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THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE FATE OF PRESIDENTIAL MEGA INFRASTRUCTURES IN AFRICA

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Introduction

Sino-African relations are not new (Snow 1988). But from 2000 onward, following the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), these relations became institutionalized and soared so rapidly that China became Africa's largest partner in many domains. Among these domains, infrastructure, which has long been an important component of China's presence on the continent since the Mao era, is of particular importance.

In this context, the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, adds up as a new investment mechanism in infrastructure development on the continent. In China's current foreign policy, the importance of the BRI is undeniable, whether due to its political or economic character (Johnston 2016; Visentini 2014; Bhattacharya 2016; Pautasso 2016). The BRI had also become central in the Sino-African cooperation agenda, overlapping FOCAC and becoming a joint commitment between the African and Chinese parties (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 2015). In the first two years, the African continent was still secondary to the BRI, with only six countries among the first to join the initiative. As of 2015, the initiative gains strength, and by 2022 approximately 46 countries on the continent have signed memoranda of understanding (Addaney 2021;

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Breuer 2017). Therefore, most African countries have endorsed the BRI very enthusiastically.

Because most of the literature on China-Africa relations adopts either a positive or negative view (Gazibo 2022), BRI projects tend to be analysed with the same lenses. The positive perspective on China-Africa relations (for example Li 2022) consider that it is a win-win relation, especially given the gap between the demand on the African side and the opportunities of funding provided by the West. Indeed, by 2017, Beijing had built in Africa around 6,200 km of railways, 6,500 km of highways, 20 seaports, 20 bridges, more than 80 power plants, more than 200 schools and 80 stadiums, in addition to several special economic zones, industrial parks, among others (Aiping and Zhan 2018; Krukowska 2016). On the other side, many sceptics point out that the BRI is just another chapter in Africa's longstanding history of exploitation and useless and white elephant projects. Both perspectives put the emphasis on the external aspect of the relations and therefore, pay little attention to several other variables among which the variety of situations and the domestic factors within African countries that contribute to shaping their relations with China.

This article adopts a more nuanced perspective by putting the emphasis on African agency. In fact, despite this overwhelming positive trend and the obvious need of investment, some countries have gone against the wave by halting or putting an end to some BRI projects. One case is Sierra Leone, which canceled the construction of the Mamamah Airport in 2018, and another is Tanzania, which suspended the construction of the Port of Bagamoyo in 2019. These two cases are particularly interesting because of the scope of the projects and the longstanding relations with China. Tanzania for example, along with Zambia, has benefited from the 1860 km TAN-ZAM railway back in 1975 (Snow 1988, 154). The question therefore is why such a country (as well as Sierra Leone) interrupts a BRI project carried out by such an old partner. In the search for an explanation of the reasons that led to these interruptions, we found that these two projects share the common characteristics of being very ambitious in terms of size and cost; of having been decided discretionary by the sitting president and at the same time, of being not so useful or profitable. In these projects, the political factor becomes more decisive than the economic one, although the latter is the official justification. Thus, we verify that the dynamics of domestic politics do have an influence on whether these agreements are maintained.

The article is organized as follows: part 1 presents the conceptual framework to understand why these projects have been abandoned. We suggest the concept of *presidential megaprojects* which comes out of the adaptation of the idea of *white elephant* projects used in the infrastructure literature to the literature on neopatrimonialism. Part 2 presents a brief overview of how BRI projects are framed in order to understand both why they can be decided on a personal basis by a president and interrupted by another. Part 3 presents the case studies, and the conclusion summarizes our main findings.

Neopatrimonialism, White Elephants and Presidential Megaprojects

In this article, we propose the concept of *presidential megaprojects*, which refers first to the idea of *white elephant*, "a metaphor used to describe an object, construction project, scheme, business venture, facility, etc. considered expensive but without equivalent utility or value relative to its capital (acquisition) and/or operational (maintenance) costs"[3].

However, the expression *White elephant* itself does not capture what is specific to the projects we study in this article. Although this expression is mostly used in the infrastructure literature, it is also applied to new and not yet clearly understood projects and mechanisms such as the financing of the energy transition or carbon market in the developed world (Theys 2016). *White elephants* are maybe more widespread in Africa, which has a long history of costly and useless infrastructures, built especially in the first 3 decades after the independences. The most known are probably the *Basilica of Our Lady of Peace* built in Côte d'Ivoire in the village of the first president of Côte d'Ivoire, far from the densely populated areas like Abidjan; or the *Hassan II Mosque* in Casablanca (Elleh 2002).

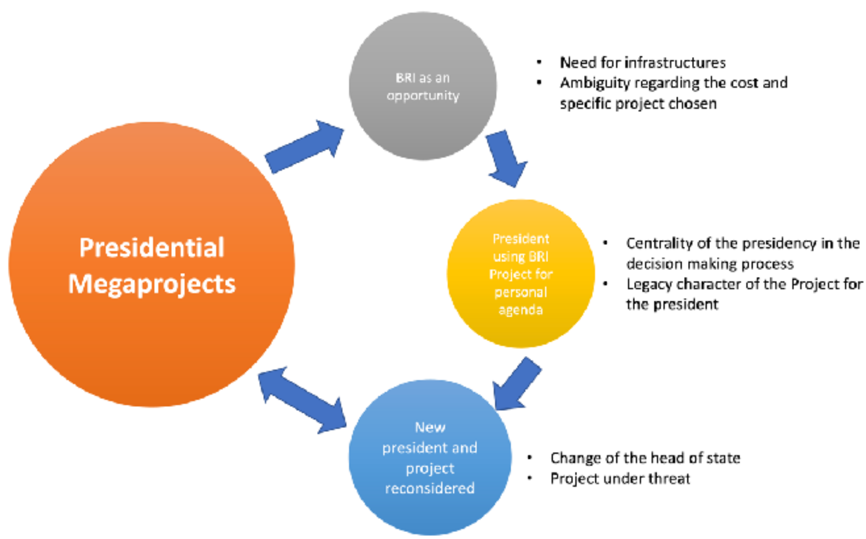
To better understand the projects studied here and their fate, it is necessary to see the idea of wide white elephants in the context of neopatrimonial politics which is not specific to Africa whatsoever (Bach and Gazibo 2011), but nonetheless deeply entrenched in the continent. Neopatrimonial governance has many characteristics such as the confusion between public and private resources or the pervasiveness of corruption. But in the cases studied here, the most consequential aspects are the weakening of institutions, *big man* rule and the arbitrary nature of decision-making processes (Medard 1991). These have important implications in terms of public policy. One is that decisions are made not necessarily based on bureaucratic and technical advice, but on political considerations. Another is the overwhelming domination of the Executive, and especially the President, who is unlikely to involve the

3 Available in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_elephant, consulted on March 9, 2023.

parliament or the civil society in decision-making processes.

This brings us to the concept of presidential megaprojects. By encompassing the idea of white elephants and the characteristics of neopatrimonial rules, it provides a framework that improves our understanding of the growing complexity of Sino-African relations and the impact of African domestic political dynamics on the evolution of this cooperation. As Bratton and van de Walle (1997, 84) rightly warned, in a neopatrimonial system, “power is so concentrated that the disposition of the regime is synonymous with the personal fate of the supreme ruler”. Because the projects studied in this article are the result of the personal decision of the sitting Presidents who devise them without broad technical and political consultation for sociopolitical and personal purposes, they lack political consensus and legitimacy and are vulnerable in the event of a political change.

Figure 1: Presidential Megaprojets



Source: The authors

Technical Aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative and Projects

For Africa, the Belt and Road represents a shift in emphasis in Sino-African relations: the resource-swapping trade of the 2000s loses ground to connectivity and industrial cooperation and the promise of investments in large infrastructure projects (Johnston 2016; Vieira 2019). Some projects overlap with planned regional projects (as was the case with the Port of Lamu-South Sudan-Ethiopia transport corridor) and/or are multi-country (case of the Ethiopia-Djibouti railroad, delivered in 2017) (Breuer 2017). The BRI, in this sense, intersects with African regional ambitions, among them Agenda 2063 and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). Therefore, it is an opportunity for African countries and leaders to operationalize their national and regional strategies (Chen 2018; Lisinge 2020, Gazibo 2022).

Moreover, it is important to note that, in need of financing to develop infrastructure, Africa finds in China a partner with the interest and capacity to mobilize the necessary resources. In 2018 the African Development Bank estimates that the need for investment and maintenance stands at $130 - $170 billion a year (African Development Bank 2018). Crucial sectors for the development of African countries, neglected by traditional partners, have allowed China to find room to invest in Africa. Chinese projects are less bureaucratic, faster, and cheaper and in return, Africa provides the resources necessary for its domestic demand - in a *resource-for-infrastructure* model (Cheru and Obi 2010; Johnston 2016; Lisinge 2020).

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global multibillion endeavor which focuses mainly on Africa, Asia, and Europe and, according to the Chinese government, ambitions to achieve "policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties". The Initiative has proven to be versatile, as it is easy to label the projects of many participating countries as "BRI"[4], which encourages their adherence. Because it is a broad and flexible initiative, it is difficult to define precisely when a project does or does not belong to it[5]. The problem with this is that there is no official centralized data collection and no rigorous synchronized dissemination, for example, between policy statements and development bank communiqués and reports (Hurley, Morris, and Portelance 2018).

4 BRI projects begin with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). MoUs are documents signed bilaterally at the government level. Although there is no official database, in 2019 the Chinese government published "The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects" presenting data showing that 173 cooperation agreements have been signed with 125 countries and 29 international organizations (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative 2019).

5 There is no general constitution treaty, no adhesion protocols, and few formal international law mechanisms exist (Wang 2019 cited in Martinico 2020).

The projects start with a less formal approach that allows for an individualized and contextualized agreement between China and the investment recipient country. From the initial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), a "cascading system" is created, generating declarations and documents and "a legally hybrid jungle" (Martinico 2020, 133). Ultimately, while important to the implementation of the BRI, these documents are not legally binding, making it easier to suspend and cancel them.

In addition to the MoUs, the countries involved sign performance agreements, which are secondary agreements, such as contracts. The secondary agreements concern the implementation of the project, dealing with public-private partnerships and financing - in general. They are hard law agreements, which are more complex and long-term (Wang 2021).

To be classified under the BRI in this research, a project must comply with two criteria, namely (i) the signing of the MoU between the country and China took place after 2013; and (ii) they are connectivity and logistics infrastructure projects. The projects discussed in this work fall within this context, even though the idea for the developments appears before the official launch of the BRI. However, despite the general positive trend, these projects have been interrupted. The two cases were at the stage of secondary agreements: the Mamamah airport project in Sierra Leone was beginning to be implemented, which implied the signing of the binding agreement, and the Bagamoyo Port stalled in negotiations on the terms of the investment, construction, and operation of the port. Both interruptions happened after the President who initiated them left office. What is also interesting is that in one case (Tanzania), the new President who suspended the project had come from the same party as his predecessor while in the other (Sierra Leone), the alternation took place between two Presidents coming from two different parties. This difference is important because it means that the reason for the interruption is not ideological. Rather, the reason seems to be idiosyncratic.

In general, there is constant secrecy about agreements between African countries and China. It is also not common in recipient countries to declare the details of the project; to overcome this, we develop the case studies in two stages: (i) pre-agreement analysis, with the collection and analysis of project information in the planning and signing phase of the MoUs and (ii) post-agreement analysis, with the collection and analysis of information on the evolution of the agreements.

Case Studies: Belt and Road Projects Interruption in Tanzania and Sierra Leone

The BRI projects in these two countries are different in nature (port vs. airport), but they share many similarities, beginning with the context for the expected start of construction in both countries. In Sierra Leone, the symbolic “foundation stone” was laid a few days before the election, and in Tanzania two months before the election - which put the projects at the center of the electoral debate. Another similarity between the projects is their centrality to the government’s development agenda. They are *presidential megaprojects*, with strong political appeal; on the one hand, the new “state of the art” airport that would be named after Koroma, and on the other, the mega port of President Kikwete’s hometown.

Another similarity between the projects is that both were intended to displace existing (and reformable) infrastructure. Building from scratch was a political choice of the governments; this, coupled with the domestic context, is a source of weakness precisely because of the legacy factor: these projects are more vulnerable to changes in domestic politics. Interruptions, in this context, occur shortly after changes in the head of state; with the change in political will to advance projects, as well as new government priorities. Thus, Mamamah was cancelled in 2018 and Bagamoyo entered a succession of renegotiations, resulting in the suspension of the project after 2016.

The Tanzanian Case

We examine the Bagamoyo port case in this section, which was suspended indefinitely in 2019. The partnerships between China and Tanzania are primarily commercial now, but Tanzania has historically been a significant political ally of China on the continent. Despite not being the focus of Chinese investment, Tanzania’s infrastructure industry has exploded recently, making up roughly 15% of the country’s GDP in 2016. The Magufuli Government (December 2015 to March 2021) has committed a sizeable portion of its budget to infrastructure development despite the nation’s budgetary difficulties. To consolidate the Initiative, the government has sought finance from both established and new partners (Kim and Tuki 2018), concomitant with China increasing the number of MoUs under the BRI.

Tanzania is presenting itself, not just for China, but for other nations, as a candidate to attract more and more investments in connectivity and logistics infrastructure due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean and its role as the main gateway for several surrounding nations without access to the sea. Considering this trend, the government of Jakaya Kikwete (December

2005 to November 2015) conceived the Bagamoyo project and found in the Chinese partners the willingness to invest in the Port and Special Economic Zone project in Bagamoyo, the president's hometown (Makundi, Huyse, and Develtere 2017).

Bagamoyo's project design

The idea for the new Bagamoyo Port emerged in 2007 in a study funded by the World Bank (Hönke 2018). This study indicated the difficulties faced by the port of Dar es Salaam[6] eand possible solutions to the issue. Dar's physical expansion capacity is limited and, as a result, its inefficiency has cost the country and its neighbors about US$2.6 billion (Kim and Tukic 2018). In this context, the government chose to build an additional new port at Mbegani in the Bagamoyo region (Ministry of Industry and Trade 2011; Kim and Tukic 2018).

Making the area a regional marine hub was the goal of the proposed port, which would be among the largest in all of Africa. The port is a component of a broader proposal that also entails the development of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which was motivated by the industrial complexes that were built in coastal areas like Dubai and Shenzhen. The Bagamoyo SEZ includes a canal, a port construction, a logistics park, and an industrial free zone (Shaw, Botes, and Buck 2018; Ministry of Industry and Trade 2011).

Considered by the Kikwete government to be the centerpiece of the country's industrialization in the 21st century, the Bagamoyo SEZ, located 60 km north of Dar (see figure 2) and it was expected to overtake Dar in cargo volume by 2020 (Ministry of Industry and Trade 2011).

Figure 2 – Localization of the Tanzanian ports

6 Dar responds for 95% of Tanzania's maritime traffic and is responsible for shipping production from Zambia, Malawi and Burundi and a large share of goods from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. In 2011, according to information disclosed in the Integrated Industrial Development Strategy 2025, demand for cargo handling have been increasing by 13.1 percent per year (Ministry of Industry and Trade 2011).

Source: BBC (2015)[7]

The memorandum of understanding between the governments for the development of the project was signed in early 2013, during Xi Jinping's visit to the country. This opportunity marked Tanzania's entry into the Belt and Road Initiative. This represents a shift in China-Tanzania relations, as since 2006, cooperation between the two has been primarily focused on agriculture (Cabestan and Chaponnière 2016). The Bagamoyo port project, with an estimated US$10 billion budget, has been intended to be developed as a public-private partnership (PPP), at little or no expense to the government. Additionally, several advantages for SEZ investors have been disclosed, including a tax exemption for 10 years and an automatic visa quota for five foreign workers with specific skills (The World Bank 2018; The East African 2013).

The construction was intended to begin in 2014, but the opposition was successful in delaying it. However, the project gained momentum after the Oman State General Reserve Fund (SGRF) and China Merchants Ports (CMPorts) signed a development deal in October 2014, bringing the Arab nation into the project (Cabestan and Chaponnière 2016). At that time, the date set for the start of construction was July 1st, 2015.

Bagamoyo after the elections

7 Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34554524

The election of John Magufuli in 2015, whose priority was the fight against corruption, resulted in some adjustments in the ties with China, albeit indirectly[8]. Additionally, despite belonging to the same party, the new administration didn't prioritize Bagamoyo as much as its predecessor did.

Due to concerns and criticism regarding the port project's construction, particularly in relation to its size and location, away from the new gas deposits, the beginning of its construction has been postponed once more and it was reported that construction would not begin until after the elections, scheduled for October (Honan and Ng'wanakilala 2015). Yet, during the election process, construction began, marked by the speech in which Kikwte declared that the work would be an "industrial revolution" for the country (Global Construction Review 2015; Daily News Reporter 2015; The East African 2015).

The project's first setback under the new administration occurred in January 2016, when it was put on hold for additional research for a period of six months. The Magufuli administration had also indicated that it would concentrate on modernizing the port of Dar es Salaam, with funding previously authorized by the World Bank and coming from the Bank of the United Kingdom, and TradeMark East Africa Bank, totaling US$596 million. It is important to keep in mind that the opposition had condemned the project during the elections as a waste of public money and for not consulting parliament beforehand (Hönke and Cuesta-Fernandez 2018; The Citizen 2015; The East African 2016). Thus, the suspension has also become politically strategic.

The Magufuli administration had not completely ruled out the Bagamoyo SEZ (including the port). The project's progress (although delayed) was briefly described in the Government's Five-Year Plan, which was unveiled in June 2016. It should be emphasized that the new port in Bagamoyo is still seen in that document as a crucial project for the development of Tanzania's Central Corridor. Nevertheless, the commencement of construction has once again been delayed.

The end of the chapter of Bagamoyo (for now)

AAfter more delays, the Government of Tanzania was prepared to negotiate a revised investment proposal made by CMPorts and SGRF of Oman in June 2017 in accordance with the current government policies for

8 One example is the limitation of external travel for government officials, which consequently led to a reduction in employee training in China. In addition, the President was absent from the 2015 and 2018 FOCAC summits, sending considerably smaller delegations than in previous years (Makundi, Huyse, and Develtere 2017; Kim and Tukiİ 2018).

private sector development investments (Ministry of Finance and Planning 2018). The project would begin operating between 2020 and 2021 and be finished by 2022, according to an announcement made by the Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment in late 2017 (Hönke 2018; The Citizen 2017a; 2017b).

As of 2018, there hasn't been any work on the port project. In late 2018, during the FOCAC Summit in Beijing, ironically the Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa stated the nation's intention in increasing its participation in the BRI (Xinhua 2018). The Initiative's first project in the nation was precisely Bagamoyo and it was never started. Majaliwa claimed that throughout the conversations, the administration remained interested in talking about the project, which would be crucial in assisting Tanzania's economic development (Machira 2018). Despite the optimistic atmosphere, the negotiations went on without making any significant progress.

The disagreement between the parties involved in negotiating was again highlighted in the media in 2019. Both parties made public accusations regarding the negotiation, and the project's steps continued ambiguously between moving forward with the work or continuing to renegotiate. Shortly thereafter, President Magufuli suspended the construction of the port indefinitely, stating some of the terms: "t*hose investors are coming with tough conditions that can only be accepted by mad people. They told us once they build the port, there should be no other port to be built all the way from Tanga to Mtwara south*" (Mwangasha 2019). The President also revealed some of the clauses of the contract, a maneuver to put pressure on the Chinese: "*They want us to give them a guarantee of 33 years and a lease of 99 years, and we should not question whoever comes to invest there once the port is operational. They want to take the land as their own, but we have to compensate them for drilling construction of that port*" (Mwangasha 2019).

Answering these claims, CMPorts accused the Tanzanian government of leaking false information about the causes of the delays in the negotiations; the company announced that it had not received any documents containing the new demands and accused Kakoko (director of Tanzania Ports Authority, who, according to the company's representative, was not at the negotiation meetings) of fabricating information, as the parties had already reached an agreement on the 33-year concession (The Citizen 2019b; The East African 2019).

This shows that there was less political will in the Tanzanian government to negotiate the deal, contrary to the personal investment of Kikwete, who saw the development of his hometown as a source of political capital (Kim and TukiC 2018) and expressed the commitment that he will do everything to assure the take-off of the project (Ng'wanakilala 2014).

The Sierra Leone Case

In Sierra Leone, China has become an important bilateral partner in recent years, investing heavily in high-deficit sectors such as civil construction. Sierra Leone's government, like Tanzania's, is committed to advancing the country's political and economic development. The launch of the Agenda for Prosperity in early 2013 created new opportunities to expand partnerships with China and President Ernest Bai Koroma announced in July 2013 that he had signed with them agreements to build infrastructure worth approximately $8 billion, including the new Mamamah airport (Datzberger 2013; Jalloh 2021).

In general, Chinese construction firms entered the Sierra Leonean market in the 1980s, with a brief pause during the civil war (1991-2002). With the loss of most infrastructure due to the war, the country suffers from several deficiencies in the sector. In this context, China has built several public buildings, bridges, and dams, in addition to the National Stadium and the University of Sierra Leone (Centre for Chinese Studies 2006).

The Mamamah airport

The Mamamah airport project was initially negotiated with China in 2011[9] with funding from the Chinese Eximbank and would be built by the China Railway Group (CRG). However, this first attempt, planned against a backdrop of Sierra Leone's 17 percent annual growth, was postponed due to declining commodity prices, and diminishing resources available in the country (Global Construction Review 2016; Koroma 2012). In 2013, the Sierra Leonean government released the Third Generation Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2013-2018), also known as the Agenda for Prosperity. Its goal is to make Sierra Leone a middle-income country by 2035, with 80 percent of the population above the poverty line. The construction of the Mamamah Airport (and the surrounding administrative town) is listed in the document as an important element in achieving this. The overall goal of the project

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9 According to Kamara (2018) however, "the Mamamah Airport is an idea that was first conceived in 1973 by the government of the then Prime Minister Siaka Stevens of blessed memory after extensive engineering studies done proved that Mamamah area will be best suitable for the airport. In 2009 and 2010, another study was done, and the conclusion was the same. Therefore, the decision for the airport was never motivated by any political consideration but was informed by a series of aerodrome engineering advisory opinion". https://sierraexpressmedia.com/?p=85824, consulted March 9, 2023.

is to improve the country's international competitiveness, which has been experiencing constant economic losses due to poor infrastructure (The Government of Sierra Leone 2013).

The airport project has become one of the major infrastructure projects of the Koroma government (Awoko Newspaper 2013); according to a publication from the Ministry of Transport and Aviation (2016), the project would attract investment and expand economic activity in the country, in addition to improving competitiveness. It is important to note that an airport near Freetown and in the mainland as Mamamah would solve the current mobility issues at Lungi International Airport[10].

Figure 3 – Airport issue in Freetown, Sierra Leone

Source:CNN (2018)[11]

To increase the revenue generation outside of the aviation industry, the project also involved building a commercial and administrative city. The project was expected to cost $318 million as of 2016 (the first phase was valued at $200 million) and was supposed to be finished in 4 years (Ministry of Transport and Aviation 2016). The concessional loan for its construction was

10 There are currently two travel options between Freetown and Lungi: a 4+ hour drive or at least a 30-minute ferry ride across the estuary. The ferry is often delayed, for example due to increased rainfall (Lu 2020, 20; The East African 2018b)..

11 Available at https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/11/africa/china-africa-sierra-leone-airport-intl/index.html

approved by the Chinese Eximbank and the new bilateral agreement between the Chinese government and the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) was signed in 2015.

After the deal, the cancellation

In July 2015, it was announced that the Chinese company responsible for building the airport was already on site waiting to begin construction. Construction was supposed to start in 2014 but was delayed by the Ebola epidemic (Awoko Newspaper 2015b). At a meeting between Presidents Koroma and Xi Jinping in September 2015 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, the Sierra Leonean president asked the Chinese president to help prevent the project from collapsing and left with assurances that work would return as soon as possible (Awoko Newspaper 2015a; Lamin 2016).

In April 2016, the local Awoko Newspaper reported that the project was struggling to get off the ground, due to pressure from the International Monetary Fund (that already had concerns about the economic feasibility and has had the study reconducted), which led to the delay in signing the final agreement. The China Railway team had already been in the country for a few years, having cleared the area, taken soil samples, set up the work camp and installed the weather station (Awoko Newspaper 2016a). In 2016, in December, during a visit to China, Koroma reinforced that both governments wanted to continue the Mamamah project. The President expressed his intention to expedite the signing of the final agreement and begin construction quickly (Awoko Newspaper 2016b; Sesay 2016). In 2017, further delays were attributed to discussions between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance with the World Bank and IMF, on how to finance the work (Awoko Newspaper 2017; Thomas 2017).

The project did not actually begin until March 2018, just days before the elections. European observers reported that the APC party used campaign space to make official announcements of the incumbent government, including the Mamamah Airport advertisement – which had been criticized in the local media outlet The Sierra Leone Telegraph (Thomas 2018). According to the EU Election Observer mission (2018, 22), the President commissioned the airport in party colors (rather than national colors) and stated in a State House press release that the new airport, "his dream project", would "take the country to the next level". In fact, as an observer remarks, after he got the assurance from his counterpart that China will fund the project in 2015, President Bai Koroma was "obviously in jolly mood and smiling from ear to ear". He went on to add that "the airport will add to the magnificent legacy of national developments that President Koroma will leave Sierra Leone when his term expires"[12].

Even having the project started did not prevent it from being cancelled a few months after the new President and opposition candidate Julius Maada Bio took office (Al Jazeera 2018). The current government's focus would be on renovating the Lungi airport (which has a loan of about $200 million negotiated with the World Bank) and building the Lungi bridge project (estimated at $1 billion to $2 billion). Bio criticized Mamamah's project during the campaign, calling it fake and promising to cancel the construction if elected (The East African 2018; Reuters 2018; Awoko Newspaper 2018; Quirke 2018; Thomas 2018).

Despite the cancellation (and criticism to China), the Bio government has not distanced itself from the Asian giant, and the reversal of the project has not compromised Sino-Sierra Leonean relations. During a September 2018 visit to China for FOCAC, President Bio even proposed that the new Lungi Bridge be built by Power China International Group (Reuters 2018; Awoko Newspaper 2018). This new move may well be the first of new *presidential megaprojects* under the leadership of President Maada Bio, who decided in addition, in favor of the extension of the Lungi airport. According to a former MP under the Bai Koroma administration, this extension was surrounded by controversies and while according to the Constitution, "no loan shall be raised by the Government on behalf of itself or any other public institution or authority otherwise than by or under the authority of an Act of Parliament"; the supposed contract between the [Bio] government and SUMMA Group was never made public neither ratified by parliament"[13].

Conclusion: Megapresidentail Projects, BRI Projects and the Future of Sino-African Relations

Sino-African relations are not static, and they are not just positive or negative for the continent. Our efforts were aimed at understanding the nuances and how these relations have evolved and been adapted to the new realities and needs of partner countries. The African continent is diverse in many ways, with different political systems and economic agendas. Therefore, each country develops its own relationship with China. In this context, we must recognize, also, the role of domestic dynamics during all phases of

12 Available at https://cocorioko.net/president-ernest-koroma-delighted-that-mamamah-international-airport-project-remains-on-track/.

13 Available at: SUMMA group is a Turkish construction company.http://owlpress-sl.com/lungi-airport-extension-project-a-testament-of-slpps-failure-in-fighting-corruption/.

major projects. Different actors are (or want to be) involved in the processes of negotiation and implementation of projects, from civil society to political parties.

We have attempted, in this article, to explain why some African countries, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, decide to halt a project after signing a cooperation agreement. The initial hypothesis was that internal political dynamics and changes in African countries, explain the termination of signed cooperation agreements. The cases examined also show that there is room for African actors to express themselves, and that domestic politics have a significant impact on agents' attitudes toward cooperation agreements, which contributes to their interruption or maintenance.

In Tanzania and Sierra Leone, the context of the two countries in relation to the expected projects is similar. They are at the heart of their governments' development programs. In addition, the two case studies represent a certain type of project, namely the "*presidential megaprojects*". These projects, as our data suggest, have a strong link with the Presidents who idealize them, acquiring a "legacy" character. Therefore, these projects are ambiguous, as they are perhaps necessary, but raise doubts, such as the choice of location (Bagamoyo), the cost or the need for a second infrastructure for the same purpose (Mamamah). For these reasons, they are more likely to be impacted negatively when there are changes in domestic politics, notably a presidential turnover.

Finally, the results found in this work propose a research agenda for the future, to compare with other mega infrastructure projects on the African continent that have not been cancelled. Even if our attempt at generalization is ultimately limited to these cases, it is possible to argue that African countries share the need to strengthen their agency in the face of asymmetric relationships and to learn from their experiences. Reducing the vulnerability of these agreements to major infrastructure projects ultimately benefits both China and African countries.

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to analyze the Sino-African relations and in particular the Belt and Road Initiative investments through the study of deviant cases. Using the cases of interrupted cooperation agreements in Sierra Leone and Tanzania under the initiative, this article argues that the interruption is caused mainly by the nature of the projects which make them vulnerable to changes in domestic politics. To explain this, we propose the concept of *presidential megaprojects*.

KEYWORDS

Belt and Road Initiative; Africa; Presidential megaprojects

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