

WHAT WOULD JULIUS NYERERE THINK ABOUT THE SECOND COLD WAR?

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Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's founding father popularly known as 'Baba wa taifa' in kiSwahili (father of the nation) or simply 'Mwalimu' (teacher), was invited to speak about the state of the world after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. If the audience expected Nyerere to offer an optimistic assessment of the emergent post-Cold War world, they were mistaken. His contribution was reportedly a question, and a rather short one: "What about two global powers being agreeable to each other makes you think you will be safe?" Implicit in this question was an argument that the end of the Cold War diminished developing countries' room for manoeuvre, as they lost the ability to hedge between the US and the Soviet Union.

This year marks the centennial of the birth of Julius Nyerere, and we have also witnessed a return of great power politics that some have interpreted as a '[new scramble for Africa](#)' and '[new Cold War](#).' In this context, it is appropriate to ask: what would Mwalimu think about contemporary great power competition in Africa? More specifically, will African countries be able to take advantage of the US-China rivalry and realize their autonomous development visions?

Contemporary US-China rivalry plays out in a range of fields such as finance, digital networks, production of strategic commodities like semiconductors, and so on. In Africa, both Beijing and Washington – as well as their allies in Tokyo, Moscow, and Brussels – are competing to finance and construct infrastructure projects. Infrastructure development is a top policy priority for many African governments, and as a result of geopolitical competition, there is an [array of financing options](#) from traditional donors (e.g. World Bank), China's Belt and Road Initiative, the European Union's Global Gateway, the United States' Build Back Better World, and the [G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment](#).



Circa 1961. Nyerere carried by supporters during celebrations for Tanganyika's forthcoming independence. Photograph: Keystone/Getty. Source: [New Frame](#).

Under Nyerere's leadership, Tanzania pursued autonomous domestic developmental objectives in parallel with an anti-imperialist foreign policy. He articulated a [version of African socialism](#) called ujamaa that emphasized self-sufficiency, state-led industrialization, and the collectivization of agriculture. Importantly, traditional social relations rather than class struggle were the bedrock of ujamaa. Meanwhile, Nyerere shrewdly balanced relations among more powerful countries while he supported liberation struggles. He was a Pan-Africanist, so for him, Africa was not free if one country was still colonized.

The Tanzania Zambia Railway (TAZARA) is an example of a large-scale infrastructure project that addressed these domestic and foreign policy objectives. By linking the Zambian Copperbelt to the Dar es Salaam port, copper shipments could avoid passing through 'frontline states' to the south where they were vulnerable to harassment from the South African Defence Forces. Thus, the railway was designed to boost domestic economic growth while advancing Pan-Africanist ideals with a like-minded government in Zambia.

After Western countries declined to finance TAZARA, Nyerere turned to Beijing. TAZARA became China's first large-scale overseas

development project in Africa and a harbinger of things to come. Its cost was significant, and it remains one of China's largest overseas aid projects. Throughout the 'long 1960s', China supported governments and liberation movements across the continent that were sufficiently anti-imperialist. This support included overseas development aid in addition to military training, and [according to historian Matthew Rothwell](#), China was the primary "generative force for global revolution" throughout this period.

Beijing curtailed its revolutionary fervor after its rapprochement with the US began in the early 1970s. [Deng Xiaoping advised African leaders](#) to pursue Western development aid and embrace privatization rather than scientific socialism. Many African societies struggled through the global economic crisis in the 1970s, and by the 1980s, they had little choice but to embrace neoliberal globalization. Indeed, the debt crisis sparked by rapid interest rate hikes in the US led to a debt crisis. Countries that received emergency assistance from the International Monetary Fund were forced to deregulate and liberalize their economies.

As pundits in the North Atlantic celebrated the unrivalled supremacy enjoyed by the US and its allies in the post-Cold War era, many [African countries were impoverished as a result of structural adjustment](#). Exposing the African industry to global competition failed to make it leaner and more productive. Instead, many countries experienced 're-primarization,' as capital was invested in agriculture and resource extraction at the expense of industry. Furthermore, private-sector investors showed scant interest in African infrastructure. This led to the emergence of an '[infrastructure gap](#)' or 'deficit.' By the 2010s, the infrastructure deficit in many African countries was so acute that many policymakers considered addressing it a [prerequisite for achieving national development objectives](#). It is thus unsurprising that infrastructure finance and construction have become imperatives for African policymakers, as well as an arena of great power competition.

Tanzania is emblematic of these trends. The Tanzanian economy was wracked by turmoil in the 1970s, which was caused by exogenous factors and exacerbated by poor policymaking. Nyerere resisted structural adjustment, however the following president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi (1985-1995), ultimately reached an agreement with the IMF that proceeded throughout Benjamin Mkapa's administration (1995-2005). Tanzania's nascent manufacturing sector was decimated while investors were attracted by its resources. Like many African countries, the Tanzanian economy was buoyed by China's

insatiable demand for resources in the 2010s. This fuelled a narrative that Africa was ‘rising.’ Tanzanian president John Magufuli (2015-2021) sought to harness economic growth to re-industrialize, and massive infrastructure investments were considered a precondition.

Tanzania embraced infrastructure-led development under the leadership of Magufuli. By 2019 Egypt and South Africa were the only African countries investing more than Tanzania in infrastructure. Chinese firms had a near monopoly on Tanzanian infrastructure projects until 2017 when [Magufuli famously denounced the terms of Chinese loans](#). While Chinese firms remain central to Tanzania’s infrastructural ambitions, firms from Turkey, Egypt, South Korea, and Japan have entered the sector.

It is too early to tell whether this competition among great and regional powers benefits Tanzania. The [IMF expressed reservations about Tanzania’s infrastructure spending](#) spree and its long-term fiscal outlook. But we can begin to answer the question: what would Julius Nyerere think about the Second Cold War? He cared deeply about Tanzania, but his vision was pan-African in scope. Tanzania’s contemporary development objectives lack a pan-African vision. Some of Tanzania’s largest infrastructure such as the new standard gauge railway are transnational in scope, with plans to connect central Africa (e.g. Burundi, Rwanda, and DR Congo) to the Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam. These plans, however, are animated by a narrow economic logic. While Nyerere would most likely welcome a return to great power rivalry given the opportunity it affords developing countries to pursue autonomous policy, he would surely articulate a pan-African vision.

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