Seeking new allies in Africa: China’s policy towards Africa during the Cold War as reflected in the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia railway

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ARTICLE

Seeking new allies in Africa: China’s policy towards Africa during the Cold War as reflected in the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia railway

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In the 1960s, there was an upsurge in national liberation movements in Africa. Newly independent Tanzania and Zambia urgently needed a railway transportation line to link the two countries in order to achieve true independence and self-strengthening. Using archival materials, this paper shows that the Chinese government decided to support construction of this railway in response to Tanzania’s request for aid, despite China’s own economic underdevelopment. In the face of US and British policies to thwart the railway construction, China overcame Zambian suspicion and ultimately facilitated the signing of a tripartite agreement with both Tanzania and Zambia. China’s assistance in the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia railway during the Cold War had great strategic significance. This project helped China break out of its international isolation, and it became a turning point in China’s gradual formulation of its own independent Africa policy. Moreover, it promoted national emancipation and economic construction in Africa and broadened the influence of the Chinese developmental path there. However, this project also created a financial burden for China, and its underlying model of cooperation proved unsuitable for sustaining the railway’s long-term operation.

Keywords: China’s Africa policy; Tanzania–Zambia railway; foreign aid

Aiding the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia railway was a significant item on China’s strategic agenda in Africa during the Cold War. As the single largest complete project in the history of Chinese foreign aid, the Tanzania–Zambia railway still has important strategic meaning even in the twenty-first century. Reviewing the decision-making process concerning aid for the railway construction will help delineate China’s strategic thinking about Africa during the Cold War, and it will be very meaningful in analyzing the future direction of the Sino–African relationship.

Extant research on the Chinese decision-making process in providing aid to the Tanzania–Zambia railway construction is limited to personal reminiscences and journalistic accounts.¹ The declassification of Western archives facilitated in-depth analysis of China’s motivation for aiding this project,² but some research is biased due to the limits of

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¹ Some of the representative works include Zhang Tieshan, Youyi zhilu; Li Benshen and Huang Jinru, “Zai Tan Zan tielu”; and Chen Xiaochen, Xunlu feizhou.

² Chinese scholars’ analyses of China’s decision-making in regard to aiding the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway tend to focus on the leaders as individuals. See Xue Lin, “Zhou Enlai tuidong yuanjian,” 14–21; and Shen Xipeng, “Zhou Enlai zai Zhongguo yuanjian,” 226–229.
source materials or the researcher’s perspective. Based on material from declassified government archives in both China and the United States, this article attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of China’s decision-making process and to analyze the significance of the railway in the Sino–African relationship, in order to explore the position of Africa in the strategic landscape of China’s foreign relations during the Cold War.

I. Setbacks for Tanzania and Zambia in seeking aid from the international community to construct the railway

As part of a wave of national liberation across Africa, Tanganyika proclaimed independence on December 2, 1961. Later, it merged with Zanzibar to form the United Republic of Tanzania on October 29, 1964. Zambia proclaimed its independence on October 24, 1964 and founded the Republic of Zambia. These two countries both faced the task of developing their national economies after independence, so it was particularly pressing for them to build a railway link between the two.

Zambia insisted on building this railway mainly as a means to achieve economic independence and autonomy of transportation from colonialists or white-minority governments. There is a 144-kilometer-long, 48-kilometer-wide copper mine in Zambia’s Central Province, and the Zambian economy is heavily dependent on the export of copper. From 1965 to 1970, copper production and sales made up 45 percent of Zambia’s GDP, 60 percent of government revenue, and 95 percent of Zambia’s export trade. Zambia is a landlocked country. At the time, all of its railway connections to the sea were dominated by countries ruled by white men, and for political reasons, these railway lines were blocked. The only exit to the sea for Zambia was Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, which was opened to benefit Zambia with the approval of the East African Community. The expansion of this port also brought considerable revenue to the newly independent Tanzania. To export copper, Zambia had to transport it to Dar es Salaam via the poorly maintained Great North Road, where accidents often occurred. The other reason Zambia wanted to build the railway was to develop its northern provinces. Zambia’s railways were then concentrated in the south and in the copper-mine belt, while its northern regions remained underdeveloped due to poor soil and backward infrastructure. In addition, many leaders of Zambia’s ruling United National Independence Party were born in the northern provinces and played active roles in promoting the construction of a railway in that region. For Tanzania, a railway link with Zambia would bring both direct and indirect benefits by promoting trade. Moreover, closer trading ties among African countries would expedite the continent’s overall development.

The heads of state of Tanzania and Zambia began to discuss the building of a transnational railway in 1963. Neither the Zanzibar Revolution in January 1964 nor Western studies are mainly based on American archives and the investigative reports of international organizations, and they are not without bias. See Monson, “Defending the People’s Railway,” 113–130. Monson focuses on the railway’s managerial difficulties today, and his main argument is that China’s goal was to benefit the people rather than to make a profit from the railway. Rettman in “The Tanzam Rail Link” argues that China’s main goal was to assemble an African anti-Soviet front. Yu argues in “Working on the Railroad” that China engaged in building the railway in order to establish informal relationships with Tanzania and Zambia and thus to reinforce China’s own international appeal.

3 Sklar, Corporate Power, 24.
6 Snow, The Star Raft, 151.
Tanganyika’s military insurgence, which was later put down, shook Kaunda’s determination to build the Tan–Zam railway. In February 1964, while attending a meeting of the Organisation of African Unity in Dar es Salaam, President Kaunda instructed his minister of transportation to discuss the issue of the railway with Julius Kambarage Nyerere, president of Tanzania. In January 1965, Nyerere and Kaunda held a second meeting. The two presidents announced to the world that they had reached a consensus on building a railway linking the two countries. At this time, the main challenge for this project was the need to find foreign aid.

At first, the two governments presented a request to the World Bank and the United Nations. In its feasibility report, the World Bank suggested that the construction of the railway would be uneconomical because the amount of trade in East and Central Africa was too small. In 1964, the United Nations made another appraisal, and its report concluded that building the railway might be too risky.

In July 1964, Nyerere contacted the American Embassy in Tanzania to begin the process of requesting US aid in constructing the railway. In May 1965, the Tanzanian government formally requested American help by sending an official memorandum, but the US reply was similar to that of the World Bank. The US turned down Tanzania’s request because the two countries’ bilateral relationship was then at a low ebb. In the eyes of the American government, Zanzibar after a pro-Communist revolution was nothing but an “African Cuba.” From December 1964 to January 1965, Tanzania twice arrested American pilots for suspected involvement in the coup against President Nyerere, and the ensuing diplomatic crisis caused the mutual withdrawal of embassies.

The relationship between Tanzania and West Germany was at that time almost at its nadir. After independence, Zanzibar established official relations first with East Germany, rather than West Germany. After Tanganyika and Zanzibar united as Tanzania in April 1964, Nyerere still permitted East Germany to maintain an unofficial liaison office, which led to West Germany’s withdrawal of all military aid to Tanzania. Infuriated by this coercion, Nyerere requested the withdrawal of all West German economic aid, including a US $4 million loan and technological aid valued at US $3 million. Under these circumstances, aid from West Germany was out of the question. After this series of frustrations, Nyerere began to doubt the true motives of Western countries, because they were reluctant to help Tanzania in construction despite their friendship in name.

Meanwhile, President Kaunda of Zambia incessantly wrote personal letters to British prime minister Harold Wilson requesting aid. In order to ease the tense bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and Zambia, Wilson dispatched Barbara Castle, the minister of overseas development, to visit Tanzania and Zambia. She explicitly informed both countries that because the UK was having a balance of payments crisis, it would be unable to provide large-scale aid to support the railway construction.

Tanzania and Zambia had no choice but to turn to the socialist camp. However, the Soviet Union also rejected their request. Influenced by the Cold War environment, the

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8 Land, "They're Working on the Railroad," 12.
14 “Zhou Enlai zai guowuyuan,” 3.
USSR emphasized military aid rather than economic development aid; its strategy in Africa was to engage in proxy wars.\textsuperscript{15}

II. China’s positive response to the Tanzanian request

After this series of setbacks, Nyerere began to probe China’s attitude. Nyerere supported the socialist ideology. While studying in Britain as a student, he had been immersed in socialist ideas and created his own “Ujamaa” socialism, an ideology seeking to strike a balance between Marxism and capitalism and retaining unique African traditional social values and religious meanings. Tanzania also had a good relationship with China, because Nyerere had supported the People’s Republic of China and not Chiang Kai-shek’s regime in Taiwan as the legal government of China.

In addition, China’s policy towards Africa enhanced the confidence of Nyerere. In the mid-1960s, China and the USSR came into open conflict with each other over both ideology and national interests. Having lost the support of the Soviet superpower, China was eager to find a new ally in the international community. The first official encounter between socialist China and African countries occurred at the Afro–Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. There, Zhou Enlai proposed the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences (\textit{qiu tong cun yi}) in response to the misunderstandings and hostilities many newly independent African countries harbored towards China.\textsuperscript{16} In May 1956, China established formal diplomatic relations with Egypt, which set the stage for broader interactions between China and Africa. Multiple times, Mao Zedong openly expressed his support for African independence movements.\textsuperscript{17} These Chinese actions introduced to Africans an alternative to the United States and the USSR.\textsuperscript{18} China not only morally supported Egyptians’ struggle to maintain national sovereignty and oppose aggression in late October 1956, but also donated 20 million Swiss Francs to Egypt.\textsuperscript{19} In January 1964 in Mali, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai announced the eight principles guiding China’s economic and technological foreign aid, and these guidelines were incorporated in full into the text of the China–Mali Joint Communiqué.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Akindele, “Africa and the Great Powers,” 135.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Yu, “China and the Third World,” 1037–1038.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu and Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, \textit{Mao Zedong waijiao wenxuan}, 370, 408.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Akindele, “Africa and the Great Powers,” 139.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Liu Hongxuan, \textit{Zhongguo mulin shi}, 312.
\item \textsuperscript{20} The eight principles are: (1) The Chinese government provides foreign aid in accordance with the principles of equality and reciprocity. It never sees the aid as a unilateral gift, but instead regards it as a mutual obligation. (2) While providing foreign aid, the Chinese government fully respects the sovereignty of the recipient. It will never impose any conditions and will never ask for any privileges. (3) The main forms of Chinese government aid are low-interest or interest-free loans, whose maturities can be postponed when necessary in order to reduce the burden on the recipient countries. (4) The main goal of the Chinese government’s foreign aid is not creating dependency upon China, but helping the recipient countries to gradually pursue the path of self-reliance and independent economic development. (5) The Chinese government seeks to support cost-efficient projects, so that the recipient governments can increase their income and accumulate capital rapidly. (6) The Chinese government provides the highest quality equipment and materials that China can produce and the price is to be negotiated based on the prevailing price on the international market. If the equipment and materials provided by the Chinese government fail to meet the negotiated standard of technological specifics and quality, the Chinese government guarantees their exchange or return. (7) While providing any type of technological aid to a foreign country, the Chinese government assures that technicians in the recipient countries will fully grasp the required technical
\end{itemize}
principles explicitly expressed China’s diplomatic standpoint and political determination to sincerely support African nations’ efforts at economic reconstruction and their political struggle for national independence and liberation. This vision was undoubtedly compelling to Nyerere.

In June 1964, Nyerere dispatched Prime Minister Rashidi Mfaume Kawawa to visit China. During his visit, China and Tanzania signed their first agreement on economic and technological cooperation. The agreement stipulated that China would provide financial aid to Tanzania in the form of an interest-free loan of 10 million British pounds, equivalent to 68.96 million Chinese yuan, and financial aid of 3 million US dollars, equivalent to 7.35 million Chinese yuan. In response to Tanzania’s requests for assistance in building a textile factory, a farm, an agricultural tool factory, and a radio station, China agreed it would soon dispatch experts to Tanzania to perform feasibility studies.21 In December 1964 and January 1965, the two countries signed agreements in which China agreed to provide a short-wave radio station at no charge, as well as a “Friendship Textile Factory,” the Ruvu State Farm, and the Ubungo Agricultural Tool Plant, all three of which were to be financed through the interest-free Chinese loan.

China’s generous and quick response to Tanzania’s request for financial aid convinced Nyerere of China’s honesty and seriousness about assisting Africa. On December 29, 1964, Prime Minister Kawawa met with He Ying, the Chinese ambassador to Tanzania, and conveyed Nyerere’s intention to visit China. One week prior to his formal visit, Nyerere dispatched the minister of commerce Abdulrahman Babu to visit China and sign a trade agreement. Premier Zhou Enlai then instructed He Ying to ask Babu about Nyerere’s concrete plans. Babu replied that Nyerere wanted to build a railway to help independent Zambia break the blockade of Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, the three countries ruled by white colonialists, and to export its copper to foreign markets. Babu acknowledged that the railway construction would be very challenging and costly, but he also conveyed Nyerere’s hope that China would not turn down the proposal right away.22 He Ying submitted a report to the Foreign Ministry based on the minutes of his conversation with Babu. This report aroused the intense interest of Chinese leaders. Without hesitation, vice premier and foreign minister Chen Yi forwarded it to Zhou Enlai. Zhou and Chen then called a meeting with Fang Yi, director of the Foreign Economic Liaison Commission, and Lu Zhengcao, minister of railways, soliciting their opinions on aiding the construction of the railway in Tanzania and even the entire Tan–Zam railway. Lu Zhengcao spoke first, saying that if China was truly committed to assisting African friends in building the railway, his ministry should definitely dispatch the best engineers and workers. Fang Yi was concerned about the scale of investment: “Spending so much money on a railway might not be as good as assisting the construction of some medium- or small-sized projects.” Fang continued, “With that sum of money we could perhaps help many African countries to build dozens or even hundreds of factories, stadiums, and department stores.”23

knowledge and skills. (8) The specialists dispatched by the Chinese government to assist construction in the recipient country enjoy the same economic treatment as the domestic specialists in the recipient country. Chinese engineers and technicians are prohibited from presenting any special demands or having extra privileges. Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu and Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan, 388–389.

21 Ye Rugen, Fang Yi zhuan, 320.
22 He Ying, “Yuanjian Tan Zan tielu,” 42.
After hearing what Lu Zhengcao and Fang Yi had to say, Zhou Enlai came up with a five-point suggestion: (1) Constructing the Tan–Zam railway was indeed urgently needed by the two countries. President Nyerere himself was coming to ask for help, and China should grant his request. (2) China was capable of undertaking the project financially and technically. It would take about eight to nine years to complete the whole process of survey, design, and construction, and the yearly average cost should only be about a few tens of million Chinese yuan. Considering that Kaunda of Zambia has not yet decided to ask for China’s assistance, if China only engages in construction within Tanzania, then the budget should not be tight at all. (3) The effect and influence of one single large project would far surpass that of multiple minor projects. (4) A very capable team of experts should be dispatched to survey the conditions first, because this type of grand transnational project inevitably encounters many unanticipated problems. (5) China’s consent to engage in the construction would certainly make the West panic. It was likely that Western countries would be pressed to agree to provide aid, and then Nyerere might use China as a trump card in its negotiations with the West to challenge their harsh political conditions for economic aid.24

Chen Yi, Fang Yi, and Lu Zhengcao all agreed with Zhou Enlai’s strategic analysis. After the meeting, Zhou Enlai asked the Foreign Ministry to write up a report on China’s aiding the Tan–Zam railway, which would be submitted to the Party Center for instructions. Mao Zedong read the report and approved it. Thus, China’s construction of the railway was decided in principle.

On February 17, 1965, Nyerere and his entourage arrived in Beijing. On the afternoon of February 18, the leaders of China and Tanzania held their first formal meeting. On the Chinese side, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, Li Xiannian, Fang Yi, Zhang Aiping, Qiao Guanhua, and He Ying were all present. The meeting dragged on and on, but Nyerere did not mention the request about the construction of the Tan–Zam railway. Liu Shaoqi then took the initiative by saying: “Your Excellency may candidly present any questions that you want to address, and we will consider them. If we have difficulties, we will let you know frankly.” Nyerere then subtly stated the importance of a railway for the economic development of Tanzania and Zambia, and he also admitted that Western countries refused to lend him support. Finally Nyerere tentatively inquired,

Constructing this railway requires a huge investment, and the bulk of it will be put into Tanzania. I am talking about this candidly with you so that you can all understand the situation. Please feel free to decide what to do next.

Liu Shaoqi replied,

[We] may deliberate on it, but that will take a long time. The first step now is to survey. … Things that imperialists won’t do, we will. We will certainly help you build the railway. … The construction of the Tan–Zam railway is relevant to Zambia. You may consult Zambia, and we can discuss it with Zambia, too. No matter what attitude Zambia may have, we will lose no time sending survey teams to Tanzania to investigate and choose routes, and then we will go ahead with the design work.25

At four o’clock that same afternoon, Nyerere met with Mao Zedong in the Great Hall of the People. After exchanging greetings briefly, Mao Zedong said,

24 Ye Rugen, Fang Yi zhuan, 322–323.
It is a great pleasure for the Chinese people to see friends from Africa. This is mutual aid, not about who exploits whom. We are all family. We don’t harbor indecent thoughts about each other. Neither of us is an imperialist.26

Mao confirmed China’s commitment to the railway construction. In the evening, Zhou Enlai held a smaller meeting with Nyerere where the only other attendees were Fang Yi, Zhang Aiping, and Oscar Kambona, Tanzania’s foreign minister. In discussing the surveying work, Zhou Enlai said that coal mines along the railway also needed to be surveyed, since the construction of the railway and coal mines would both have long-term benefits. Zhou and Nyerere agreed that they should hold off the announcement of the confirmed projects, particularly the Tan–Zam railway, for a while.27 The twelfth ministerial business meeting of the Chinese Ministry of Railways, which was called following the Zhou–Nyerere talks, concluded that “We should be careful regarding the aiding of the Tan–Zam railway. There are many developing countries in Africa, but some things there are advanced too. We should present our best stuff, and not disappoint our friends there.”28

Nyerere’s visit to China was very productive. China and Tanzania signed not only a treaty of friendship, vowing to strengthen cooperation and mutual trust, but also a package agreement regarding bilateral cooperation in the economic realm, trade, and technology. More importantly, China agreed to provide assistance in constructing the Tan–Zam railway.

Soon after Nyerere finished his visit to China, Zhou Enlai was invited to visit Tanzania in May 1965. During his visit, Zhou and Nyerere held a meeting to continue the discussion about railway construction. By this time, some Western countries were guessing that China would step in to help with the construction of the Tanzanian part of the Tan–Zam railway. Fearing that China would expand its influence to Africa, they began to pay lip service to providing aid while ridiculing China and Nyerere. In the meeting with Zhou Enlai, Nyerere candidly said that he did not trust the sincerity of Western countries at all, but he also knew well that China was assisting many other countries while it was far from a wealthy country itself; thus, constructing the railway would be a big burden for China. Therefore, Nyerere asserted that he, along with Kaunda, planned to make a new effort at the upcoming Commonwealth Conference to urge the better-off Commonwealth countries to provide aid in constructing the Tan–Zam railway.29

Zhou Enlai earnestly responded to Nyerere in a second meeting with the vice president of Tanzania. Zhou said that China would be glad if Western countries were willing to help; however, if they presented very harsh conditions, then President Nyerere could feel free to negotiate with them by citing China’s favorable conditions. If these countries did not do anything but talk, then China would just build the railway. Or, if they stopped halfway, then China would continue it. To assist the president’s struggle, China would dispatch its survey team right away.30 Both parties agreed to release the news about China’s decision to assist in the construction, in order to observe the reactions from various political forces in the West. Nyerere then followed up with an open announcement, “The Tan–Zam railway must be built, no matter whether the aid comes from a Communist country or a Western country.”31

26 “Mao Zedong zhuxi huijian Tansangniya.”
27 “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo Tansangniya lianhe gongheguo lianhe gongbao.”
28 “Zhongguo tumu gongcheng jitian,” 3.
29 “Zhou Enlai tong Zanbiya fuzongtong.”
30 Ibid.
After this meeting, Zhou Enlai ordered the Ministry of Railways to conduct an on-site survey and to concretely study the technical feasibility of constructing the railway. The China Foreign Economic Liaison Commission immediately submitted to vice premier Li Xiannian and acting premier Deng Xiaoping the Report Asking for Instructions Concerning the Dispatch of a Hydrogeological Investigation Team to Tanzania, suggesting that it be dispatched as a hydrogeological survey group to avoid attention. The Ministry of Railways designated its Second Design Institute to undertake on-site reconnaissance, surveying, and design of the Tan–Zam railway. The survey team consisted of 17 members, separated in two groups. In August 1965, the Chinese team started surveying the route between Kidatu and Tunduma in Tanzania. Zhou Enlai gave pre-departure instructions that “the technical standard of the future Tan–Zam railway should be slightly higher than the current technical standard of railways in Tanzania and Zambia.”

The survey team returned to China in December of 1965. During its four-month stay in Tanzania, the team travelled in 11 districts of three provinces, covering a distance of 6,570 kilometers and surveying about 700 kilometers of the proposed railway line. The group also signed a memo with Tanzania on the railway’s route and main technical criteria. In April 1966, the Ministry of Railways forwarded to the Foreign Economic Liaison Commission the Work Report on Surveying the (Proposed) Railway in Tanzania with the memo about the technical criteria as an attachment. In September of that year, the Chinese survey team submitted to Nyerere the Investigation Report on the Kidatu to Tunduma Portion of the United Republic of Tanzania’s Proposed Tan–Zam Railway.”

When referring to China’s assistance to the Tan–Zam railway, Mao Zedong asserted that “(we) must carry it out resolutely.”

III. China agrees to Zambia’s request for aid

After Nyerere’s visit to China, Kaunda still placed his hopes on the US government, and he played the China card from time to time in order to persuade the US government to fund the Tan–Zam railway. In early 1965, the railway project became more critical because of the political upheaval in Southern Rhodesia. At one international conference, after suggesting to an American official that Zhou Enlai was going to agree to aid the Tan–Zam railway, Kaunda requested that Western countries beat China by acting first.  

33 The head of the survey team was Huang Yueping, the vice director of the Second Railway Design Institute, and team members included Jia Yi, Yu Boxi, Luo Hengfu, Liang Boren, Shen Mingde, Li Yan, Gao Qingtian, Zhou Renkun, and Zhang Xin. Accompanying them were Zhong Xianruo and Chen Bannian, two translators from the International Liaison Bureau of the Ministry of Railways. See “Zhongguo tumu gongcheng jituan,” 3.
34 Ibid., 4.
35 Ibid.
37 In November 1965, a white political party in Southern Rhodesia led by Ian Smith proclaimed its independence from Britain. The independence was not recognized by the British government or by the majority of African countries that were governed by black people. These countries boycotted Southern Rhodesia and called for British intervention. See Rothchild, “Rhodesia Rebellion and African Response,”184–196; and Nyerere, Freedom and Socialism, 116–120.
The political chaos in East Africa compelled the US government to take the railway project seriously. The United States had its own significant political and economic interests in East Africa. First, Tanzania and Zambia were influential as the frontline of national liberation struggles in the southern part of Africa. The two countries had played important roles in the struggle to promote racial equality and oppose white supremacy. Second, Zambia was then one of the largest exporters of copper in the world, and a downturn in copper exports would have a huge impact on the US, the UK, and other copper-importing countries. Third, both Tanzania and Zambia pursued a foreign policy of nonalignment, and they exerted considerable influence on issues concerning the United Nations, arms control, and Vietnam. And finally, the biggest concern of the US was Chinese infiltration through the railway construction and any Chinese impact on the two countries’ positions on international issues as well as their future development. However, from a purely financial point of view, the railway construction would not bring much return for the US.  

The entangled political and economic aspects of the Tan–Zam railway dragged US decision-makers into heated debates. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs W. Averell Harriman was in favor of US engagement in the railway construction, worrying that Chinese aid would limit the US influence within southern Africa, whereas opponents such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued that it would be an exaggeration to see the construction of the railway as a Chinese triumph in Africa. After Zhou Enlai’s visit to Tanzania in May 1965, the previous rumors about China’s engagement were further substantiated. US President Lyndon B. Johnson began to advocate collaboration between the United States and Britain in conducting survey work for the railway. Nevertheless, for several reasons, the US National Security Council did not think American engagement in the construction of the railway was the optimal plan to help solve the crisis in Southern Rhodesia. They argued that first, the construction of the railway might take more than 10 years, so that it could not be the way to solve the current crisis. Second, the current railway co-owned by Zambia and Southern Rhodesia was perhaps the best consideration that might prevent the two parties from taking an impulsive, retaliatory action. Third, the Chinese government might be incapable of providing sufficient financial support for such an enormous railway construction project. Fourth, compared with a railway, a highway might be more reasonable but less costly. As a result, the US government proposed that an American company build a highway. This plan was accepted by Tanzania and Zambia. However, the US was only trying to buy time until the end of the Southern Rhodesia crisis, and it took no substantial action to proceed.  

After China dispatched its surveying team, Britain attempted to pressure Tanzania and Zambia at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference in June 1965, in order to

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40 Ibid., Document 463, 798–799.
41 Ibid., Document 465, 800–801.
42 Ibid.
43 The construction of the highway was placed on the American agenda only in 1966. With the collaboration of other countries, the US put together a United Road Engineering Company, which began to make construction investments in March 1967. The US government contributed US $2 million, and the World Bank contributed US $10 million. However, with such a limited budget, the highway failed to solve Zambia’s transportation problems; all it did was slightly ease the pressure on Zambian trade and transportation. In the rainy season, the highway was virtually useless. See Rettman, “The Tanzam Rail Link,” 245–246.
dissuade them from accepting the Chinese aid. The British and Canadian prime ministers decided that three companies from Britain and Canada would jointly invest in constructing the railway and that two British consulting firms, with the collaboration of a Canadian aviation company, would pay for a survey of the railroad route. This decision once again ignited hopes in Zambia. In August 1965, when the Chinese team was working on a survey of the proposed Tanzanian portion of the railway, Zambian staff warned the Chinese not to cross the border into Zambia.

Zambia shunned China for several reasons. First, though Zambia, like Tanzania, pursued policies of nonalignment and antiracism, its own domestic ethnic and racial issues were more complicated than those of Tanzania. This situation attracted the Kaunda administration’s attention mainly during the consolidation of the government in the early period of the country’s independence. As a result, Kaunda worried that if he accepted aid from a Communist state, he would have to confront the entire West. Second, economically and technologically, Zambia heavily depended on its copper resources and also on the colonialist world order and the countries dominated by colonialism. Western countries were not only the major market for Zambia’s copper products, but also its main investor and developer. Third, British colonialist influence in Zambia still lingered. Britain not only controlled Zambia’s economic arteries such as the mining industry, but also supported its agents in Zambia’s partisan politics. Fourth, the relationship between China and Zambia at the time was still fragile. Zambia did not have a clear understanding about China. Although China recognized the Zambian government the day it proclaimed Zambia’s independence on October 29, 1964, and set up a Chinese embassy, Zambia was reluctant to dispatch its own ambassador to China.

Nevertheless, the independence of Southern Rhodesia forced Zambia to change its attitude towards China. In November 1965, a white political party in Southern Rhodesia led by Ian Smith proclaimed the country’s independence from British rule. Most African countries, such as Zambia, Tanzania, Ghana, Guinea, and Mali strongly requested Britain to send troops to suppress the Smith clique, but the British government refused to send ground forces. It said that economic sanctions sufficed to bring down the Smith regime. Britain prohibited Rhodesian funds from circulating in the London financial market and imposed an embargo on Rhodesia’s sugar and tobacco, its main exports. Rhodesia’s capital in London was frozen. In addition, at the United Nations, Britain advocated an international boycott of trade with Rhodesia. However, Zambia’s participation in the sanctions against Rhodesia created production and transportation problems for Zambia. Eventually, due to the rejections of South Africa, Mozambique (then a Portuguese colony), and Angola, the sanctions advocated by Britain at the United Nations were not implemented and in the end were abandoned. Western countries were indeed concerned about the expansion of a Communist country’s influence in Africa, but they were equally worried that a hard-line policy would ignite a confrontation with South Africa, and even the Portuguese

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44 Zhang Tieshan, *Youyi zhilu*, 85.
48 Rettman, “The Tanzam Rail Link,” 236.
49 Yu, *China and Tanzania*, 54.
government, and thus jeopardize Western investments and interests in Africa.  

50 These factors gradually alienated Zambia from the West.

In this context Zambia approached China. In August 1966, Kaunda sent Vice President Kamanga to visit Beijing. Three formal meetings were held between Kamanga and Zhou Enlai during this visit. In the first meeting, Kamanga did not mention the railway. At the second meeting a day later, Zhou Enlai took the initiative to steer the discussion toward the railway.  

51 Zhou Enlai told Kamanga,

As for the construction of the railway in your country, we can use the same strategy [as we used in Tanzania]: if the West is willing to build, just let them do it. If they are unable to complete it, then we can resume the construction. … Our aid will take the form of an interest-free loan with a fixed term of repayment. If there is difficulty in paying at the due date, we can postpone the deadline. If there is still difficulty, then we can further extend the due date. With regard to the construction of the Tan–Zam railway, if Your Excellency consents, then we can sign a draft agreement, which can be publicized or can be kept secret. It’s all up to you. You may sign it here if you deem necessary, but if you think it is inappropriate, you can forward the document to President Kaunda. … Our aid or loan will not come with additional political conditions or privileges.  

Kamanga expressed his gratitude, saying that he needed to consult Kaunda first, and then he would approach the Chinese ambassador to Zambia.

At the invitation of the Chinese government, President Kaunda arrived in Beijing in June 1967. On the morning of June 22, Zhou Enlai held a first formal meeting with Kaunda, who did not mention the railway. On the evening of June 23, Zhou and Kaunda had a second meeting in the Great Hall of the People. The discussion at first focused on the independence of African nations and Kaunda’s worry about the military coups in Africa; Kaunda still did not present the request for Chinese aid in building the railway. Understanding Kaunda’s reticence and the issue of his self-esteem, Zhou Enlai straightforwardly brought up the topic of railway building and asked multiple questions about it. Kaunda replied that prior to his visit to China, he had already presented his proposals to several private companies in the US, Japan, and France, and he wanted to hear the opinion of the Chinese government before he could make a final decision at a conference of the ministers of finance and transportation from Tanzania, Zambia, Kenya, and Malawi, which was to be held one month later. Zhou Enlai said that he had already talked with President Nyerere several times, that the Chinese government had promised to help with the construction, and that both Tanzania and Zambia were on China’s agenda for foreign aid. If the president could make a decision, Zhou Enlai said, China would be willing to make the investment and transport the equipment to Africa by sea. Zhou reiterated that China’s main purpose was to support the African struggles for national independence and against imperialism and colonialism, as well as to help African countries develop their national economies and consolidate their independence. Kaunda was very satisfied, saying, “I cannot ask for more. At this stage, your consent to help with our construction has fully satisfied our requirements.”  

In a subsequent meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong, Kaunda said, “I just mentioned the railway question. The Premier and I have discussed it in detail. After I return, I will

51 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu waijiaoshi yanjiushi, Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong, 503.
talk with President Nyerere and will let you know the result right away.” Mao Zedong commented, “In the future, when African nations dispel imperialism and all become independent, you can develop a railway network.” Kaunda replied, “We can only return your favor by assisting freedom fighters in others regions to help them gain independence.” Mao said, “This is not about returning favors. Countries that have won independence are obligated to help latecomers.” The talks with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai moved Kaunda deeply. On the way back to Zambia, he met with Nyerere in Tanzania, and a government delegation from Zambia was soon dispatched to Beijing to deliberate on the details of railway construction.

On August 30, 1967, vice premier Li Xiannian held a first meeting with a joint delegation from Tanzania and Zambia. Before the negotiations started, the African delegates presented to China the survey report published by Britain and Canada in August 1966 and asked China to implement the construction accordingly. With multiple years’ experience in guiding Chinese domestic railway construction, Zhou Enlai felt that the report was only a survey report and did not provide guidelines for the actual design. Zhou emphasized that since China was undertaking the foreign aid project, it should be in charge of all investigation, surveying, design, and construction. He told Li Xiannian to organize experts to carefully study the British–Canadian report and to comment on it to the friends from Tanzania and Zambia. On September 1, Chinese vice premier and minister of finance Li Xiannian, the Tanzanian minister of finance and the Zambian minister of finance signed the Agreement Concerning the Construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway on behalf of their respective governments. The agreement called for three major stages of construction. In the first stage, the Chinese government was to dispatch, at its own expense, an appropriate number of experts to conduct an initial investigation in Tanzania and Zambia. In the second stage, the Chinese government was to dispatch an appropriate number of experts and engineers to undertake a technical survey; China was to be responsible for the design based on the results of the investigation and the survey. In the third stage, based on the results of the design, the Chinese government was to dispatch the appropriate number of experts, engineers, and technicians to assist the governments of Tanzania and Zambia in the construction of the railway.

An editorial in The Nationalist, a Tanzanian newspaper, extolled China’s aid to the railway construction. The Chinese interest-free loan, it said, “was provided based on the spirit of friendship, and the agreement respects both the provider and recipients of the aid.” When Abeid Karume, the first vice president of Tanzania, addressed a meeting of the 18 leaders of the National Union of Tanganyika Workers in Zanzibar, he mentioned that when he heard the news about China’s providing the interest-free loan to help build the railway, he was very excited. He remarked that the railway would reinforce the ties between Tanzania and Zambia, boost the two countries’ economies, and greatly benefit the entire African continent. He vowed that his country would devote all its resources to the construction of this great project. The Western media’s reaction, however, was complicated. At first, the media exaggerated China’s hope of making Tanzania and Zambia a gateway for Communist expansion through railway building.
media cast doubt on China’s technical and construction expertise. After the railway construction commenced, Western countries began to complain to each other about failing to embark on the project.

IV. Conclusion

Eventually, China dispatched railway survey teams to both Tanzania and Zambia, and these teams produced the Survey and Design Report for the Tan–Zam Railway in July 1970. The report was well received by the governments of China, Tanzania, and Zambia. Between July 10 and December 1970, delegates from the three countries held another round of meetings in Beijing to sign the following three documents: (1) Agreement on the Amount of the Loan and Method of Repayment, (2) Details Concerning the Handling of Financial Issues in Implementing the Agreement on the Amount of the Loan and Method of Repayment, and (3) Minutes of the Meeting Concerning the Construction of the Tan–Zam Railway. The project officially began in October 1970, and it was completed after an arduous effort lasting five years and eight months. After transferring the railway to the Tanzanian and Zambian governments, China continued its technical cooperation with the railway administrations of the two countries at their request. Chinese aid in railway management and equipment maintenance continues to this day.

At a time when it was an underdeveloped country, China made the important decision to aid in the construction of the Tan–Zam railway. This decision meant a lot for Chinese diplomacy during the Cold War, as well as for Sino–African relations after the Cold War. The impact of China’s involvement in the railway construction had significant diplomatic, economic, and sociocultural aspects.

Diplomatically, Chinese assistance in the construction promoted the PRC’s image in the international political arena. Using the railway as a starting point, China gradually formulated its own independent and autonomous Africa policy. Although making a large zero-interest loan was a burden on the Chinese economy, China’s willingness to do so demonstrated its determination to assist the anti-imperialist, anti-colonial struggles of the people of Africa, as well as their efforts at economic reconstruction. By building this

61 “Zhou Enlai tong Tansangniya,” 12.
64 With regard to the loan amount, the Chinese government agreed that within the 10-year period from January 1, 1968 to December 31, 1977, China was to provide the governments of Tanzania and Zambia with zero-interest loans totaling 988 million Chinese yuan, to be divided equally between Tanzania and Zambia with a grace period of 15 years; within the 30-year period from January 1, 1983 to December 31, 2012, the governments of Tanzania and Zambia would repay the loan with goods that were available to the two countries and acceptable to the Chinese government, or with currencies that could be freely exchanged. The two countries were to repay 1/30 of the total amount to China each year. See Zanbiya sheji jichu ziliao huibian bianweihui, Yuanwai chengtao xiangmu sheji, 362; and Li Benshen and Huang Jinru, “Zai Tan Zan tielu,” 150.
65 This major artery of transportation begins in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in the east and ends at Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia, in the west. The railway is 1,860.5 kilometers long and has now been in use for 38 years.
66 In 2012, Li Jinzao, China’s vice minister of commerce, signed the fifteenth protocol of the tripartite agreement on technical cooperation. See “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengfu.”
so-called “Great Uhuru Railway”, 67 China won the recognition and trust of African countries. In October 1971, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing the PRC’s legitimate rights in the United Nations. The resolution was proposed by 26 countries, including Tanzania and Zambia. With the support of many African countries, the bill was passed by an overwhelming majority vote. This demonstrated the significance of African countries to Chinese diplomacy. 68 Through the railway construction, China modified its concept of the strategic position of Africa, breaking with the Cold War mentality, and incorporating its Africa policy into the context of South–South cooperation. In 1974, while meeting with visiting Zambian president, Kaunda, Mao Zedong explicitly proposed the Theory of the Three Worlds, which highlighted the importance of the Third World in the global order. 69 Explicit in this strategic outlook was the importance the Chinese government attached to its solidarity and cooperation with the Third World. During the 1970s, Chinese foreign policy shifted to oppose the hegemony of the two superpowers and thus made its own contribution to pluralization, democratization, and progress in the international community.

From an economic perspective, China lent support to the national emancipation and economic construction of Africa by assisting in the construction of the Tan–Zam railway. Tanzanian president Nyerere thought highly of the railway:

Goods are transported between Tanzania and Zambia through this railway. It also enables us to develop the underdeveloped regions in our country. I wish no one to underestimate the important role this railway continues to play for our country and all of southern Africa. 70

Zambian president Kaunda made a similar remark:

As an international route reaching the port of Dar es Salaam, the Tan–Zam railway opened a new page for our young country. It brings to us new hope, pride, and courage to face the difficulties of the past, the present, and the future. 71

During the colonial period, the long-term and sustainable production of grain was ignored, and locally grown crops were far from sufficient for the consumption of local people. Overreliance on imports had a negative impact on the livelihood of ordinary people and posed a threat to national security. The operation of the Tan–Zam railway facilitated the flourishing development of an agricultural economy along its route, and local areas changed dramatically after its completion. Wastelands and jungles were transformed into farms of rice, corn, and bananas. The railway also promoted the circulation of commodities. Besides effectively solving the problems confronting the export of copper, the Tan–Zam railway also revitalized domestic trade by speeding up the transportation of light industrial products between different localities and made travel much easier than before for the local people.

69 When meeting with Kaunda, Mao said, “I would say the US and the USSR are the First World. Those in the middle, such as Japan, Europe, Australia, and Canada are the Second World. We are the Third World.” He also stated, “In Asia, all countries belong to the Third World except Japan. All of Africa is the Third World and so is Latin America.” See Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, Mao Zedong nianpu (1949–1976), vol. 6, 520–521.
70 “Nileier zongtong.”
71 “Kawengda zai qingzhu Tan Zan.”
Finally, from a sociocultural perspective, the Chinese assistance to the railway deepened the mutual understanding between China and Africa and enhanced China’s influence in Africa. It also set a precedent for the future development of Sino–African relations. Prior to the construction of the railway, Tanzania and Zambia had very limited knowledge about China. Nyerere once said during his visit to China: “We knew little about China, and what we heard were all distorted reports.” With the progress of the railway project, Nyerere was gradually touched by China’s honesty and generosity, and his perception of China changed. Before his visit to China, Kaunda harbored many worries and suspicions, but after China agreed to provide assistance in constructing the railway, he began to call China a “reliable, all-weather friend” of Zambia as reported in the New York Times on June 20, 1967. During the process of railway construction, China emphasized the integration of modern technology with local development and engaged in nonmaterial development, including training Tanzanian and Zambian students in China, building on-site railway technology schools, educating technicians, and creating conditions to enable the two countries to operate and manage the railway independently. These measures all differed from the model of imposed modernization that the West promoted in Africa, and they played a positive role in the development of Sino–African relations, as well as in the formation of pluralized paths to modernity.

On the other hand, China’s decision to assist the Tan–Zam railway construction also had its drawbacks. From the Chinese perspective, assistance did burden the Chinese economy. In 1970, the Chinese GDP totaled 226.13 billion Chinese yuan, yet China provided a zero-interest loan of nearly 1 billion Chinese yuan for building the railway. The agreement called for a payback period of 30 years, which was renewable in case of repayment problems. Due to multiple factors, the management of the railway was not effective enough after its completion. An economic downturn in the two countries, combined with other management problems, eventually led to a situation where the financial return from the railway was insufficient to repay the loan. To address this issue, China had no choice but to conduct debt restructuring in 1993. From the perspective of the two aid recipients, in the 1990s, more channels of transportation began to open to Zambia with the improvement of the political situation in southern Africa, so Zambian goods were diverted from the Tan–Zam railway. Another problem is that the railway was under the joint management of the Tanzanian and Zambian governments, and this managerial system did not work well. In addition, since the two countries prioritized use over maintenance, equipment loss caused a deterioration in the quality and efficiency of the railway’s operation. Finally, the railway administration pursued an unrealistic welfare policy, which continues to inflate the cost of management. All these factors pushed the Tan–Zam

72 “Mao Zedong zhuxi huijian Tansangniya.”
73 The Chinese approach of independent socialist construction impressed Nyerere, and he drastically changed his perception of socialism. In early 1962, when referring to socialism, Nyerere thought that “it was only an idea.” But he changed his mind during the process of seeking aid from China, and he signed the Arusha Declaration, which advocated public ownership, socialism, and autonomy. See Tordoff and Mazrui, “The Left and Super Left,” 427–445. Also see Hoskyns, “Foreign Relations,” 459; and Yu, “China and the Third World,” 1043.
74 “Zhou Enlai huijian Tansangniya,” 12.
76 “Zhou Enlai deng tong Tansangniya,” 11.
railway to the brink of bankruptcy. These problems also illustrate a weakness in Chinese foreign aid projects, which can be barely sustainable after completion and transfer.

The construction process of the Tan–Zam railway demonstrates that the three participants, China, Tanzania, and Zambia, each had their own specific interests and goals. China’s assistance was motivated by a revolutionary desire to support Africa’s struggle against imperialism and colonialism, as well as by national-interest-based diplomatic calculations aimed at winning over allies. Tanzania and Zambia proposed to build the railway in order to solve their own diplomatic dilemmas and to pursue economic autonomy. Their shift from looking toward the West to looking toward China for help resulted from the evolution of a specific set of international relations. Cooperation among the three countries was initially reciprocal, and it provided a meaningful alternative path for developing countries striving for international status and independent development against the background of the rivalry between the two superpowers and the confrontation of the East and West camps. Given that the tripartite collaboration was based on this situational political calculation, the three counties were unable to anticipate long-term changes in the international situation nor to reasonably assess managerial issues. This weakness eventually undermined the commercial operation and sustainable development of the Tan–Zam railway.

(translated by WU Guo)

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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**Glossary**

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Li Jinzao 李金早
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Li Yan 李焱
Liang Boren 梁伯仁
Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇
Lu Zhengcao 吕正操
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