



# Tanzania and China: China–Africa Policy Signals, Substance and Suggestions

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# Executive summary

In December 2024 Tanzania's investment agency, Tanzania Invest, announced the establishment of the Tanzania Investment Centre China (Hunan) Investment Cooperation Platform in the China–Africa Deep Cooperation and Trade Cooperation Pioneer Zone in Changsha, in China's Hunan province. Domestically and in the subregion, Tanzania has a unique background in terms of its political economy. It has also made several first-in-Africa moves in collaboration with China, such as in China's Africa zone in Hunan, where it has been the first country to open an official investment centre. This signals a stronger China–Africa relationship and the potential global development importance of Tanzania's December 2024 policy announcement.

This policy insights takes a closer look at the investment centre and the 'Hunan Model' agenda in which it is anchored. It also outlines several other first-mover turning points in the political economy history of China and Tanzania, including the Tazara Railway and Tanzania's support for Beijing at the UN. This points to a forward view of China–Africa industrial and agricultural development ambition – and the alleviation of poverty and hunger. Policy and future research suggestions are offered accordingly.

## Introduction

Mainland Tanzania, known as Tanganyika at the time, gained its independence on 9 December 1961. Tanganyika had become a British mandate territory after the First World War, prior to which it was part of German East Africa.<sup>1</sup> Founding prime minister Julius Nyerere, leader of the Tanganyika African National Union party, remains a revered figure in both Tanzania and other African countries.<sup>2</sup> Among the first countries to congratulate him and to recognise the newly independent nation was the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>3</sup>

The United Republic of Tanzania would only emerge three years later when Zanzibar gained independence and formed a union with the mainland, on 26 April 1964. Zanzibar itself had passed through multiple colonial hands since the 1500s, including those of Portugal, Oman, Germany and the UK.<sup>4</sup> During these colonial iterations, Zanzibar was a trade powerhouse regionally, known colloquially as 'Clove Island' owing to the slave and spice trades.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 John S. Saul, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Tanzania", *Socialist Register* 11 (1974); K. Nsari, "Tanzania: Neo Colonialism and the Struggle for National Liberation", *Review of African Political Economy* 2, no. 4 (1975): 109–118.
  - 2 Reuters, "President Nyerere Opens Tanganyika Parliament", *British Pathé*, 2022.
  - 3 Martin Bailey, "Tanzania and China", *African Affairs* 74, no. 294 (January 1975): 39–50.
  - 4 Jan Knappert, "A Short History of Zanzibar", *Annales Aequatoria* 13 (1992): 15–37.
  - 5 Peter J. Martin, "The Zanzibar Clove Industry", *Economic Botany* (1991): 450–459.

Arrangements for the unified nation would see Tanganyika's leader, Nyerere, become Tanzania's first president and Zanzibar's leader, Abeid Karume, its first vice-president. The country's current leader, Samia Suluhu Hassan, is the first president of Tanzania to hail from Zanzibar, having assumed the presidency on 19 March 2021 following the death of president John Magufuli.<sup>6</sup>

## Tanzania became a leading advocate for pan-Africanism and various independence movements

As an early independent East and Southern African nation under Nyerere, Tanzania became a leading advocate for pan-Africanism and various independence movements. Toward that agenda the country also acted as a sanctuary for subregional activism. For example, it served as the headquarters of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa and the Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu) during their respective independence struggles.

## Tanzania's strategic coastline has an enduring political economy of development importance in the subregion given that it has eight land borders, five of which are with landlocked countries

China and Tanzania would collaborate in fostering pan-Africanism and related independence movements. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai's visit to the country in June 1965 sought to consolidate these agendas, including by deepening mutual exchanges.<sup>7</sup> A notable example of that collaboration is the construction of the Tazara Railway, which brought Zambia's copper to the port of Dar es Salaam. This circumvented obstruction from apartheid South Africa, which would otherwise have offered more proximate trade ports for Zambia.<sup>8</sup> Tanzania's strategic coastline has an enduring political economy of development importance in the subregion given that it has eight land borders, five of which are with landlocked countries – Burundi, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia (see Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

6 Aggrey Mutambo, "Tanzanian President John Magufuli Is Dead", *The EastAfrican*, March 17, 2021; Mate Tongola, "Samia Suluhu Hassan Sworn In as Tanzania's President", *The Standard*, March 19, 2021.

7 Chinese Embassy in Zambia, "China and Zambia Exchange of Letters on Emergency Humanitarian Food Assistance and China-Aid Projects", People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 30, 2024.

8 Ngila Mwase, "Zambia, the TAZARA and the Alternative Outlets to the Sea", *Transport Reviews* 7, no. 3 (1987): 191–206.

9 Chisom Michael, "Africa's Second-Largest Nation Borders Nine Countries in Strategic Position", *Business Day* (Nigeria), February 1, 2025.



**Figure 1 Map of Tanzania**



Created with Datawrapper

Under President Xi Jinping, China and Tanzania appear to have continued their frontier cooperation. For example, when Xi made his inaugural overseas tour his first stop was in Russia, followed by a visit to three African countries, with Tanzania being the first (and hence the second stop globally).<sup>10</sup> Recently, in December 2024, Tanzania became the first African country to launch an investment facilitation centre in the China–Africa Deep Cooperation and Trade Cooperation Pioneer Zone in Changsha, Hunan province.<sup>11</sup> That zone and the China–Africa Economic and Trade Exhibition, also hosted by Changsha, comprise the two pillars of China’s next trade and development push for deepening ties with Africa, an approach known as the Hunan Model.<sup>12</sup> As this policy insight shows, this new Tanzanian platform in Hunan may indicate movements and priorities in China–Africa economic ties.

<sup>10</sup> “China Expected to Invest \$1.4bn in Tanzania-Zambia Rail Line”, *African Energy*, March 31, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> “Tanzania Launches Investment Facilitation Platform in Hunan, China to Secure US\$ 3 Billion in Investments”, *Tanzania Invest*, December 14, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Johnston, “The Hunan Model: China’s Zone for the China–Africa Future” (Occasional Paper 349, South African Institute of International Affairs, July 2023).

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The policy insights surveys the China–Tanzania relationship and argues that China–Tanzania ties may indicate the direction of broader China–Africa ties. It outlines several earlier first-mover actions and other outlier moves between China and Tanzania, sheds light on the new investment facilitation centre and introduces China’s flagship Hunan Model for China–Africa economic development ties. It then explores Tanzania’s unique policymaking influence and soft power. Finally, it offers policy suggestions for Tanzania’s investment centre, for the Hunan Model and for African cooperation within the Hunan Model and beyond.

## Examples of China and Tanzania’s strategic alignment

### Support for replacing Taipei with Beijing at the UN

The civil war in China ended in October 1949 with the founding, on mainland China, of the PRC. The defeated and earlier ruling government of what had been the mainland Republic of China (ROC) fled to Taiwan. From there, the departed ROC government continued to claim ‘China’s’ permanent seat on the UN Security Council. For the leaders of the newly founded PRC, re-assuming China’s seat at the UN on behalf of Beijing was of great strategic and validation importance.

This agenda would take a few decades and would be supported in particular by many of the African countries that became independent in the 1960s. By the 1970s many newly independent African countries had joined the UN. Among them, Tanzania’s Nyerere was a proactive supporter of the PRC and opted to co-sponsor Resolution 2758. The resolution proposed recognising the PRC as ‘the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations’ (and so expel the ROC as that representative).<sup>13</sup> He also rallied other African and Non-Aligned Movement countries to support the resolution.

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<sup>13</sup> Charalampos Stamelos and Konstantinos Tsimaras, “The UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 of 1971 Recognizing the People’s Republic of China as the Legitimate Representative of the State of China”, in *China and Taiwan in Africa: The Struggle for Diplomatic Recognition and Hegemony*, ed. Sabella O. Abidde (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 101–119.

Eventually, UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 passed on 25 October 1971, recognising the PRC as the only legitimate representative of China at the UN.<sup>14</sup> Tanzania's role in helping to coordinate votes among the Global South was pivotal to the outcome, which itself was a historic moment in international relations and in international validation of the PRC.

## Construction of the Tazara Railway

Tanzania, alongside Zambia, was also a first mover in large-scale infrastructure cooperation and projects between China and Africa. The Tazara Railway connects the port city of Dar es Salaam and Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia's Central Province. It was built as a turnkey project by China between 1970 and 1975, is 1 860km long and is one of China's largest-ever foreign aid projects.<sup>15</sup> Funding came from China in the form of a CNH<sup>16</sup> 988 million (some \$500 million) interest-free loan.<sup>17</sup> It was a product of Cold War geopolitics and Africa's post-colonial development ambitions. China also provided technical support and over 50 000 workers to help build the line. More than 60 of these workers died during construction.<sup>18</sup>

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The geopolitics surrounding the line's construction derives from the fact that it was built to provide landlocked Zambia with a reliable means of engaging in international trade while bypassing the then-apartheid regimes in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides the following text to describe the regional and China–Africa significance of the line:<sup>19</sup>

Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's founding President and leader of the independence movement in the southern part of Africa, described that part of history emotionally, 'The history of TAZARA is that former President Nyerere of Tanzania and I, myself, went to the West and told them we need this railway between Tanzania and Zambia... The West rejected that proposal. They said... don't think of this. President Nyerere and I then went to see Chairman Mao, and the prime minister [Zhou Enlai]. We talked and put it to them, and they readily agreed, "we'll

14 Stamelos and Tsimaras, "The UN General Assembly Resolution 2758".

15 Rahman Nurdun, "The Evolution of China's Foreign Aid Perspective towards Africa: The Case Study of TAZARA Railway from the Cold War to the Present", *PERCEPTIONS: Journal of International Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2024): 174–194.

16 Currency code for the Chinese renminbi.

17 Nurdun, "The Evolution of China's Foreign Aid".

18 People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China Helped Us In Our Most Difficult Time – Tanzania-Zambia Railway Bears Witness to China-Africa Friendship", August 22, 2022.

19 People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China Helped Us When Help Was Most Needed", August 26, 2022.

go together to build that railway”, this came. They came as brothers and sisters, as friends, as comrades with common struggle... So you can see, the friendship is genuine. When others thought it was not necessary... we built it. What more friendship do you want to see more than that?’

**Figure 2 Tazara Railway route**



Note: see Tim Zajontz, “Tanzania and Zambia Want to Upgrade the ‘Uhuru Railway’ – But Can They?”, *The Conversation*, September 19, 2022

Created with Datawrapper

The scale and complexity of the Tazara project mean it is one of the most significant infrastructure projects in post-colonial Africa. While the Tazara has faced operational, financial and management challenges over time,<sup>20</sup> it remains a prominent symbol of China–Africa and South–South cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

20 David Burroughs, “Tazara Revenue Down in Annual Financial Results”, *International Railway Journal*, August 17, 2022.

21 Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, “President Xi Jinping Leaves Beijing for State Visits to Russia, Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of Congo and Attending the Fifth BRICS Leaders’ Meeting”, March 22, 2013.

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## Xi's first stop in Africa as president

Xi, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and chair of the Central Military Commission, has served as the seventh president of China since 2013. His first international visit in this role was made in March 2013 and consisted of four stops: Russia, Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of Congo. The stop in South Africa had a dual purpose as he participated in the fifth leaders' summit of the BRICS countries.<sup>22</sup>

This itinerary makes Tanzania the first country in the Global South that Xi visited as president. A key occasion during the visit was a speech he made at the Julius Nyerere International Convention Centre titled 'Stressing China and Africa Will Always Remain Reliable Friends and Faithful Partners'.<sup>23</sup> The emphasis in the speech was on China and Africa's being focused on realising their own development goals, and doing so through strength, unity and cooperation. He emphasised that such unity had in the past helped China and African nations to overcome adversity together. Looking forward, Xi noted that China and Africa had entered a 'fast-track' of mutual development.

## China's first political school in Africa

Consistent with Xi's first speech in the Global South being made in Tanzania, China also launched the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in February 2022. The Leadership School is located in Kibaha, west of Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania's Coastal Region.

The Leadership School is supported by the Party School of the CCP Central Committee and provides ideological training to cadres from African liberation parties, which have governed essentially uninterrupted since the fight for independence.<sup>24</sup> The six sister parties in Southern Africa with which China's Party School co-founded the Leadership School are:

- Chama Cha Mapinduzi of Tanzania;
- the ANC of South Africa;

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22 Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, "President Xi Jinping Leaves Beijing".

23 Embassy of the PRC in the United Republic of Tanzania, "Xi Jinping Delivers a Speech at the Julius Nyerere International Convention Center in Tanzania, Stressing China and Africa Will Always Remain Reliable Friends and Faithful Partners", April 12, 2013.

24 Cheng Duoyi, "Let Inter-Party Exchanges Blossom at the Nyerere Leadership Academy - Notes on Accompanying Members of the Mozambican Frente de Libertação (FMLN) Party to the Nyerere Leadership Academy 2025 Seminar for Young and Middle-Aged Cadres of the Six Sisters Parties in Southern Africa at the Nyerere Leadership Academy", PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 4, 2025.

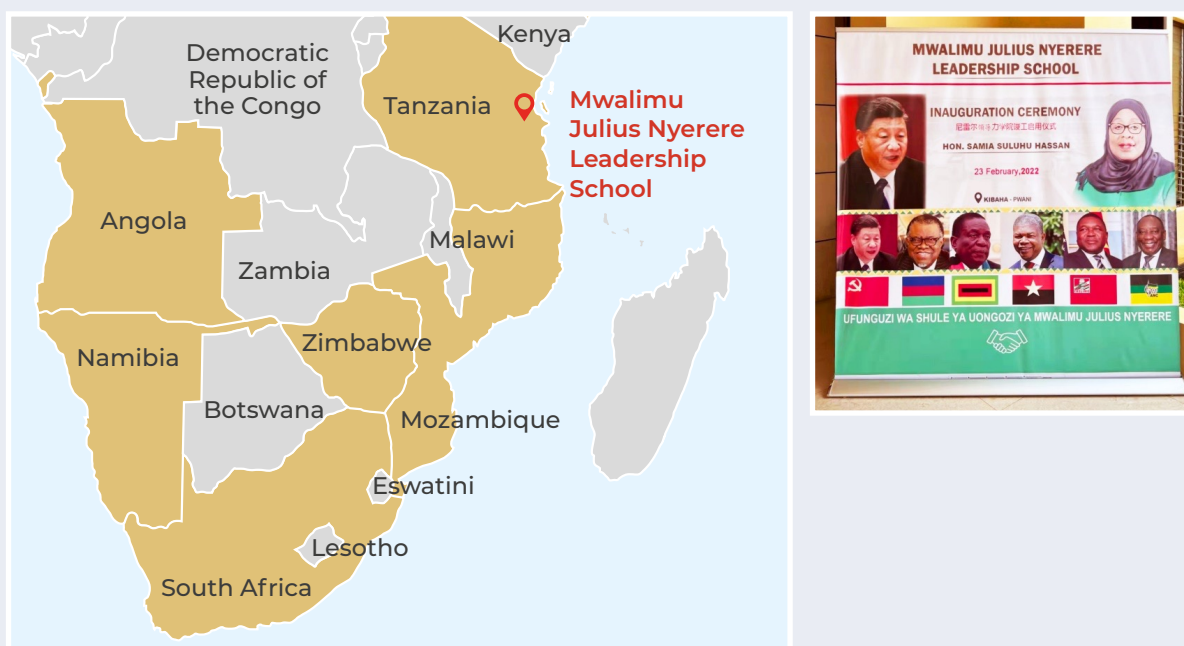


- Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique);
- the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola);
- Swapo (South-West African People's Organisation Party) of Namibia; and
- Zanu-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front).

All seven flags are included on the school's official documentation.

The Leadership School provides ideological training to cadres from African liberation parties

**Figure 3 The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School**



Tanzania may have been chosen to host the Leadership School because it acted as a sanctuary for some of these political parties when they were fighting for freedom. It is also significant that the Leadership School's collaboration partner is China's Central Party School. The Central Party School is that country's main institution for training and ideologically educating high-ranking and up-and-coming officials. Founded in 1933, it was

originally based in Jiangxi province and moved to Beijing in 1949. It is an elite leadership school that plays a major political role in shaping the ideological direction of China.

In terms of teaching and operations, the Central Party School is an active stakeholder and participant in the Leadership School's operations, and instructors include visiting CCP officials. The Chinese embassy in Tanzania and the Confucius Institute at the Centre for Chinese Studies, University of Dar es Salaam, are also active in the school's activities. Given the school's mission to foster incumbent rule by these political parties, it has been criticised by civil society and analysts for undermining democratic principles and goals.<sup>25</sup> It has also been censured for misappropriating Nyerere's legacy.<sup>26</sup>

In general, little is publicly available on the details of the Leadership School. It has been reported, however, that students study the history of the various liberation struggles, the CCP and Chinese experience and the current state of liberation parties.<sup>27</sup> Other topics are said to include party recruitment, management, administration, mass mobilisation, leadership and propaganda systems, taught with the help of CCP experts. The training fosters not only the 'people-to-people ties' agenda of China's Belt and Road Initiative (its international geo-economic strategy) but also policy coordination on international issues between the seven parties.<sup>28</sup> It may become an important area of subregional China–Africa study going forward if the school comes to embody a point of transition in this regard.

## The Comprehensive Services Cooperation Zone

Tanzania hosts one of two pilot 'centre' sites in the context of the 'two parks, two centres' initiative promoted by China's Ministry of Commerce to support Chinese firms going global and China–Africa economic ties.<sup>29</sup> Laid out at the 2021 Forum for China–Africa Cooperation hosted by Dakar, the two industrial 'parks', in Djibouti and Egypt, focus on production and value-add, while the two 'centres', in Nigeria and Tanzania, serve as

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25 Paul Nantulya, "China's First Political School in Africa", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, November 7, 2023; Greg Mills and Ray Hartley, "Power Above Rights – China's More Sinister Role in Africa", The Brenthurst Foundation, November 13, 2023; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "In Tanzania, Beijing Is Running a Training School for Authoritarianism", Axios, August 21, 2023.

26 Nantulya, "China's First Political School".

27 Nantulya, "China's First Political School".

28 Lauren A. Johnston, "The Belt and Road Initiative: What Is in It for China?", *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 40–58.

29 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, "Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022–2024)", PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 22, 2021.

regional logistics and commercial hubs. The overall initiative was included in the List of Practical Cooperation Deliverables of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation of October 2023, and the Dar es Salaam hub is a signature cooperation project between Tanzania and China.

The Dar es Salaam centre is located in Ubungo District, an area chosen for its proximity to long-distance bus networks, railways, aviation and port transportation networks. The centre is also affiliated with a bonded warehouse and logistics park at Zanzibar Airport. Developed by Weihai Huatan Supply Chain Management of Shandong Province and covering 109 700m<sup>2</sup>, it houses the East Africa Commercial and Logistics Centre, an exhibition centre area and a Huatan overseas warehouse. The goal is to establish a 'one-stop' location for cross-border business services, which means the locality also has customs, tax and commodity inspection bureaux.

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Opened in June 2025, the hub is also home to labour and financial services, as well as shipping and logistics companies, among others.<sup>30</sup> Government sources reported in May 2025 that more than 210 Chinese and African companies had already settled in the cooperation zone in Weihai, a coastal city in Shandong Province, of which more than half are Tanzanian.<sup>31</sup> Signalling Tanzania's broader regional significance, the same Weihai government source noted that the 'cooperation zone is the fulcrum for leveraging the Tanzanian market, and Tanzania is the fulcrum for leveraging the entire East African market'.<sup>32</sup> There are also plans to launch a shipping route between Weihai and Tanzania in the near future.

Such is the agenda that, within Shandong Province and China–Africa circles in China, this is known as the 'Weihai Model' for China–Africa cooperation, and Tanzania is one of the pilot points.<sup>33</sup> Core elements of the model are high-level leadership and coordination, end-to-end services to support trade and investment, cluster-based investment zones (those in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar) and brand building and marketing.

30 Weihai Huatan Supply Chain Management, "East Africa Commercial and Logistics Center", [huatansupplychain.com](http://huatansupplychain.com), accessed July 20, 2025, <http://huatansupplychain.com/en/index.php?c=about&a=detail&id=6>; Xinhua Silk Road, "Comprehensive Service Cooperation Zone of East Africa Commercial & Logistics Industrial Park in Tanzania Added in List of Practical Co-op Deliverables of BRF2023", October 25, 2023.

31 Weihai Municipal People's Government, "Going Out, Weitan Accelerates "Two-Way Flows", May 23, 2024.

32 Weihai Municipal People's Government, "Going Out".

33 Weihai Municipal People's Government, "Going Out".

# Tanzania's Investment Centre China (Hunan) Investment Cooperation Platform

Most recently, in December 2024, Tanzania Invest, the Tanzanian government's national investment agency, announced the opening of an investment liaison office in the Promotion Innovation Demonstration Park section of the China–Africa Economic and Trade Deep Cooperation Pilot Zone.<sup>34</sup> The Tanzania Investment Centre China (Hunan) Investment Cooperation Platform is the first of its kind for Africa.

The Investment Centre is meant to be a gateway for a 'concerted effort' by Tanzania to gain a share of the \$10 billion in investment in Africa that China promised at the 2024 FOCAC in Beijing.<sup>35</sup> It offers a venue that strengthens investor and trader docking and collaboration, shares resources and promotes investment in Tanzania, including by providing advice on investment policies and related matters.<sup>36</sup> The centre is the result of a three-way memorandum of understanding between Tanzania Investment, the Hunan China–Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Promotion Research Association and a Chinese pharmaceutical company with production facilities in Nigeria, Hunan Erkang Pharmaceutical.<sup>37</sup> The Hunan China–Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Promotion Research Association reported from the launch that Erkang Pharmaceutical would tap the Tanzanian market and work with other Chinese companies 'overseas in groups'.<sup>38</sup> This points to pathways through which China seeks to galvanise industrial scale and clusters in its emerging approach to investing in Africa's industrialisation.

The launch of the Investment Centre could signal wider commitment to a much bigger China-led China–Africa agenda centred on Hunan province

The launch of the Investment Centre could signal wider commitment to a much bigger China-led China–Africa agenda centred on Hunan province since 2018 (the start of the first US–China trade war).<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, this would echo events in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when, following in Tanzania's footsteps, several African countries

34 "Tanzania Launches Investment Facilitation".

35 "Tanzania Launches Investment Facilitation".

36 "Hunan Province Deepens Cooperation with African Countries to Promote the Development of China-Africa Economic and Trade Relations, *People's Daily Online*, December 14, 2024.

37 "Tanzania Investment Centre China (Hunan) Investment Cooperation Platform Launched", *People's Daily Online*, Hunan Channel, December 14, 2024.

38 "China-Africa Technical Measures to Trade Research and Evaluation Base (Changsha) Rated as 'Excellent' Nationwide", *Hunan Today*, February 23, 2025.

39 Lauren A. Johnston, "The 'Hunan Model': From 'African Shenzhen' to China's 'Africa Shenzhen'" (Paper, SSRN, January 6, 2025).

supported Beijing's UN representation campaign and welcomed large-scale Chinese-led infrastructure projects. This history may signal that Tanzania's first-mover investment platform in Hunan Province is of relevance not only to the future of China–Africa economic relations but also to shaping China's Hunan Model.

## Tanzania's Hunan Investment Centre: Why Hunan and what is the Hunan Model?

### Why Hunan?

When the first trade war between the US and China began, Xi, in his October 2018 speech at FOCAC, promised that China would launch an Africa-focused trade exhibition. The first such exhibition – the China–Africa Economic and Trade Expo (CAETE) – was held in June 2019, in Changsha, the capital of Hunan. It has been held biennially there since, including online during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup>

This policy insight argues that Hunan has been selected as China's hub for promoting elevated economic ties with Africa for reasons of both domestic political economy and growth and development complementarity.<sup>41</sup> The word 'Hunan' translates to 'south of the lake', referring to Dongting Lake in Hunan's north-east that is fed by the Yangtze-bound Xiang River. The city of Changsha has a long history of prosperity and settlement thanks to its capacity to supply China's rice and fresh-water fish markets. The province retains a central role as a food basket, with the production of vegetables, tea, fruit, grains, fish and pork. At the same time, it is home to innovative cultivation, harvesting and processing technologies, underlining its potential to support agricultural development in Africa.<sup>42</sup>

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Moreover, Hunan is also a hub for world-class construction and transportation industries, including firms such as Sany Heavy Industry, a multinational giant in heavy industry equipment; BYD Changsha, a leading Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer; and CRRC

40 Lauren A. Johnston, "China's 'Hunan Model' For Realising China-Africa Food Security", *Welthungerhilfe*, October 2023.

41 Johnston, "'Hunan Model': From 'African Shenzhen'".

42 Lauren Johnston, "The Hunan Model: China's Zone for the China–Africa Future" (Occasional Paper 349, SAIIA, August 23, 2023).



Zhuzhou Locomotive, an electric rail transportation multinational.<sup>43</sup> China's Hunan Model for Africa appears to be built upon the complementarity of its industries with Africa's current development needs and prospects. In addition, the province is home to specialist research and training clusters, including the National University of Defence Technology, the Central South University (formerly the Central South Institute of Mining and Metallurgy) and the comprehensive Xiangtan and Hunan universities.<sup>44</sup>

## Hunan province – like Tanzania – is steeped in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberation movements

Importantly, Hunan province – like Tanzania – is steeped in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberation movements. The CCP's roots derive from pre-World War 2 protests when Changsha was a treaty port serving Western and Japanese interests. Relatedly, Mao Zedong, founding father of the PRC, was a native of Hunan, as were many other leaders of the CCP.<sup>45</sup>

In the China–Africa global development context, Hunan, moreover, is the province China used to solve the nation's hunger challenges and where Xi launched the successful 'precision poverty alleviation' programme that underpinned the end of absolute poverty in the country in 2013.<sup>46</sup>

What then are the more technical specifics of the Hunan Model, and what does it mean that Tanzania has launched an investment platform there?

## What is the Hunan Model?

The Hunan Model aims to support the goals of the 2035 Vision for China–Africa Cooperation, as well as of China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>47</sup> In 2022 the vice-governor of Hunan, Li Dianxun, emphasised that the province was becoming a new window for local economic and trade cooperation with Africa.<sup>48</sup> For Africa this means elevated support

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43 Johnston, "China's 'Hunan Model' for Realising".

44 Johnston, "'Hunan Model': From 'African Shenzhen'".

45 Johnston, "The Hunan Model".

46 Xinhua, "The Global Significance of China's Poverty Alleviation", PRC, State Council Information Office, December 9, 2024.

47 See FOCAC, "China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035", December 10, 2021; Xinhua News Agency, "[Explainer: Hunan a Rising Test Field for China-Africa Cooperation](#)", Belt and Road Portal, June 28, 2023. The 2035 Vision for China–Africa Cooperation is a framework aimed at realising high-quality, sustainable and inclusive development across areas such as trade, industrialisation, infrastructure, green growth and peace and security, by 2035.

48 Hunan Provincial People's Government Web Portal, "[Li Dianxun attended China \(Hunan\)-Africa Economic and Trade Co-operation Matchmaking Meeting and Promotion of China-Africa Economic and Trade Deep Co-operation Pioneer Zone](#)", *Hunan News*, July 29, 2022.

for the African Continental Free Trade Area agenda and African development via the Hunan Model's goals.<sup>49</sup>

- create a new window for local cooperation with Africa;
- focus on key links and explore new paths for sustainable development;
- expand bilateral trade and build a new platform for business distribution; and
- deepen interconnection and expand new channels for international logistics.

## The Hunan Model aims to support the goals of the 2035 Vision for China–Africa Cooperation, as well as of China's Belt and Road Initiative

The delivery of those goals is focused on two flagship platforms for China's economic ties with African nations. The first is the CAETE that Xi promised at the 2018 FOCAC. The second is the China–Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Pilot Zone. Both are centred in Changsha.

The CAETE is both a permanent trade exhibition hall in Changsha and a biennial trade fair.<sup>50</sup> More recently, there have been a series of trade promotion events in Kenya and Nigeria.<sup>51</sup> The platform forges new business partnerships with speed and logistical ease and adopts themes of interest and priority for each event.

The China–Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Pilot Zone focuses on trade and investment bottlenecks.<sup>52</sup> With a goal of expanding both investment and trade ties, it has various initiatives and clusters that seek to overcome hurdles and study China–Africa economic relations over time. Examples include initiatives focused on currency-related issues and finance, marketing and law, digital technology challenges, language translation, technology standards, and technical and vocational skills training.<sup>53</sup>

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49 PRC, Ministry of Commerce, "Ministry of Commerce Holds Press Conference on the China-Africa Deep Economic and Trade Cooperation Pioneer Zone", January 12, 2024.

50 China–Africa Economic and Trade Expo, "The Fourth China–Africa Economic and Trade Expo", accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.caetexpo.org.cn/>.

51 Johnston, "Unpacking China's."

52 Johnston, "The Hunan Model".

53 Johnston, "The Hunan Model".

Also included are five industrial clusters that target Hunan's industrial strengths and Africa's development needs:<sup>54</sup>

- Changsha China–Africa Construction Machinery Industry Cluster;
- Xiangtan China–Africa Mining Machinery Industry Cluster;
- Shaoyang China–Africa Economic and Trade Industry Cluster;
- Liuyang China–Africa Economic and Trade Industry Cluster; and
- Hunan Precision Metals Deep Processing Cluster.

These point to the industrial development focus of the zone and the emphasis on industries of relevance to African countries, such as construction and metal processing.

**Hunan has taken the lead in promoting and processing China's 'green lanes' to facilitate African agricultural exports**

The zone is aimed at directly unlocking trade in terms of building logistical channels for elevated trade with Africa. In this way, Hunan has taken the lead in promoting and processing China's 'green lanes' to facilitate African agricultural exports. By doing so, China is not only seeking to foster rural development in African countries but also working to diversify its sources of agricultural products affected by recent trade wars. These include soybeans (with Tanzania a new source) and seafood products from Kenya and other countries (lobster, for example, is a source of Australia–China trade tensions).<sup>55</sup>

## Tanzanian policymaking and soft power platforms

Tanzania's unique history as a liberation supporter and coalescer of non-aligned countries, and of China's Hunan Model agenda for Africa, helps to explain why it is the first African country to open an investment platform in the Hunan zone. Moreover, Tanzania is uniquely placed to impact both East and Southern African economic policy.<sup>56</sup> It is a founding member of the East African Community (EAC), alongside Kenya and Uganda,

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<sup>54</sup> Johnston, "The Hunan Model".

<sup>55</sup> Johnston, "From 'African Shenzhen'"; Johnston, "The Hunan Model: China's Zone".

<sup>56</sup> East African Community, "[The Democratic Republic of the Congo Joins EAC as Its 7th Member](#)", Press Release, March 29, 2022.

and hosts its headquarters in Arusha. By 2025, additional members included Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Somalia and South Sudan.<sup>57</sup> The EAC focuses on regional integration, growth and development and political cooperation among member states. Discussion areas include freedom of movement of citizens within the EAC and policies for expanded regional integration and development.<sup>58</sup>

Tanzania is also a founding member of SADC, based in Gaborone, Botswana.<sup>59</sup> Previously known as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference, it was founded in 1992. The other founding members are Angola, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Eswatini, Zambia and Zimbabwe. More members have joined SADC since then, including the DRC, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles.<sup>60</sup> SADC promotes regional infrastructure developments, food security, education and additional policy alignment, and is sometimes also active in peace and security.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that Tanzania is a founding member of both the EAC and SADC highlights its unique cross-regional influence in an economic policy context

The fact that Tanzania is a founding member of both the EAC and SADC (the only other country that is a member of both is the DRC) highlights its unique cross-regional influence in an economic policy context. This implicitly charges Tanzania with the delicate task of ensuring the agendas of the two regions are congruent. It also hinders regional integration as a member of multiple regional economic communities. Beyond its activities in the subregion and in entities such as the AU and UN, Tanzania is also a key western Indian Ocean node and member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.<sup>62</sup>

A final element in Tanzania's soft power is the role of the Kiswahili language. Kiswahili derives from the East African coast, especially in today's Tanzania and Kenya. Tanzania is often recognised as the linguistic heartland of Kiswahili, the Zanzibar Archipelago in particular.<sup>63</sup> This links to the latter's historic role as a trade-related melting pot of languages, cultures and ethnicities. Today, Kiswahili is used to varying extents in Burundi, Comoros, the DRC, Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda. It is also the only native African language used across borders on the continent that is also an official language

57 EAC, "Overview of EAC", accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.eac.int/overview-of-eac>.

58 EAC, "Overview of EAC".

59 AU, "Southern African Development Community (SADC)", accessed July 9, 2025, <https://au.int/en/recs/sadc>.

60 SADC, "History and Treaty", accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.sadc.int/pages/history-and-treaty>

61 SADC, "History and Treaty".

62 Indian Ocean Rim Association, "Member States", accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.iora.int/member-states>.

63 Francis N. Njubi, "Remapping Kiswahili: A Political Geography of Language, Identity and Africanity", *African Studies in Geography from Below*, eds Michel Ben Arrous and Lazare Ki-Zerbo (Codesria, 2009), 105–130.

of the AU.<sup>64</sup> This may explain why at least six universities in China – including the Beijing Foreign Studies University – offer a Kiswahili language major.<sup>65</sup>

A final element in Tanzania's soft power is the role of the Kiswahili language

Tanzania is thus relatively, if not absolutely, well placed to nurture and shape cross-regional economic policymaking in East and Southern Africa (two of the continent's more advanced economic regions). It is also able to shape the language of cultural and people-to-people ties and communication.

## Tanzania's first-mover Hunan Province Investment Centre: Policy suggestions

Tanzania's decision to become the first country in Africa to open an investment facilitation platform in Hunan is significant. The bigger backdrop of rising global tensions and fragmentation adds to its prospective significance. In that context and recognising that Tanzania is not new to such a precedent-setting role, some suggestions are offered to make the new Investment Facilitation Platform a success for Tanzania, for Africa and for China–Africa relations.

- Foster collaboration between African universities and think tanks that can serve as researchers and advisers for African interests in the context of the Hunan Model agenda. The Hunan Model itself has an official Chinese economic research network that undertakes requested and supportive research on trade and investment trends, policy effectiveness, standard impacts, etc. In the context of the Tanzanian Investment Platform, such an initiative could, for example, have an EAC or SADC member country institutional focus.
- Encourage African business communities to sponsor research and dissemination around institutional arrangements in China and East Asia that have supported industrialisation and development. The goal would be to ensure that African businesses and policymakers are empowered to set up institutional and business relationships, for example joint-venture enterprises for a fixed period before default to local ownership, as was the case in East Asia.

64 AU, "AU Languages", accessed July 9, 2025, <https://au.int/en/about/languages>.

65 Dativa Minja, "Six Varsities Establish Faculty of Kiswahili in China", *Daily News*, 20 April 2024.



- Improve CAETE. CAETE is maturing, and the biennial (and expanded) expo was held in Changsha in June 2025. African regional organisations, or Tanzania in the lead, could undertake an official review of its progress, noting gaps and suggestions on how it is serving Chinese business versus African business needs, and how it could be improved accordingly.
- Review the Hunan Model. Given the Hunan Model's emphasis on local currency-based trade and the expansion of the role of the renminbi in China–Africa trade, Tanzania could lead a related review, together with the African Export Import Bank for example, to identify optimal currency-related policy shifts.
- Evaluate the adoption of Chinese industrial standards, including in transportation (rail and car), port standards and other industry standards. In the absence of proactive and advance evaluation, local standards adoption could easily become a default of trade partner standards. It may be useful to have a related African strategy for industry standards, possibly emerging via a Hunan Model or in China–Africa economic relations in general.
- Tanzania's Investment Centre in Hunan and Tanzania itself should stay strategically abreast of the Weihai Model agenda and evolution, ensuring that this too is shaped not only in Tanzania's long-run interests but also in China–Africa development interests, given the country's implicit leadership role in this regard.

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## Cover image

Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan arrives at Beijing Capital International Airport ahead of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) on September 3, 2024 in Beijing, China (Andres Martinez Casares via Getty Images)

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