EAC and China. Subsequently, the following section explores the functions of interregionalism based on Jürgen Rüland's framework.

Rüland's functions as analytical framework

In attempting to understand interregionalism as a key driver of regional integration, Rüland's interregionalism functions can be used as a lens of analysis. Rüland (2002, 300-310) identified six functions of interregionalism, namely balancing, institution building, rationalising, agenda-setting, identity building, and promotion of development. These functions, detailed below, provide insights into the multifaceted dynamics and impact of inter-regional interactions.

Balancing is linked to the realist notion of a balance of power in the global system. For instance, China and Africa are implementing a cooperative strategy through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, 2012, FOCAC, 2018). This forum acts as a tool in Beijing's foreign policy strategy, aimed at both expanding its influence and countering the hegemonic dominance of the US and its European allies in Africa. The Chinese government funds global infrastructure projects in Africa, Asia, and Europe through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), acting as a key tool for China's global influence. Despite potential shared interests in advancing global system reforms within the China-Africa relationship, motivations may differ. Africa's alignment with China signals its agency in diversifying relationships beyond traditional Western partners. This underscores African countries' ability to select preferred

partners aligned with their developmental goals. Notably, both China and Africa advocate for a more equitable global system, emphasising multilateral consultation, establishing a fair international system, and reforming institutions like the United Nations (UN) (White Paper on China's African Policy, 2006, Shelton, 2009, and FOCAC, 2015).

Institution building involves establishing subsidiary institutions, such as ministerial meetings, high level (senior officials) meetings, regular summits, and business dialogues (Rüland 2002, 302). Rüland argues that inter-regional dialogues inherently influence a regional organisation's institutional processes, necessitating internal coordination to formulate common positions (Rüland 2002, 303). Similarly, Doidge contends that interregionalism enhances intra-regional institution building, fostering collaboration among weaker role-players to engage effectively with dialogue partners (Doidge, 2007). Unlike EU-Africa relations, the China-Africa partnership adopts a flexible approach. Carmody and Taylor (2010) describe China's strategy as "flexigemony," adapting policies to individual countries and regional contexts. For example, China tailors its relations with EAC countries based on their economic and political status. Notably, Kenya and China signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Cooperation Agreement in 2018, encompassing various sectors (Mbogo, 2018). In 2020, China elevated its relations with Burundi to "all-weather friends," expressing support for the country's sovereignty, independence, and national dignity, aligning with its development path (Xinuanet, 2020).

Rationalising as function of interregionalism serves to rationalise the goal setting and agenda-setting processes in inter-regional interactions. Rationalising in interregionalism involves utilising inter-regional dialogues to address obstacles in global decision-making, preventing the negotiation process from becoming cumbersome. In the context of expanding multilateral negotiations, such as those on climate change and UN Security Council reforms, involving diverse actors poses a risk of slow progress and potential deadlock. To overcome this, rationalising as a function of interregionalism allows stakeholders to establish task forces at the regional level, expediting decision making on matters under negotiation before reaching the inter-regional and global stage (Rüland, 2002). This attribute facilitates a step-by-step approach to agenda-setting, efficiently saving time and achieving consensus on global issues (Rüland, 2002).

Agenda setting, according to Rüland, is closely connected to the rationalising function (Valle 2008, 19). Agenda setting in China-Africa hybrid interregionalism through FOCAC has been used to advance issues

of common interest to Africa, such as climate change, promotion of a rules-based international system of governance and pushing for reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and other multilateral bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The China-Africa hybrid interregionalism is inherently Chinese-centric, concentrating on providing Chinese aid and outlining specific sectors for collaboration with Africa. China's Africa policy of 2015 stated that China would focus on improving overall development cooperation with Africa in areas such as agriculture, industrialisation, infrastructure development and financial cooperation, which are cascaded to the sub-regional level (FOCAC, 2015). Agenda setting as a function of inter-regional partnerships can be used as a catalyst for building alliances to support international themes (such as climate change, COVID-19 vaccine equity, migration) which are contentious in global settings (Hänggi, Roloff and Rüland, 2006). Notably, in China-Africa relations, the agenda-setting function has placed a great deal of emphasis on Africa's development agenda, in a manner and intensity that Africa has never experienced in its inter-regional dialogues with the EU, US, or Japan. In 2015, the China-Africa hybrid interregionalism was upgraded, through the AU Commission, to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the highest status of a multilateral relationship with a region.

Collective identity building in inter-regional dialogues pertains to their impact on shaping regional identities. According to Rüland, inter-regional dialogue can shape collective identities and norms, fostering solidarity (Valle 2008, 19). It may be argued that how other regional groups perceive a regional grouping impacts its self-perception, role, and interests, leading to intentional or unintentional identity building. The latter is more likely to occur in highly imbalanced interregional relations, as illustrated by the EU and South Africa relations. Additionally, identity building is unintentional "if the relationship is perceived by one side as a device in the hands of the other to establish or consolidate superiority". Conversely, intentional identity building involves offering material incentives to strengthen regional cohesion. (Rüland 2002, 308). An example is China funding the construction of the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, reflecting Beijing's support for continental unity and regional integration.

Rüland identified stability and development as functions of interregionalism, arguing that economic growth leads to prosperity and security (Valle 2008, 20). The interconnection of security with economic well-being makes stability and development inseparable. Regional

organisations, by aiding other regions, use inter-regional relations to bolster their own security (Yaya, 2015). In the context of China-Africa hybrid interregionalism, a stable and prosperous Africa is beneficial for China, ensuring the safety of Chinese investments and sustaining its commercial activities (Hanauer and Morris, 2014). After exploring Rüland's functions of interregionalism, it is evident that these functions can be applied to understand how China-EAC hybrid interregionalism drives regional integration in the EAC region.

Analysis of the catalytic capacity of Rüland's functions Framework in the case of China-EAC hybrid interregionalism

In attempting to understand how attributes of China-EAC hybrid interregionalism promote regional integration in the EAC, this study applied Rüland's framework as an analytical lens. The functions analysed included balancing, institution building, rationalising, agenda-setting, identity building, and promotion of development, all of which could be considered as drivers of EAC integration.

Function one: Balancing

Balancing arises when states seek to extend their influence in other regions unilaterally or through alliances when necessary. The historical dominance of Western powers, including the US, UK, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France, in Africa during the colonial and post-colonial eras is evident. Djibouti hosts military bases for these nations, and in 2017, China also established its military base there. While this might seem like a source of income for a low-income country like Djibouti, it carries a negative consequence by jeopardising the nation's capacity to make autonomous decisions regarding political, economic, and social policies (Yimer, 2021). For example, France continues to maintain its grip on its former African colonies, employing the Communauté Financière Africaine (African Financial Community), commonly known as the CFA franc. This currency is utilised by various West African nations (Niger, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal, and Togo), serving as a mechanism through which France influences the resources, economic structures, foreign policy, and political systems of these countries (Sylla, 2017).

China's presence in Africa has reshaped the global distribution of wealth and power, diminishing the influence of Europe and the US. In the EAC context, Cissé, Anthony, Burgess and Esterhuyse (2014)

highlight a substantial increase in China's influence, notably as the largest trading partner for Tanzania and Kenya. The discovery of oil and gas has further heightened China's engagement in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. High-profile visits by Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, underscore the strategic significance China places on the EAC region (Cissé et al., 2014). Importantly, this presents EAC member states with a valuable opportunity to exercise agency by selecting development partners to support their regional development objectives.

Function two: Institution building

Institution building, manifested through various forms such as regular summits, consultations, ministerial meetings, and high-level engagements, is evident in China-EAC relations. Notably, the appointment of Chen Mingjian as China's Ambassador to both Tanzania and the EAC in 2021 underscores China's commitment to regional integration (EAC, 2021). This appointment signifies Beijing's official representation to the EAC, contributing to institution building. Further collaboration is evident in the grant agreement of \$200,000 signed between EAC Secretary General Ambassador Liberat Mfumukeko and Chinese Ambassador Wang Ke to support the EAC integration process (EAC, 2018). Additionally, China's donation of \$200,000 to the EAC in 2016 for resolving the Burundi political crisis demonstrates shared commitment (Odgaard, 2018). In reciprocal efforts, the EAC Council of Ministers visited China in 2008, showcasing cooperative engagements with external partners (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kenya, 2008).

Following the EAC Council of Ministers' visit to China, the China-EAC dialogue was held in Arusha, Tanzania, marking a significant step to formalise China-EAC cooperation. Noteworthy developments include the signing of the November 2011 framework agreement covering the economy, trade, investment, and technical cooperation. Through this agreement, the EAC and China aim to enhance collaboration in infrastructure development, trade, business exchange visits, and human resource development. To implement this, a Joint Committee on Economy, Trade, Investment, and Technical Cooperation (JCET) was established (EAC, 2011). While the involvement of EAC Heads of State or Foreign Ministers in China-EAC meetings is yet to occur, interactions among senior officials indicate a growing partnership. The ongoing development of mechanisms and institutions at the regional level

suggests that China-EAC interaction is progressing toward higher institutional involvement, potentially including Heads of State and Foreign Ministers in the future.

Function three and four: Rationalising and agenda setting

Rationalisation recognises the complexity of global policy matters within multilateral institutions, influenced by conflicting interests of multiple actors (Hänggi, Roloff, and Rüland, 2006). This process involves regional, inter-regional, and global decision-making layers, exemplified by discussions between China and the AU at the inter-regional level to support Africa's representation in the UN Security Council (AU, 2011). However, the empirical evidence for rationalisation in China-EAC relations is limited, likely due to the partnership's weak institutionalisation. Similarly, agenda-setting, closely linked to rationalisation, requires further empirical research to reveal its functions in China-EAC relations. The multilateral approach taken by China in engaging with EAC partners poses challenges to fully operationalising the agenda-setting function.

Function five: Collective identity building

Collective identity building in inter-regional relations could contribute to the formation of regional identities. In addition, collective identity building occurs when the interaction between two actors (region-to-region or state-to-region) creates a situation that fosters regional solidarity based on norms and values. Collective identity is more likely to form in dialogues with significant and coherent external partners (Papatheologo, 2014). Collective identity building can be intentional or unintentional. Intentional collective identity occurs when the stronger partner offers incentives for cohesion, exemplified by China's financial support for EAC's integration efforts. Conversely, unintentional identity building arises when perceived as a tool for external dominance, as seen in Kenya's refusal to sign the China-EAC free trade agreement, citing concerns about market access and potential harm to its manufacturing sector (Otieno, 2018). EAC primarily exports agricultural and mineral commodities to China, with China exporting manufactured goods and machinery to the EAC. This trade dynamic may hinder the industrialization prospects of EAC nations. Kenya's rejection of the China-EAC trade deal provides an opportunity for EAC countries to reassess their negotiation strategies. Collaborative efforts are essential for

making EAC-China trade mutually beneficial. Failure to secure the endorsement of all EAC countries could lead to regional tensions and impede overall regional integration.

Function six: Promotion of development

The promotion of development addresses socioeconomic inequalities by focusing on key factors such as infrastructure. Infrastructure, including roads, rail, and ports, fosters economic development by enhancing productivity, connectivity, and market access, thereby supporting regional integration. Applying the sixth function of interregionalism – promotion of development, as suggested by Rüland – the catalytic role of infrastructure development in promoting regional integration in the EAC region was assessed. The China-EAC framework agreement prioritises infrastructure development, aligning with the EAC's integration goals, with China identified as a financial partner for this crucial aspect of regional integration. Article 89 of the EAC Treaty underscores regional infrastructure development as a vital area of cooperation to facilitate the movement of goods, promote integration in regional and global markets, and enhance the physical cohesion of member states (EAC, 2000). In alignment with this, EAC member states and the Chinese government collaborate to boost regional connectivity and integration in the East African sub-region. Identified projects, particularly under the Northern Corridor Integration Project (NCIP), include the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) line, designed to link the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa to Rwanda and Uganda (NCIP, 2019). Upon completion to Western Kenya and potentially beyond, the SGR is anticipated to yield economic benefits such as enhanced regional competitiveness, improved trade flows, access to a broader market, promotion of industrialization, integration, and potential reduction of transportation costs among EAC member states (Ndegwa, 2019). The efficient cargo processing, coupled with the railway project, is expected to expedite the movement of goods into the hinterland, easing congestion at the port of Mombasa, a crucial export route for many landlocked East African countries.

Kenya officially launched commercial operations for the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) on May 31, 2017, with the Chinese state-owned company, Chinese Road and Bridge company (CRBC), undertaking the construction of the Nairobi-Mombasa railway line (Sun, 2017). Nevertheless, the SGR project encountered controversy due to unilateral

contracts awarded to CRBC and its sister company China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). China Communications Construction Company had been blacklisted by the World Bank for fraudulent practices in the Philippines (Wissenbach and Wang, 2017, Wang and Wissenbach, 2019). In addition to these concerns, corruption practices within Kenyan national politics led to escalating project costs. Allegations arose of elite politicians benefiting financially from the project (Wang and Wissenbach, 2019).

Tanzania, despite receiving partial funding from China for its SGR project, was not part of the Northern Corridor Integration Project (NCIP) agreement initially involving Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda (which was referred to as coalition of the willing partners). However, Rwanda's withdrawal from the NICP project led to the dissolution of the coalition of willing partners. Rwanda joined Tanzania in the SGR project linking Dar-es-Salaam to Kigali, citing the Tanzanian route as "shorter and cheaper compared to the Kenyan SGR" (Anyanzwa, 2019). Uganda's lack of political will impeded its progress (Cooksey, 2016). Infrastructure projects of this scale demand commitment, political will, and transparency for achieving national and regional development objectives. Kenya attempted to persuade Uganda to reverse its decision, with President Uhuru Kenyatta offering land in Naivasha, approximately 100 km north-west of Nairobi, ostensibly for Uganda to operate a dry port (The East African, 2019).

The Lamu Port South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) is a crucial Kenya Vision 2030 project designed to integrate Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda through diverse infrastructure projects, including ports, roads, rail networks, and an oil pipeline (LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority, 2016). Future plans entail integrating LAPSSET with West Africa's regional transport corridor, connecting countries such as Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast (Kabukuru, 2016). However, the project's viability faces challenges due to regional political complexities, notably the normalisation of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations. Ethiopia might prefer Asmara Port in Eritrea over Lamu Port for similar reasons as Uganda, potentially affecting the project's success (Bretton Woods Project, 2018). Despite financial setbacks due to withdrawn pledges from China, the EU, India, and Japan, Kenya pushed forward with the project. The Chinese Communications Construction Company (CCCC) was awarded the tender to build three berths at Lamu Port, originally set for completion in 2020 (Kim and Tukic, 2018; Kazungu, 2018). The COVID-19 outbreak

added further delays, with the first berth eventually opening only in May 2021 (Alden, Chichave, Jiang, Murg and Lim, 2021).

However, this mega infrastructure project has not been without challenges. Uganda has since abandoned the Kenyan route and opted to have its oil pipeline pass through Tanzania to the Port of Tanga. This decision was motivated by three factors. The first one was security, owing to the recurring Al-Shabaab terrorist attacks along the planned route in Garissa and Lamu counties (Watkins, 2016). It therefore makes sense from a national security point of view for Uganda to link its railway line to that of Tanzania to Tanga Port, although much longer than the Kenyan route. The second factor was the location of the port. It is cheaper to use an already existing port than wait for a new one to be built. The third point was related to finances to undertake the project. It was reported that the Government of Tanzania made several concessions, thus making the project more economically viable for Uganda (Trademark East Africa, 2017). Despite the challenges, the completion of this infrastructure project is expected to enhance cross-border exchanges and contribute to economic integration in the region.

Aside from the above projects, China and Tanzania signed an infrastructure agreement in 2013 for the construction of Bagamoyo Port, led by China Merchants Holdings International (CMHI). While enhancing China-Tanzania ties, this project may intensify the competition between Kenya and Tanzania for control of the EAC regional trade market. The Bagamoyo Port project, including a special economic zone (SEZ) and a comprehensive transport network, aligns with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), extending connections to global markets in the Middle East, China, India, and East Asia. However, the ambitious project faced a deadlock as late President John Magufuli expressed concerns about its terms, deeming them disadvantageous to Tanzania. This scepticism from the Tanzanian leadership suggests uncertainty about the realisation of the project (Mwangasha, 2019).

Furthermore, it is important to caution that Chinese investments in the development of infrastructure in Africa has raised criticism revolving around accusations of debt-trapping, exploitation of African resources and the prioritisation of Chinese interests over the interests of recipient countries (Vinicius de Freitas, 2023). In this view, one needs to emphasise that Chinese loans to African governments sometimes come with stipulations imposed by Chinese enterprises, giving the Chinese side a more favourable position compared to their African counterparts (Otele, 2021). Moreover, it is important to highlight that the Chinese

financed infrastructure in Africa, as it is exemplified by the situation in Kenya, may contribute to heightened debt levels for African countries (Otele, 2021). This view was also underscored by reports indicating that China would have potentially taken control of the port of Mombasa if Kenya had failed to meet its debt obligations (Muchira, 2021).

Consequently, Kenya, alongside countries such as Angola, and Zambia, is actively engaged in negotiating agreements with China to facilitate the effective management of debt repayments. This study suggests that African countries bear responsibility for their challenges in debt management. Therefore, it is imperative for African countries to establish mechanisms for debt sustainability, negotiating terms aligned with their internal laws to safeguard national interests.

Patterns of selected functions of interregionalism as drivers of regional integration in the East African Community

After analysing these six functions of interregionalism with specific reference to China-EAC relations, functions one (balancing), two (institution building), and six (promotion of development) demonstrate their catalytic capacity to foster integration in the EAC region. Balancing is important because it allows the EAC countries to choose from a wider range of development partners and select the one they wish to collaborate with for regional development. Institutional building (function two) illustrated the gradual development of China-EAC relations through (i) the signing of the framework agreement to define the scope of cooperation, (ii) meetings involving senior officials from both China and the EAC, (iii) financial assistance to support EAC integration efforts, and (iv) the appointment of an ambassador to the EAC regional bloc. Promotion of development (function six) through infrastructure development could promote regional cohesion in the EAC region. China is supporting EAC member countries to upgrade and build their transport infrastructure. This will enhance the mobility of citizens and increase intra-regional trade among EAC countries. It also has the potential to improve interregional trade with the Central African region. However, the implementation of these Chinese funded regional transport projects was affected by (i) political factors (rivalries between EAC countries), (ii) lack of political will from EAC member states, and (iii) their inability to negotiate deals that will benefit the EAC bloc. Therefore, it could be argued that these political dynamics in the region contribute immensely to stalling the EAC's integration agenda.

Conclusion

The paper examined whether hybrid interregionalism based on China-EAC relations had promoted regional integration in the EAC region since the signing of the Framework Agreement in 2011. China is using interregionalism as a tool to build and intensify its external relations with other regions, and thus asserting itself as a global player. The analysis demonstrated that the China-EAC relationship falls under hybrid interregionalism as it consists of the relationship between a single powerful state and a regional organisation. The nature of China and the EAC relations is not necessarily a template regarding China's engagement with other African regional institutions, as China adapts its relationships according to the dynamics of the environment in which it finds itself. This paper showed that the functions of interregionalism as suggested by Rüland were significant in understanding hybrid interregionalism as a catalyst for regional integration in the context of China-EAC relations. The assessment of China-EAC hybrid interregionalism revealed that out of the six functions of interregionalism that were analysed, only three functions (balancing, institution building and promotion of development) were deemed to have the ability to provide insights into how hybrid interregionalism promotes regional integration in the context of the EAC. However, none of the other functions (agenda setting, rationalising and collective identity building) demonstrated how China-EAC hybrid interregionalism could enhance regional integration of the EAC region. Despite the assessment suggesting that the EAC and China have formalised their relations to achieve EAC regional development and integration goals, these relations are still at an infancy stage, and need further institutionalisation involving the Heads of Government of EAC member states. In this view, the member states of the EAC should unite and avoid political tensions for the China-EAC hybrid interregionalism to function effectively and contribute meaningfully to regional development and integration.

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