

Kenyan Standard Gauge Rail Successful in Looking Beyond the Here and Now

by Mark Bender

Oct. 25—Proponents of the New Paradigm in Africa have a new milestone to celebrate, with the opening of a new segment of the Mombasa-Kisumu Standard Gauge Rail (SGR) line in Kenya. On October 16, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta [led a celebration](#) to open Segment 2A, a 120 kilometer (75 mile) extension from the capital (and current terminus) of Nairobi, to Naivasha, a large town northwest of the capital. Opening of this—admittedly rather short—segment nonetheless brings the SGR project one step closer to its planned destination: Kampala, the capital city of neighboring, landlocked Uganda.

Stunning Progress

Kenya's SGR project, the most advanced in Sub-Saharan Africa, began in 2014, when the country began construction of a modern, standard gauge (1.435 meter) rail line from the port of Mombasa on the Indian Ocean, northwest to the nation's capital of Nairobi, a distance of 450 km (275 mi). Opened in 2017, on Madaraka Day—Kenyan Independence Day, when the people took political control of their destiny from the British Empire on June 1, 1963—the rail line has been a huge success, cutting transport and delivery time significantly for both goods and people. Exceeding expectations, the railway transported two million passengers within its first 17 months; and in 2018, its first full year of operation, carried over 5 million tons of freight.

The Mombasa-Nairobi line was initiated in 2009 discussion between the China Road and Bridge Corporation and the Kenyan government, as [reported](#) by P.D. Lawson in the April 27, 2018 *EIR*. China's Exim Bank extended credit for 90% of the project. By May 2016, initial track laying was completed in just over 1 year. Passenger service was opened May 31, 2017, eighteen months

ahead of schedule. Freight services commenced in January 2018. Plans are now underway to electrify the segment from Mombasa to Nairobi, which will greatly lower operating costs.

Benefits of the new, faster technology now extend far beyond mere transport, where the railway has taken hundreds of trucks (and buses) off the notoriously congested highways, making them safer and more useable for the population.

With the increased capacity and speed of freight transport, Kenya's exports to the East African Community (including neighboring states Uganda, Tanzania and South Sudan) have hit a three-year high in the first eight months of 2019. Not only have government earnings from domestically produced goods increased 6% compared to 2018, but Kenya's domestic consumption of electricity—certainly not a nation known for its overconsumption of this resource—has increased 3.2% in the first 8 months of 2019.

President Kenyatta has launched additional infra-



structure projects, building on the Kenya Vision 2030 [plan](#). In addition to the opening of SGR Section 2A on October 16, he has announced plans for construction of an inland container depot (ICD) at Naivasha (to store or transfer goods from rail to truck, or from SGR to the old meter gauge rail, MGR); a new 23 km expressway in Nairobi; and a water project in rural Kimuku (stemming from a natural spring accidentally discovered during construction of the rail line!). He wants to create a Special Economic Zone—to include the port of Mombasa—to further speed up freight delivery.



President's homepage
Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya.

British Environmental Fakery

While the Kenyans have rightfully been celebrating, not everyone is happy. Imperial resistance has been present almost from Day One—in Kenya using the environmental flank to discourage economic development, adding unnecessary expenses supposedly to preserve nature and “habitat,” at the expense of technological innovation.

Three months after Segment 1A opened, for example, in September 2017, a London NGO was created: Delphically named Development Corridors Partnership (DCP), with the UK, China, Kenya and Tanzania as its only members. The DCP is funded by the UK Research Council's Global Challenges Resource Fund (GCRF), an NGO with \$1.5 billion in its very deep pockets. The GCRF was established in 2015 in the wake of the announcement of the global Belt and Road Initiative by China's Xi Jinping in 2013.

The DCP has been very low-key in its operations—GCRF's website says it is “monitored by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).” Ultimately, it is the DCP that was responsible for such design oddities as the 6 km elevated section running through the Nairobi National Park, a feature unnecessary from an engineering standpoint. In order to accommodate wildlife “migration patterns” (specifically those of giraffes) the entire railroad bed was hoisted about 10 meters above the ground, requiring the construction of 198 huge concrete pillars. In another segment, sound barriers were installed, so as not to in-

terrupt the sleep rhythms of the animals. The next time anyone raises the issue of “cost” for the SGR, ask him or her how much the 198 piers cost.

Then there are the little things. Segment 2A's opening was supposed to be on Madaraka Day (as was Segment 1 on June 1, 2017), but it was delayed because of a (possibly contrived) legal skirmish over compensation fees by landowners. Just enough to quench the anti-colonial momentum. Segment 2A is not fully complete because of technical issues at the final Naivasha station (all passengers get dumped at

the currently isolated Suswa station, 20 km short of destination), and there is uncertainty involving freight transfer from SGR to MGR trains.

Uncertainty contributed to Uganda's decision to put its upgrade to SGR on hold. Meanwhile, Uganda is rebuilding its 100-year-old MGR line. But it is preserving the SGR right of way by demarcating the planned path from the Kenyan border to Kampala.

The best news is that Uganda had, as of October 2, already re-submitted a loan application to the Exim Bank of China through the Ministry of Finance to get funding for the construction of the SGR.

New Paradigm Is Hope for the Future

Addressing all these concerns at the Oct. 16 launching ceremony, President Kenyatta raised the element of hope, and the need for all to cast their eyes past the here and now, [speaking](#) partly in English and partly in Swahili. As [quoted](#) in the October 16 issue of the *Kenya Star*, he said:

I have seen some media reports saying that the President is launching a railway going to nowhere. But I said it is ok. Because you have no vision ... you stay in Nairobi ... you walk to your bar in the evening ... you wake up and look for a matatu [minibus] because you are going to where you know.

But your reasoning cannot tell you to think of how the Kenya of tomorrow ... the Kenya of our children will be ...



kremlin.ru

Russian President Putin (left) with Kenyan President Kenyatta at the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia on October 24, 2019.

Let me tell you. Mai Mahiu . . . Suswa is not nowhere. This is Kenya. And let me tell you. Whether you like it or not, once I am done with my work and go home, after 20 years when I

come back here, Mai Mahiu and Suswa will be more developed than Nairobi. . . .

And I tell all those who are thinking of holding us back, that they should relocate to other countries because there is no place for them in Kenya. We will not be discouraged by baseless claims. We know where we want to take the country in development and we will not allow visionless people to discourage us.

In words his listeners could understand, President Kenyatta likened today's SGR critics to colonial-era British Members of Parliament who in 1894 argued against the construction of the original Kenya-Uganda railway, claiming it was a "Lunatic Express" that led "nowhere," and thus a waste of money:

We are not only focusing on today. We are looking at 50 years from now. We want to come to Suswa in future not only for politics but to see industries. We want to see our youth working, living well, and educating their children.

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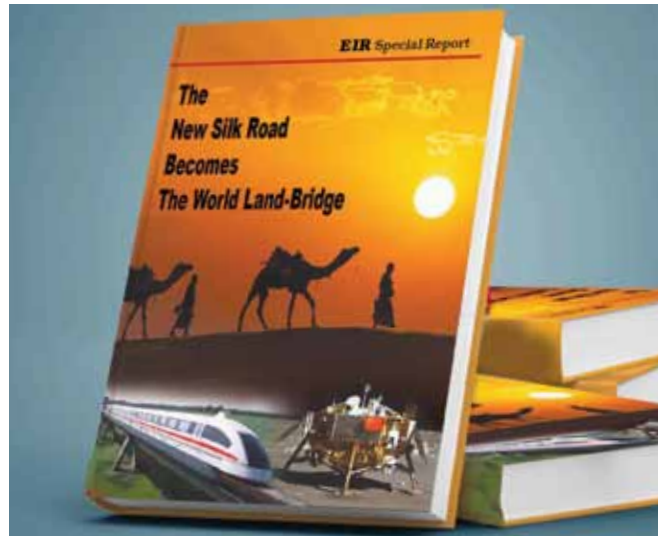
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