KENYA’S ‘RAIL STRATEGY’ WILL REVOLUTIONIZE DEVELOPMENT

Future generations are likely to remember Uhuru Kenyatta’s presidency for implementing one of Africa’s most audacious railway projects. Ideologically, the ‘railway strategy’ which is about speed, capacity and cost will enhance Kenya’s strategic position, capturing Kenyatta’s Africa-centered foreign policy anchored on regional economic interdependence.

Likewise, the Kenya ‘railway strategy’ has the potential to revolutionize development across the African region and spur the growth of Kenya’s GDP by at least 1.5 percent. Hopefully, its outcome will make Kenyans across the land feel like one people.


One of Africa’s most audacious railway projects has the potential to revolutionize development across the African region. When completed, the line will run for a total of 3,200 kilometers (1,989 miles), covering Mombasa to Nairobi (472 km), Nairobi to Malaba (520 km), Kisumu branch line (174 km), the Nairobi to Moyale line (700 km) and the Lamu to Nadapal (South Sudan) line (1300 km).

To be sure, Kenyatta’s railway strategy is not a jolt from the blues. It is also not a wasteful adventure into extravagant spending.

It dates back to his experience as Kenya’s former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister (2008-2012) at a time when the continent was undertaking an in-depth assessment of the state of its railway system within the aegis of the Africa Development Bank (AfDB).

After a study of the railway systems in eight African countries (Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Senegal, Tanzania and Zambia), the Bank concluded that: “Unless this mode of transport is developed, Africa may not realize its full potential in exploiting its abundant natural resources and wealth” (2015).

Africa needed to invest in its railway system. But International Financial Institutions such as the International Finance Corporation (part of the World Bank) limited Africa’s options to rehabilitating the outdated colonial-era lines, arguing that this would cost 25 per cent less than building a new line.
Mending the old rather than buying the new made no business sense. The ensuing forays into private concessions “proved rather unsettling” according to the Africa Development Bank.

In Kenya, truckers increased competition, and cargo shifted from the rail to tarmac. By June 2017, truckers are handling more than 95% of the freight moved from Mombasa port.

In contrast, Africa occupies a railway-have-not zone. According to the International Union of Railways, in 2014 the region carried a paltry 158 billion tonne-kilometers of freight, 84% of that in South Africa.

Moreover, Africa’s railway system is unconnected. Architects of the colonial-era lines had little regard for interconnection. They adopted a variety of gauges and standards that balkanized the continent and deepened its splendid technological isolation.

Africa deserved a 21st century railroad technology to power its Agenda 2063 on development and

Railway is power. The building of the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1800s changed America. Only after the completion of the 7500-kilometers Trans-Siberian Railway in 1904 did Russia become a global power.

Closer home, the Uganda Railway, lampooned as the Lunatic Express or Lunatic Line (1896-1901), created modern Kenya as the gateway and economic powerhouse in Eastern Africa.

Railways are linked to the rise of powers. The highest railway cargo traffic is in the United States, China and Russia. The U.S. hauls 2.525 trillion tonne-kilometers annually. China and Russia have the second and third heaviest freight traffic in the world standing at 2.518 trillion tonne-kilometers and 2.222 trillion tonne-kilometers every year, respectively.

Kenya’s railway strategy is about speed, capacity and cost. Madaraka Express is built to a modern “standard gauge” (1,435mm), unlike the meter gauge old line.

Designed with an axle-load of 25 tonnes, it is expected to haul up to 22 million tonnes of cargo per year at a speed of 80-100km per hour—although passenger trains are expected to achieve speeds of up to 120km per hour.
Ideologically, the ‘railway strategy’ enhances Kenya’s strategic position, capturing Kenyatta’s Africa-centered foreign policy anchored on regional economic interdependence.

Madaraka Express is the artery of the Northern development corridor linking Kenya to a market of nearly 350 million people, covering Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Northern Tanzania, Eastern DRC, Southern Sudan and Ethiopia.

The line is part of a huge land bridge designed to link the Indian Ocean rim and the Atlantic seaboard.

Globally, Kenya’s new railway network is part of China’s “New Deal for Africa” inspired by President Xi Jing Ping’s Belt and Road Initiative aimed at connecting humanity. China’s new infrastructure deal is a new wave of railways in 21st century Africa: A new line now links Djibouti’s port to Addis Ababa; Rwanda plans a new line going through Tanzania; Uganda wants one going to Sudan and other lines are planned in Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana.

The Mombasa-Nairobi line is 90 per cent funded by the China Exim Bank, with Kenya financing the remaining 10 per cent. Hopefully, it will reduce congestion at the port of Mombasa and secure it from competition from other ports, boost domestic and international tourism, employment, incomes and value of land and attract new investments in homes, offices, markets and settlements along the railroad.

By providing low cost, speed and certainty in the transportation of goods and long-distance travel and reducing the distance by over a half, the line lays a solid foundation for Kenya’s industrialization.

Moreover, besides cutting the number of heavy trucks on the road, wear and tear on our highways and the cost of maintenance by nearly 30%, the railway provides Kenyans with the world’s safest form of transport with minimal chances of accidents and breakdown of railways.

As a passenger in the maiden passenger train, I was astonished to find no safety belts on the train’s seats!

With the electrification of the line (now under way at a cost Sh49 billion), Kenya will eventually have its first green transport, giving environmentalist something to cheer about.

Beyond economics, the line will inspire the imaginations of many Kenyans. It was Paul Theroux who wrote that: “Railways are irresistible bazaars, snaking along perfectly

The new line expected to spur the growth of Kenya’s GDP by at least 1.5 per cent.
level no matter what the landscape, improving your mood with speed, and never upsetting your drink.”

A railroad is a sharp tool in the hands of a conscientious nation builder. Abraham Lincoln hoped that: “A transcontinental railroad would bring the entire nation closer together – would make Americans across the continent feel like one people – United the States of America”.

Hopefully, Kenya’s new railroad will make Kenyans across the land feel like one people.

Railways are costly ventures. Critics are fretting a debt burden. But nation building is not for the faint-hearted. It is for the brave hearts.

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