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China and Tanzania in the New Era: A complicated relationship

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This article provides a brief overview of China's activities in the United Republic of Tanzania, spanning from economic to political connections, and connects them to general trends of the Chinese outward-going strategy in Xi Jinping's New Era.

Introduction

China's relationship with the United Republic of Tanzania has a long history, spanning back to the independence of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in the early 1960s. Zhou Enlai, Premier at that time, even visited Tanganyika in 1964, just some months before the unification of Tanganyika and Zanzibar which created modern Tanzania (Shangwe, p. 81). While China promptly recognized the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, other countries were hesitant at first, with this China positioned itself as an unconditional friend to Tanzania from the very first start. Relations had an ideological basis as Tanzania, like many other sub-Saharan African nations, was led by a socialist revolutionary government. For young Tanzania the relationship with China was important as it strengthened its position as an independent country, while China looked for recognition as well. Hence the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the all-time governing party in Tanzania, have a long-standing mutual friendship. The good relationship resulted in many development projects, most famous the Tanzania-Zambia (TAZARA) railway project that still today stretches over 1800 kilometers from Dar es Salaam into Zambia. This project at that time was also seen as an answer to the railway tracks built by the colonial governments in Southern Africa (Rhodesia and South Africa). The first Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere visited China in 1968, and since then mutual visits between the two nations, especially of party officials has remained common (Shangwe, p. 83). Particularly since China's economic opening in the 70s the good inter-party and diplomatic relations were joined by more and more economic and investment cooperation. To this day African countries remain most favorable towards China, many for very similar reasons as Tanzania (Benabdallah, p. 3).

One of the most famous projects of the 21st century is China's attempt to "rebuild" the ancient Silk Road that connected Asia and Europe. Under the umbrella of the One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR)¹ China has intensified investments in infrastructure and engagement with governments to revive this connection. China includes both maritime and land routes in the concept. While at the announcement by Xi Jinping in 2013 the focus was on central Asia (China Daily, 2013) the scope has steadily increased. East Africa may not be on the direct route between Asia and Europe, but it still is the target of a wide range of Chinese infrastructure projects incorporated into the OBOR. The often-massive investments conducted by China are expected to improve trade routes, secure markets, and improve diplomatic relations. However, their conditions are not always transparent or advantageous for China's partners. The best example of this is the Hambantota International Port in Sri Lanka that proved non-economical and was largely sold off to China Merchants Port Holdings. Furthermore, a 99-year lease was granted to them (BBC, 2017). This case reflects the main argument of the narrative of the "debt-trap" policy connected to Chinese investments in developing countries. In disagreement

¹ 一带一路 (yi dai yi lu) is the Chinese name. Hence the translation One-Belt-One-Road. Since 2015 the National Development and Reform Commission urged to change the English translation to Belt and Road Initiative, which is argued sounds more inclusive (NDRC, 2015).

of this view Chinese researchers and diplomats work hard to dispel such perceptions of China relations (Were, p.8). China nowadays tries everything to prevent such bad publicity (Bloomberg, 2021).

Besides the OBOR China also engages in other methods to supply development assistance. One framework employed by China is the *South-South cooperation*. In 2021 foreign minister Wang Yi emphasized China's commitment to its southern partners (Xinhua 2, 2021). Within the South-South cooperation, China provides financial assistance as well as technical know-how. *About 93% of the financial aid provided by China is bilateral, leaving just 7% for multilateral agreements (Carter 2017, p. 2)*. The private sector engagement in development assistance is difficult to quantify as the demarcation between state and private in China is very ambiguous. Another point of differentiation compared to Western countries, are Civil Society Organizations (CSO), these rarely exist in mainland China and thus rarely contribute to aid and knowledge transfer to developing countries (Carter, p. 6). In the following chapters, some economic aspects and Chinese sponsored infrastructure projects will be discussed. Thereafter Chinese cultural, political, and media influences in Tanzania are going to be unveiled.

Chinese engagement in Tanzania and its local impacts

Today China is the biggest investor in Tanzania, as well as the largest exporter of goods to Tanzania. The investment volume reached 7 billion USD in 2019, trade volume between China and Tanzania reached 3.9 billion USD. China ranks as Tanzania's fifth-largest export destination. However, it receives only 3.9% of Tanzanian's total exports. Unfortunately, the relationship with this important investment and business partner is not at all equal. Tanzanian Ambassador to China Mbwela Kairuki states that the main challenge is the huge trade imbalance between both economies is due to the fact that for every dollar exported to China, Tanzania receives 10 USD worth of imports from China (CAP, 2020). Hence, some African scholars criticize the current practice of cooperation with China. Arguing that China is gaining much more out of its investments than its partners (Kinyondo, pp. 159-160). This critique, combined with the aforementioned debt trap debate, has influenced Tanzanian political decisions in the past.

One of China's signature investments in Tanzania was supposed to play a key role in East Africa's connection to the OBOR, namely the *Bagamoyo Port project*. Announced during Xi Jinping's visit in 2013 this 10 billion USD project would have been the biggest port in East Africa and open up the region to global trade. Investors for the project included China Merchants Holdings International and Oman's State Government Reserve Fund. In January 2016 however the project was brought to a standstill by order of the late President John Pombe Magufuli as he halted further planning of the project due to his disapproval of the unfavorable 33-year guarantee and 99 years lease terms submitted by the port operator China Merchants Holdings International. A move that appeared quite unusual despite China and Tanzania's long-standing historical friendship. Magufuli stated that "...tough conditions that can only be accepted by mad people,..."

(ENR, 2019) and believed the deal to be unbeneficial to Tanzanian interests as the agreement would avail China full control of all cargo and logistics as well as give tax benefits to Chinese companies and prohibit Tanzania from building any other new port on its coastline between the regions of Tanga and Mtwara (ENR, 2019). The cancelation of this deal makes Tanzania one of the few developing countries that openly criticized China's investments and declined billion-dollar investments. Interestingly repercussions and responses from China have been very rare, almost nonexistent. Instead, China appears to have successfully persevered the conflict and revived project discussions with the current Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan who remains convinced of the benefit and necessity of the port project (Xinhua, 2021). Still in the early stages, it is however, unclear if the project scope will be similar.

Another project sponsored by China is the new library for the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) which covers a floor area of 20,000 square meters. It was constructed by China IPPR Engineering International Co., Ltd. a state-owned enterprise (SOE), and Jiangsu Jiangdu Construction Group Co., Ltd. and finished in 2018 for a total sum of 41 million USD provided by China Aid. The opening ceremony was attended by late President Magufuli and China's ambassador to Tanzania Wang Ke (Xinhua 2, 2018). Adjacent to the library a new Confucius Institute has also been constructed. Further details on its role are provided in the following pages of this report. *Unfortunately, large parts of the library still remain empty to date as UDSM lacks the number of books and resources required to equip the whole library to full capacity.* Observations made of the library from personal visits indicate that most of the signs, floor plans, etc. within the library are only available in Chinese with some exceptions also present in English or as pictograms. The national language of Tanzania, Kiswahili, is only used on small paper signs deployed after the construction. This situation leaves the visitor rather puzzled and remains a firm reminder to all who visit of who paid for and built this new library.

Cooperation in the fields of Culture, Media and Politics

Like in many other countries China also operates two Confucius Institutes (CI) in Tanzania. One at the University of Dar es Salaam, the economic center of the nation, and one at the University of Dodoma, the political capital. Both operate several branch offices at several other universities across the country. They provide language classes, cultural activities, and scholarships (CI UDSM, CI UDOM). According to numbers from 2016 China awarded 120 scholarships to Tanzanian students on a yearly basis (Shangwe, p. 88). However, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the number of Tanzanian students studying in China has decreased to zero following the Chinese Government's directive for all foreigners to leave the country. The CI's play a crucial role in finding appropriate candidates for scholarships and potential studies in China. Other activities include the public communication and dissemination of Chinese culture, for example via newspapers. Interesting to note is a regular recurring article on Chinese language and culture in the Tanzanian government owned newspaper "Daily News", which is financed by the CI at UDSM. Sometimes

the Chinese embassy has similar features displayed in the same newspaper. Like President Xi expressed (...*the fundamental purpose...is to enhance China's soft power,...*) ***the CI are inherently involved in China's soft power approach to spread a positive story of China (Peoples Daily, 2018)².***

As China has a history of early support for African revolutionary governments and liberation movements there is some degree of fraternization between the CPC and African revolutionary parties. This also holds true for the Tanzanian case. Despite the failure of African socialism these connections still exist today and as mentioned above historic relations still play a central part in Chinese-Tanzanian relations. A noteworthy sign of ongoing cooperation is ***a dedicated cadre training school for all former liberation movements of southern and eastern Africa north of Dar es Salaam***. This school was financed by the CPC and opened in 2022. The opening ceremony was attended by late President Magufuli and Song Tao, the head of the International Department (ID) of the CPC (Benabdallah, p.30, Xinhua, 2018). Besides CCM five more revolutionary parties from Sub-Sahara Africa are utilizing the facility. These are ANC, SWAPO, FRELIMO, MPLA, ZANU-PF³. Later Xi Jinping congratulated the opening of the school and highlighted the good relations between the CPC and the aforementioned parties. These kinds of party schools as well as the occasionally intertwined connections to foreign political parties are the essence of the ID's work (Benabdallah, p.6). ***While in the past the focus was put on communist parties, the ID today works with everyone who is willing, even opposition parties***. Another change from the earlier approach that mainly aimed at legitimacy gain is the new focus on promoting China's governance model as well as mentoring young leaders from Africa (Benabdallah, p.29). Combined, this ensures that China finds a warm welcome anywhere in Africa, possibly even after regime and generation changes.

Another topic often discussed is China's media influence, propaganda, and "wolf warrior" diplomacy. In recent years China has expanded its traditional media and social media outreach globally (Madrid-Morales, p. 30, 40). Many embassies are also opening social media accounts and participating in their advertising for China. Especially after accusations of bad treatment of Africans in Guangzhou at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic some of these social media accounts across Africa got very active in trying to reduce the damage to China's image (Madrid-Morales, p. 43). However, especially regarding the traditional media, there is still a large gap in adoption between Chinese media and the established Western outlets like BBC (Bayes, p. 52).

²FOR REFERENCE:

因此毋庸讳言，讲述中国故事的根本目的就是提升中国的软实力、塑造中国正面的国家形象，并提升我国对其他国家人民的吸引力和好感度。

Therefore, it goes without saying that the fundamental purpose of telling China's story is to enhance China's soft power, shape China's positive national image, and increase the country's attractiveness and favorability to people in other countries.

³ANC (African National Congress - South Africa). SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation - Namibia). FRELIMO (Liberation Front of Mozambique). MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola). ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front).

Furthermore, numerous English newspapers in Tanzania regularly feature Xinhua and People's Daily articles, especially on foreign affairs. Xinhua is the government's voice of China, People's Daily is the voice of the party. Regular reviewing of newspapers in Tanzania during 2021 showed that these Chinese government voices were often those that criticize western nations. Calling them out for colonial practices, morally corrupt, and in the case of the USA even as warmongers. On the other hand, other articles praise the historic China-Tanzania relationship and argue that China aims for true multilateralism (The Citizen, 2021). Further articles often touch on the topics of Taiwan and the South Chinese Sea. The purpose of some Xinhua and People's Daily articles placed in Tanzanian newspapers is quite obvious. This is especially true when reading articles about Taiwan or the South Chinese Sea. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the so-called 'Mask-Diplomacy' and 'Vaccine-Diplomacy' are also popular topics. Chinese vaccine deliveries to Tanzania (here especially the delivery of Sinovac to the Republic of Zanzibar at a time where there were no vaccines available at mainland Tanzania) or other countries are highlighted and advertised consciously to portray China as the reliable partner and friend it wants to appear as. Accompanying the media praise and promotion of the Chinese vaccine are misinformation from media and also official sources that brand the mRNA vaccines as unsafe (Bayes, p. 32; The Citizen 2, 2021).

Conclusion

Most of China's influence in Tanzania seems to originate from the long established economic ties as well as investments and assistance (Shangwe, p. 100). As the world's second-biggest economy and largest exporter of goods this might be not a big surprise. As in many other countries around the globe, this economic influence is being expanded on by political means and the use of old and new media.

The Chinese-Tanzanian relationship remains interesting, despite long-standing good relations and a Tanzanian dependency on Chinese imports the former president risked confrontation over disadvantageous investments. Chinese reactions to this have been under the radar of the public. With the new president, Tanzania intensifies cooperation with China again. However, at the current state China is politically and economically less invested in Tanzania than in many other East-African nations. This is largely due to former president Magufuli who actively choose non-Chinese contractors for many infrastructure projects across the country. However, the fast-growing population makes it necessary for Tanzania to speed up its development drastically. Many remaining important infrastructure expansions require large investments which China is happy to make.

Like traditional development assistance providers who expect certain norms and rules regarding democracy, human rights, and freedom, China also expects certain "returns" on their "investments" as well. For instance receiving some sort of diplomatic support on the disputed non-recognition of Taiwan, what Taiwan derisively calls a "diplomatic money game". On China's side, this is however viewed as crucially to ensure the survival of the system. For Tanzania which is left in an underdeveloped state with a nearly exclusively first sector economy, every investment is crucial. Not everyone has the luxury to ask what strings may or may not be attached. As China promises fast and massive investments and development without talking about values and morals first it is an extremely attractive partner.

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