

Ports of Power: The Strategic Contest between the U.S. and China over Lobito and Dar es Salaam

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Abstract

The evolving geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China is increasingly manifesting in Africa, particularly through strategic control of port infrastructure. This research explores the competition over the Lobito Port in Angola and the Dar es Salaam Port in Tanzania, two vital maritime gateways with regional and global economic significance. By analyzing infrastructure investments, trade volume data, and geopolitical strategies, the study highlights how China's expansive, infrastructure-driven Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contrasts with the U.S.'s more limited, governance-oriented approach. The paper utilizes a mixed-methods framework to compare trade throughput, foreign direct investment flows, and strategic implications, ultimately revealing that port infrastructure has become a critical theater for projecting economic and political power in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords

Ports, Geopolitical Rivalry, U.S.-China Relations, Lobito Port, Dar es Salaam Port, Infrastructure Investment, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Trade Volume, Economic Statecraft, Sub-Saharan Africa, Maritime Strategy, Trade Corridors

1. Introduction: Infrastructure as the New Battleground

As global economic dynamics undergo a fundamental reordering in the 21st century, Africa has emerged as a critical battleground for influence between major world powers (Ghosh, 2018). No longer defined solely by Cold War-era military alliances or ideological alignments, today's contest is waged through infrastruc-

ture, particularly ports, railways, and roads, that underpin the continent's economic transformation (Barlow & Clarke, 2019). This competition is increasingly characterized not by overt confrontation, but by what scholars describe as "infrastructure diplomacy" (Moyo, 2018), where state-backed enterprises and development finance institutions become instruments of geopolitical strategy. In this context, Africa is not merely a passive recipient of external investment but a dynamic arena where strategic interests, developmental aspirations, and global rivalries intersect.

Among the most visible flashpoints of this emerging infrastructure-centered rivalry are maritime assets, specifically ports that serve as gateways for trade, security coordination, and regional integration (Fuchs & Klann, 2019). Angola's Lobito Port, situated on the Atlantic coast, and Tanzania's Dar es Salaam Port, positioned along the Indian Ocean, exemplify this phenomenon (Lee, 2020). These ports do not serve isolated national purposes; they function as multi-country logistical lifelines, providing critical access to the global economy for landlocked neighbors such as Zambia, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Niu, 2020). In doing so, they have become central nodes in transnational trade corridors, resource export strategies, and continental integration efforts such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA).

Their strategic importance has attracted the focused attention of both China and the United States, two nations whose visions for Africa diverge sharply (Wang, 2021). China's engagement is defined by high-capital, high-visibility projects often embedded within its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a global infrastructure strategy designed to enhance trade connectivity and deepen economic interdependence with partner nations (Liu, 2021). Chinese investments in African ports are typically comprehensive, encompassing not just terminal upgrades but also rail links, special economic zones, and customs facilities. These are financed through state-backed loans, concessional credit, and public-private partnerships involving Chinese state-owned enterprises.

In contrast, the United States has pursued a more conservative approach centered on technical assistance, institutional strengthening, and trade liberalization initiatives (Osei, 2022). Through programs such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the U.S. promotes export access for African goods (Musila, 2019), while agencies like USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) support reforms in governance, transparency, and customs efficiency (Hoh, 2021). Although these initiatives provide valuable support for long-term institutional resilience, they often lack the scale, immediacy, and visibility associated with Chinese capital projects.

This divergence in strategy reflects deeper philosophical differences in how each power views its role in Africa's development (Shen, 2020). For China, infrastructure is a lever of influence and a tool for resource extraction, market expansion, and soft power projection (Brautigam, 2021). For the U.S., the emphasis is placed on enabling environments, strengthening governance frameworks, and

promoting private-sector-led growth (Dollar, 2020). The result is a stark asymmetry in presence and perception, with Chinese-built infrastructure physically transforming African landscapes at a pace that U.S. initiatives have struggled to match (Ghosh, 2018).

The Lobito and Dar es Salaam ports are microcosms of this broader geopolitical contest (Xu, 2021). Their transformation offers a unique lens to examine how great powers seek to shape Africa's economic geography and political future not with bullets and bases, but with cranes, shipping lanes, and strategic corridors (Zhang, 2019). This paper investigates how the competition over these ports reveals the evolving nature of global power projection and what it means for the political economy of African states navigating between opportunity and dependency.

2. Methodology: Triangulating Data for Strategic Insight

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to evaluate Chinese and U.S. involvement in the Lobito and Dar es Salaam ports (Kuo, 2019). Quantitative data, such as trade volumes, container throughput (TEUs), and port traffic from 2010 to 2023, were sourced from institutions including the World Bank, IMO, and national trade ministries (World Bank, 2022). Investment figures were compiled from government reports, SOE disclosures, and independent assessments by think tanks like Brookings and CSIS (Niu, 2020). Complementing this, qualitative insights were drawn from academic publications, policy documents, and multilateral agency reports to contextualize strategies like China's BRI and the U.S.'s PGII (Hoh, 2021).

The analytical framework centers on three pillars: economic performance assessment through time-series and growth trend analysis (Barlow & Clarke, 2019); classification of infrastructure investments by purpose, origin, and operational model (Niu, 2020); and geopolitical mapping of influence strategies and policy discourse. Triangulating these elements allows for a comprehensive understanding of how infrastructure projects function as tools of economic statecraft in Africa (Moyo, 2018).

3. Lobito Port: A Gateway to China's Strategic Rear

Located on Angola's Atlantic coast, Lobito Port is more than a logistical hub; it is a keystone in China's West African strategy (Cheng, 2020). Historically tied to Angola's oil exports, Lobito has now been repositioned by Chinese capital as a multi-use export node for Southern Africa's minerals (Lee, 2020).

3.1. Chinese Engagement

China's involvement in Angola's infrastructure has grown significantly since a landmark \$10 billion financing agreement in 2004 (Ghosh, 2018). This early investment laid the groundwork for further strategic engagements, with the most notable development being the \$3.5 billion overhaul of the Lobito Port (Xu, 2021).

At the heart of this initiative is the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which spearheaded the construction of modern terminals capable of handling large vessels, including 70,000-ton containers and 100,000-ton ore carriers (Niu, 2020).

The investment in these advanced port facilities not only increases Angola's capacity for international trade but also deepens China's integration within Angola's logistics and transportation sectors (Liu, 2021). This strategic presence reflects China's broader economic and geopolitical objectives in the region, positioning Chinese firms as key players in the country's growing trade infrastructure (Shen, 2020).

3.2. U.S. Position

In contrast to China's robust financial commitment, the United States' role in Angola's port infrastructure development has been more modest (Osei, 2022). While the U.S. has been a major investor in Angola's oil and energy sectors, its engagement with port development has been comparatively limited, contributing less than \$500 million over the last decade (Moyo, 2018). U.S. involvement has largely been in technical assistance, provided through programs like the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). These efforts have focused on improving operational efficiency and providing expertise for port modernization, but they have lacked the scale and financial depth of China's infrastructure-driven approach. As a result, while the U.S. maintains a strong presence in certain sectors, its influence in the critical maritime infrastructure realm remains secondary to China's.

3.3. Trade Volume Trends

The period between 2010 and 2023 saw a remarkable rise in container throughput at Lobito Port, with volumes increasing from 1.2 million to 3.5 million Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) (Kuo, 2019). This surge reflects the infrastructural improvements funded by China, by expanded trade ties between Angola and China (Dollar, 2020). By 2023, Chinese trade constituted approximately 40% of Angola's total trade, a significant increase from previous years, while U.S. trade remained steady at around 15% (Fuchs & Klann, 2019).

This shift underscores China's strategic focus on securing access to Angola's rich natural resources, particularly minerals like oil and copper, while simultaneously embedding itself as a dominant player in the region's trade networks (Liu, 2021). The increase in trade volume highlights the growing economic interdependence between China and Angola, as well as the broader implications for regional and global trade dynamics (Lee, 2020).

3.4. Geopolitical Implications

The substantial growth of Chinese trade in Angola, particularly through the up-

graded Lobito Port, has broader geopolitical implications for the region (Xu, 2021). By investing heavily in key infrastructure projects, China secures vital access to raw materials and strengthens its political and economic ties with Angola (Niu, 2020). This deepening relationship positions China as a critical partner in the country's development trajectory, giving it significant leverage in both bilateral and multilateral contexts (Hoh, 2021).

For the United States, the limited scale of its engagement in port infrastructure development highlights a potential vulnerability in its broader strategy for influence in Africa (Osei, 2022). As Chinese influence continues to grow, the U.S. may find it increasingly challenging to maintain its foothold in the face of China's expanding economic presence and the strategic advantages that come with controlling key maritime chokepoints (Xu, 2021).

4. Dar es Salaam Port: The Indian Ocean Chessboard

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's primary port, is the busiest maritime facility in East Africa and serves as the gateway for multiple landlocked economies (Dollar, 2020). Unlike Lobito, Dar es Salaam operates in a multipolar regional trade context, where infrastructure is closely linked to cross-border economic integration (Brautigam, 2021).

4.1. Chinese Investment Surge

Since 2010, China has dramatically increased its investment in Tanzania's Dar es Salaam Port, committing over \$1.5 billion to the port and its critical inter-modal connectivity infrastructure (Lee, 2020). This includes vital rail projects, most notably the Tanzania-Zambia Standard Gauge Railway, which connects Dar es Salaam to landlocked Zambia and other regional markets (Niu, 2020). These investments have significantly boosted the port's capacity, allowing it to accommodate larger vessels and manage higher volumes (Fuchs & Klann, 2019).

However, the Chinese influence extends beyond just infrastructure by financing and building the essential transport networks that link the port to the broader African interior, China has strategically embedded itself within regional supply chains (Cheng, 2020). This infrastructure-driven model enhances Tanzania's trade potential, strengthens China's geopolitical leverage over the flow of goods in the region, reinforcing its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ambitions (Shen, 2020).

4.2. Development Model

The United States, in contrast, has adopted a different approach to enhancing Tanzania's port capabilities, with a greater emphasis on "soft" infrastructure (Osei, 2022). The U.S. has concentrated on regulatory improvements, trade facilitation, and capacity-building measures through programs like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and initiatives funded by USAID

(Musila, 2019).

These efforts have included the establishment of One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) aimed at reducing bottlenecks at border crossings and enhancing the efficiency of customs procedures (Hoh, 2021). While these improvements have undeniably contributed to smoother trade flows, they have not been accompanied by large-scale investments in the physical infrastructure of the port itself (Xu, 2021). The U.S. investment in Dar es Salaam remains under \$200 million, a fraction of the amount China has poured into the region (Ghosh, 2018). This approach has helped improve the ease of business and trade facilitation but falls short compared to the extensive infrastructure developments seen with Chinese investment (Zhang, 2019).

4.3. Trade Metrics

The impact of these differing investment strategies is reflected in the trade metrics at Dar es Salaam Port (Niu, 2020). Between 2010 and 2023, container throughput surged from 900,000 TEUs (Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units) to 2.4 million TEUs, indicating a significant growth in regional trade activity (Kuo, 2019). China's share of this growing trade is substantial, with Chinese trade accounting for more than 30% of the port's total trade volume. In contrast, the United States' share remains relatively modest, hovering between 10% and 12% of the total trade (Osei, 2022).

This stark contrast in trade volume highlights the disparity in investment approaches: China's substantial financial backing in hard infrastructure projects has facilitated an environment conducive to trade growth, while the U.S.'s focus on regulatory frameworks and capacity-building efforts has not had the same transformative impact on port throughput or regional trade dynamics (Ghosh, 2018).

4.4. Strategic Divergence

The difference in trade metrics between China and the U.S. in Dar es Salaam Port illustrates the investment gap and the strategic divergence in how the two powers are engaging with Tanzania and the broader African region (Hoh, 2021). China's strategy, centered on large-scale infrastructure projects and the integration of Tanzanian ports into broader trade networks, ensures a long-term presence in the region, with the potential to exert significant influence over trade routes and regional economies (Hoh, 2021).

The U.S., while promoting economic growth and trade facilitation through soft infrastructure, does not have the same degree of influence over the physical and logistical capabilities that drive trade (Moyo, 2018). This divergence reflects broader geopolitical trends, with China's focus on infrastructure and strategic connectivity contrasting with the U.S.'s emphasis on trade policy and regulatory improvements, which, though valuable, may not be enough to match China's growing presence on the ground (Zhang, 2019).

5. Comparative Evaluation: Investments, Influence, and Throughput

Factor	Lobito Port (Angola)	Dar es Salaam Port (Tanzania)
Total Investment (2010-2023)	China: \$3.5B/U.S.: ~\$500M	China: \$1.5B/U.S.: ~\$200M
Trade Volume Share (2023)	China: 40%/U.S.: 15%	China: 30%/U.S.: 12%
Throughput (2023, TEUs)	3.5 million	2.4 million
Strategic Role	Atlantic export corridor, minerals	East Africa's gateway, Indian Ocean

China's infrastructural reach is both broader and deeper, creating logistical chokepoints that align with its broader geopolitical calculus (Liu, 2021). The U.S., while maintaining a strategic interest, has not matched the scale or continuity of Chinese initiatives (Osei, 2022).

6. Discussion: Infrastructure as a Strategic Lever

The cases of Lobito and Dar es Salaam demonstrate that ports have evolved from simple commercial hubs into critical tools of economic statecraft, playing a pivotal role in the broader geopolitical and strategic competition between global powers (Brautigam, 2021). At the heart of this transformation is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has redefined the role of infrastructure development in international relations (Shen, 2020).

Through its capital-intensive and vertically integrated approach, China not only funds the construction of state-of-the-art port facilities but also maintains operational control over them through state-owned enterprises (SOEs) like the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) (Osei, 2022). This strategy allows China to shape regional supply chains, secure long-term access to vital resources, and trade rules and logistics networks (Niu, 2020). By embedding Chinese norms, firms, and infrastructure into Africa's developmental framework, China solidifies its role as a key player in shaping the continent's economic future (Lee, 2020).

In contrast, the U.S. approach emphasizes governance and institutional support, prioritizing the establishment of regulatory frameworks, trade facilitation, and capacity-building programs (Osei, 2022). Through initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), U.S. efforts focus on creating conditions for sustained economic growth by improving the legal and institutional environments (Dollar, 2020). While this focus on "soft power" is vital for long-term stability and resilience (Moyo, 2018), it lacks the immediate, visible impact of large-scale infrastructure projects (Ghosh, 2018). African governments, often facing urgent developmental needs, may find the U.S. model appealing in principle but less effective in providing the rapid physical transformation and economic lift required to meet their goals (Lee, 2020). As a result, the U.S. approach, despite its potential for fostering sustainable governance, can be perceived as insufficient

in regions where quick, tangible development outcomes are highly valued (Hoh, 2021).

This strategic divergence between China and the U.S. creates a complex decision-making environment for African states (Shen, 2020). On the one hand, Chinese investments offer the promise of rapid development and tangible infrastructure improvements, with vast amounts of capital flowing into ports, railways, and roads (Niu, 2020). This is particularly attractive in countries where the need for urgent infrastructure expansion and modernization is a top priority (Kuo, 2019). However, this speed and scale come with significant trade-offs. Chinese investments are often accompanied by substantial debt, and the long-term fiscal autonomy of recipient nations may be compromised (Brautigam, 2021). Furthermore, the heavy reliance on Chinese firms for the operation and maintenance of infrastructure can create a sense of strategic dependency, potentially limiting a country's ability to make independent economic decisions in the future (Zhang, 2019).

On the other hand, U.S. engagement, with its emphasis on governance and institutional development, seeks to create a more sustainable foundation for economic growth (Musila, 2019). By fostering democratic principles, enhancing regulatory frameworks, and supporting transparency, the U.S. approach builds institutional resilience that can help African nations withstand economic shocks and maintain long-term stability (Fuchs & Klann, 2019). However, the lack of substantial "hard" infrastructure investments may make U.S. efforts appear less attractive to governments that are under pressure to deliver immediate results in the form of new ports, roads, and railways (Ghosh, 2018). For many African leaders, the need for visible, physical transformation often outweighs the intangible benefits of improved governance and institutional capacity (Lee, 2020). Thus, while the U.S. model may provide a foundation for long-term development, it faces challenges in competing with China's more immediately impactful infrastructure-driven approach, which offers both economic and geopolitical advantages (Osei, 2022).

7. Conclusion: The Port as Power

The analysis of Lobito and Dar es Salaam reveals how port infrastructure has become a central arena for the U.S.-China economic rivalry in Africa (Liu, 2021). China's substantial investments have yielded tangible results in trade volume, infrastructure modernization, and strategic positioning (Hoh, 2021). The U.S., although a legacy partner in governance and trade facilitation, trails behind in visibility and impact (Niu, 2020).

Ultimately, ports such as Lobito and Dar es Salaam are no longer neutral assets; they are geostrategic levers reshaping regional trade, security alignments, and global influence (Shen, 2020). For African states, the challenge is not choosing sides but leveraging this competition to ensure diversified investment, regulatory sovereignty, and sustainable development (Zhang, 2019).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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