

The Big Five: The Free and Open Indo-Pacific and East Africa's Transport Corridors

Brendon J. Cannon

Assistant Professor of International Security, Khalifa University

Executive Summary

The development of East Africa's economic and transport corridors has recently become the focus of intense competition between China, Japan and its likeminded partners. East Africa is a region that lacks natural deep-water ports and navigable rivers. This has historically inhibited the growth of populations, economies and political sovereignty. Technological developments coupled with the discovery of significant hydrocarbon reserves have, however, revolutionized corridor development and led to an upswing in interest by Japan and other states that is driven by resource mercantilism.

The purpose of this report is to measure the feasibility and value of the five main transport and critical infrastructure corridors in East Africa. They are (from north to south):

1. Lamu (Kenya)
2. Mombasa (Kenya)
3. Tanga (Tanzania)
4. Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)
5. Nacala (Mozambique).

The research was done using a qualitative methodology and comparative methods with continuous reference to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision of Japan, India, Australia and the United States of America (US) as well as reference to the political and economic actions taken separately by the People's Republic of China (PRC; hereafter "China"). The research and subsequent report paid special attention to the actions of Japan and the rationale for Tokyo's foreign policy decisions in light of its FOIP vision. This was complemented by a focus on China, Japan's strategic competitor, and the effects of Beijing's signature foreign policy platform, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the context being the ports and their related economic and transport corridors of East Africa. The preliminary findings are contextualized within the FOIP framework and therefore provide recommendations that may be helpful in the development and operationalization of FOIP policies and strategies across East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean basin.

Transport and critical infrastructure corridors are integrated networks of infrastructure within a geographical area designed to stimulate economic development and connect different economic

agents in particular geographic area. In East Africa, the lack of navigable rivers and natural deep-water ports has severely inhibited the creation and growth of such corridors. As such, East Africa currently has only four natural deep-water ports: Djibouti, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam and Maputo. These ports supply East Africa with over 90 percent of imports and exports, but their efficacy—and that of the economic and transport corridors connected to them—is somewhat mixed.

Governments in East Africa have accordingly begun to develop new economic and transport corridors serviced by ports. Natural resource deposits have also provided impetus for the building of ports and other transportation infrastructure. In sum, these political and economic developments have resulted in the five emergent economic and transport corridors serviced by ports-in-the-making that are listed above.

A baseline evaluation of the transport and economic corridors of East Africa resulted in some highly interesting preliminary findings. Foremost among them the conclusion that strategic planning should be carried out regarding the economic and transport corridors that emanate from Mombasa, Lamu, Dar es Salaam and Tanga that will complement short and long-term strategic planning and policy development in Japan, the US, Australia and India as related to their evolving FOIP visions. In addition, the preliminary research found that, to varying degrees, all the corridors remain open to Japan from the standpoint of economic, security and political investment, albeit with significant caveats. This is on account of four interrelated reasons. First, the respective corridor's level of development; second, the level of interest and investment in the ports and corridors; third, the penetration of China or other state actors; and fourth, the regional, national and/or local conditions that either inhibit or may promote further corridor development vis-à-vis Japan and Japanese interests as well as Japan's allies and friends.

The findings are as follows:

- Mombasa rates the highest given its high level of development, its importance to Kenya's and Japan's government and the significant involvement of Japanese investment, construction and consulting interests in Mombasa and the economic and transport corridor connected to the port. The Mombasa corridor will almost certainly continue to rise in importance over the coming decade. As such, the development of policy frameworks and strategies that may support Japan's continued engagement along the Mombasa corridor, but most specifically at the port, should be explored.
- Kenya's Lamu corridor, while under-financed and problematic, merits further consideration given its growing importance for geopolitical as well as economic reasons. Offshore and onshore oil drive this importance, but so, too, do the international relations of both Kenya and Ethiopia. Tokyo, New Delhi and their Quad partners should engage in strategic planning in relation to the Lamu corridor on account the FOIP's emphasis on quality infrastructure and secure supply chains.
- Dar es Salaam represents the third most important corridor for the development of policy frameworks that may undergird and possibly expand Japan's influence in Tanzania. Dar es Salaam as a port and locus of economic activity is already well-established. The interior corridors—three of them—remain underdeveloped and prone to politicization by Tanzania's political leadership. Heavy Chinese investment and Tanzania's close,

decades-old relations with Beijing also may stymie Japanese involvement. Nonetheless, the growing importance of Tanzania, the construction of the EACOP and the corridors that reach to Rwanda, Zambia and DRC all mean that its economic and transport corridors offer interesting subjects vis-à-vis Japan and its FOIP vision.

- Tanga, to the north of Dar es Salaam and south of Mombasa, merits more examination insofar as it will be the terminus of the EACOP. Japan's resource mercantilism-driven foreign policies may be well-served here and strategic planning is therefore advised vis-à-vis this nascent corridor. Tanga remains, nonetheless, a backwater and disconnected from Tanzania's interior. Indeed, Tanga may be said to be better connected to Mombasa than Dar es Salaam.
- Preliminary findings indicate that the fifth corridor, Nacala, should neither be considered further, nor should it be the subject of strategic planning given the serious geopolitical and socio-economic factors that inhibit further development.

In conclusion, preliminary results indicate that strategic planning and the development of policy frameworks in Tokyo and in a quadrilateral setting will serve the interests of all four states well in terms of furthering and expanding their influence in East Africa. In addition, further strategic planning and the development of policy frameworks are highly suggested in relation to the economic and transport corridors that emanate from Mombasa, Lamu, Dar es Salaam and Tanga vis-à-vis their viability and benefits of engagement in the context of Japan's FOIP vision.

Equally important, however, is the finding—uncovered during the research—that there have been significant shifts in the political and economic outlook engendered by the operationalization of in Japan's FOIP vision. These changes mean that Japan's policymakers have begun to prioritize regions rather than specific corridors for further engagement by Japanese officials, businesses and consulting firms. Accordingly, additional strategic planning into four of the five East African economic and transport corridors should be complemented with the development of policy frameworks on the region as an integrated whole. This regional focus should include other economic and transport corridors that service the region; specifically, Berbera (Somalia/Somaliland), Djibouti (Djibouti) Massawa/Assab (Eritrea), Maputo (Mozambique) and Durban (South Africa).

Finally, strategic planning across the entire East Africa region should necessarily explore and evaluate the inland transport corridors and facilities running from Ethiopia to South Sudan and onward to the Great Lakes.