

# **Cold War History**



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcwh20

# Supping with a long spoon in the Indian Ocean: the negotiation of the 1972 Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between Mauritius and the People's Republic of China

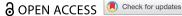
# **Thomas Burnham**

To cite this article: Thomas Burnham (2021): Supping with a long spoon in the Indian Ocean: the negotiation of the 1972 Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between Mauritius and the People's Republic of China, Cold War History, DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2021.1997990

To link to this article: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2021.1997990">https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2021.1997990</a>

9	© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
	Published online: 12 Dec 2021.
	Submit your article to this journal 🗹
dil	Article views: 393
Q <sup>1</sup>	View related articles 🗗
CrossMark	View Crossmark data ☑







# Supping with a long spoon in the Indian Ocean: the negotiation of the 1972 Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between Mauritius and the People's **Republic of China**

Thomas Burnham (1)

DPhil student, Keble College, University of Oxford, UK

## **ABSTRACT**

Against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's 1970s reengagement with Africa through the Indian Ocean, this article investigates the overlapping extensions of aid and technical assistance to the island nation of Mauritius, focusing primarily on the unprecedented 1972 infrastructural development offer by the People's Republic of China. By analysing the minutes of the Sino-Mauritian Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation's negotiations as found in the United Kingdom's Foreign and Colonial Office dossiers, this paper examines Chinese aid diplomacy to Africa in a period which saw its admission to the United Nations, its realignment against the USSR, and the concomitant latticed transformations of its aid diplomacy.

#### **KEYWORDS**

China; Africa; Soviet Union; Mauritius: aid and development

### Introduction

With the dawn of decolonisation, aid to Africa became a central part of the revolutionary foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). From its debut as an aid provider, Beijing advertised its aid as entirely different from that on offer from either Moscow or the West. When Zhou Enlai first publicly announced 'The Chinese Government's Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries' in Ghana on 15 January 1964, China had aid commitments in a quarter of Africa's independent countries. Committing the Chinese government to the principles of mutual aid and borrowing language from the Charter of the Non-Aligned Movement, Zhou's Eight Principles codified the methods and practices which Beijing had found effective in West Africa during the early 1960s. The principles have technically remained in force until today.

Crucially, in the context of the 1960s, the Eight Principles advertised that Chinese aid projects were not only free of the tyranny of debt and conditionality of Western aid, but also without the more noxious aspects of Soviet aid. Before 1964, Soviet aid had become infamous for 'white elephants', meaning costly and unnecessary prestige projects. Recognising the then numerous criticisms of Soviet aid expressed by West African

governments, the Eight Principles promised that Chinese projects were rapidly capitalisable, undertaken with guaranteed and state-of-the art equipment, and, perhaps most symbolically, implemented by Chinese experts and advisors who were required to live at the same standard of living as their local counterparts.<sup>2</sup> These commitments were born out in a number of projects. Writing in the first decades of China's aid diplomacy in Africa, Alaba Ogunsanwo explained part of the special appeal of the seemingly modest Chinese projects, highlighting their role in providing immediate relief for the chronic issue of unemployment. More famously perhaps, as illuminated in Jamie Monson's Africa's Freedom Railway, Chinese technicians evinced the spirit of solidarity by working shoulder to shoulder with their Tanzanian counterparts at the gruelling task of constructing the Tanzam Railway.<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, China's aid to Africa has widely been interpreted as part of an influence campaign aimed at achieving its accession to the United Nations (UN). In the conclusion of his study of Sino-American rivalry in Cold War Africa, Gregg Brazinsky comments that 'enlarging the status of the PRC in the Third World was an overriding goal of Chinese foreign policy'. Gaining diplomatic recognition was undoubtedly a foreign policy aim for Beijing, and aid was a means by which this could be achieved. As a rule, Chinese friendship treaties and aid agreements followed quickly after African governments switched their diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic.<sup>5</sup> In thanks to the firm foundations laid down by their engagement with African decolonisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Beijing was able to garner the support of 27 African nations for United Nations Resolution 2758 in October 1971. After China's accession to the UN, Mao Zedong expressed not only gratitude but obligation to African nations, saying, 'It was the black brothers of Africa who carried us into the UN. We will divorce ourselves from the masses if we refuse to go there'.<sup>6</sup>

However, Chinese aid in Africa did not end in 1971. As emphasised by Deborah Brautigam in her *Dragon's Gift*, '(a)rriving after independence, they never really left'.<sup>7</sup> Beijing's aid diplomacy continued as it pursued foreign policy aims beyond UN membership. An early episode in this continuation of Chinese aid diplomacy came in May 1972. Representatives from Beijing were deployed to Port Louis, Mauritius to negotiate an agreement outlined in a state visit to Beijing by Mauritius' first prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam.<sup>8</sup> Between 12 and 14 April, Ramgoolam spoke with Zhou Enlai and the two provisionally agreed to five development projects. If Mauritius had

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>'对外经济技术援助的八项原则 (一九六四年一月十五日)',《周恩来外交文选》(北京: 中央文献出版社, 1990), 388-9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Alaba Ogunsanwo, *China's Policy in Africa, 1958–1971* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 291; Jamie Monson, Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 35-70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 348.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Bruce D. Larkin, *China and Africa, 1949–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Chen Dengde, *Mao Zedong + Nixon Zai 1972* (Beijing: Kunlun Press, 1988), 259–60. Quoted in Barbara Barnouin and Changgen Yu, Chinese Foreign Policy during the Cultural Revolution (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 65.

Deborah Brautigam, The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 310. <sup>8</sup>For the arrival of the Chinese delegation in Port Louis, 'Minutes of Proceedings of Opening Meeting of Negotiations with the Delegation from the People's Republic of China held on the 31 May 1972 at 9.40 a.m.', Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 31/1227, National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew (TNA). For Ramgoolam's visit to Beijing:The New Chinese Presence',《中非关系大事记(1949年10月1日 – 1984年12月)》,中国社会科学院西亚非洲 研究所, 158, FCO 31/1227, TNA.

voted for Beijing to claim China's seat in the UN in autumn 1971, this could be seen as a natural outcome of a quid pro quo arrangement. However, Mauritius had been one of a handful of African abstentions from the UN vote. Moreover, despite China's intermittent interaction with the island dating back to well before its independence, Port Louis had delayed recognising Beijing until this meeting between Zhou and Ramgoolam in 1972. This raises the question of why China would extend aid to a small island nation after having already achieved the supposed goal of its aid diplomacy. This article therefore explores the negotiation of the Sino-Mauritian 'Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between the Government of Mauritius and the Government of the People's Republic of China' with the aim of shedding light on the dynamics of Chinese aid diplomacy in Africa during the Cold War.

At the time of the negotiations, Mauritius had already approached the United Kingdom, India and the World Bank for development assistance. For this reason, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) holds extensive documentation on the Chinese aid offer. The World Bank also has documentation on its ultimate fate. The negotiation minutes of the 1972 'Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between the Government of Mauritius and the Government of the People's Republic of China', initially gathered by a UK Ministry of Finance official stationed in Port Louis, were elevated to the highest levels of the FCO. They provide an invaluable window into the otherwise opaque world of Chinese aid in the Cold War. The availability of these documents is the result of the 1968 defence agreement between the UK and Mauritius which obligated the Mauritian government to furnish the UK with privileged information. For reasons that will be discussed later, the United States government also had a major stake in the situation and kept in close contact with the UK about developments in Port Louis. Through an analysis of the minutes as well as both their background and subsequent developments as found in UK FCO dossiers and World Bank reports, as well as US and Chinese documents and published primary sources, this paper will consider how a small, developing nation like Mauritius could navigate the complex geopolitical reality of the global Cold War. More importantly, this paper will examine Chinese aid diplomacy at the juncture between Beijing's effort to lead the colonies of the world in an anti-imperialist revolution against the West to its emergence as a part of a multilateral system of aid designed for the exclusion of Soviet influence from the Third World.

# **Background**

Mauritius might seem like an unlikely place for China's particular brand of aid during the Mao era. It was simply a small island 700 miles to the east of Madagascar, populated by just over 850,000 people in 1972. In the past, it had hosted outposts of the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and, finally British empires before becoming independent on 12 March 1968. The people of Mauritius were not uniformly pro-Beijing. Its population was diverse and included a Chinese-Mauritian community of as many as 25,000 descended from 'coolie' labour brought to the island in the early nineteenth century. 11 Although there was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>/Minutes of Proceedings of Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June at 2.45 p.m.'《周恩来外交活动大事记》(世界知识出版社, 1993), 365–6, FCO 31/1227, TNA.

10 《中非关系大事记》, 157–8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>/The New Chinese Presence', FCO 31/1227, TNA.

a 'Peking faction' among the Chinese-Mauritian community's youth, the community was divided, with a number of Chinese-Mauritians who preferred Taipei. This was because Mauritian relations with Taiwan predated its independence. In 1965, Ramgoolam had travelled together with his wife to Taipei and met with Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Meiling, after which there were numerous visits made by Mauritian officials well into 1970. Among these was a spring 1970 visit made by Ramgoolam's conservative anti-independence rival and leader of the Mauritian opposition, Gaëtan Duval. Moreover, prior to the Mauritian government switching its recognition from Taipei to Beijing, at least one Chinese-Mauritian minister in Ramgoolam's own cabinet was 'passionately pro-Taiwan'. 12

For his part, despite the sympathy he held for socialist ideas, Ramgoolam had been educated in the UK and found his base of support among the Indian and creole dock workers of Mauritius, not the predominantly shop-owning Chinese-Mauritian community. Ramgoolam was ambivalent towards the Chinese-Mauritian community and wary of the Peking faction in particular. Similar to his contemporaries in other African nations, Ramgoolam maintained a pragmatic commitment to non-alignment. He engaged with the socialist world as much to undermine criticisms from domestic leftist rivals, like the Peking faction or the creole-majority Mouvement Militant Mauricien, as to strengthen his small country's international bargaining position in the Cold War world. For this reason, China's arrival on the island was not premised on any ideological overlap between Beijing and Port Louis, as had been the case elsewhere in Africa in the 1960s.

Instead, the reasoning behind Beijing's aid diplomacy with Mauritius was multifaceted and structured both by the ideology of its revolutionary foreign policy and the exigencies of the global Cold War. A crucial factor at this time was the return of the Soviet Union to Africa via the Indian Ocean. After the removal of Nikita Khrushchev from the Presidium in 1964 and the end of what S.V. Mazov calls the 'halcyon days' of Moscow's effort to export non-capitalist development to West Africa, the Soviet Union largely retreated from the continent. In the late 1960s it returned, but this time it had turned away from the paragons of Pan-Africanism like Sekou Touré and Kwame Nkrumah. Instead, it focused its efforts almost entirely on eight strategically vital nations in the Horn of Africa.

With its return in the late 1960s, Soviet military investment ultimately dwarfed its idealistic effort to export socialism to West Africa in the early 1960s. As explored by Alessandro Iandolo, Soviet aid to West Africa in the early 1960s was a massive endeavour centred on state-led economic development, with comparatively little regard for the question of the 'potentially bourgeois nature' of post-colonial states. During that time, Moscow dispatched thousands of experts to realise infrastructure, state and energy sector projects as delineated in economic and technical cooperation agreements with

<sup>12</sup>國史館檔案史料文物查詢系統 (Academia Historica Online), 002–050101-00057-296, 12 January 1965, '總統蔣中正伉儷接見模里西斯總理藍姑夫婦'; 006–030203-00042-011, 12 May 1970, '副總統兼行政院長嚴家淦接見模里西斯外交部長Hon. Charles Gaetan Duval(徐灣)'. 'The New Chinese Presence', FCO 31/1227, TNA.

13'The New Chinese Presence', TNA, FCO 31/1227. By as late as 1960, the Beijing-headquartered All-China Federation

<sup>13′</sup>The New Chinese Presence', TNA, FCO 31/1227. By as late as 1960, the Beijing-headquartered All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese made contact with the Chinese-Mauritian community when they allocated a 10,000 RMB relief package in response to a typhoon. 《中非关系大事记》, 157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup>S.V. Mazov, A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956–1964 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010), 258; Alessandro landolo, 'The Rise and Fall of the "Soviet Model of Development" in West Africa, 1957–1964, Cold War History 12, no. 4 (2011), 687.

superficially generous terms. These agreements provided financing for these modernising projects with lengthy repayment periods and favourable interest rates at or below 2%. They were also packaged with substantial credits.<sup>15</sup>

However, it was in the protocols governing these credits that the drawbacks of Soviet aid became evident to African governments. As investigated by W. Scott Thompson, the protocols obligated African governments to use the credits in ways which seemed advantageous only to the Soviet Union, and the equipment made available for purchase was 'plainly uncompetitive' in comparison to what was available on the global market. There were also a number of complaints about the comportment of Soviet experts and advisors in African countries during this period. 16

In combination with the unsustainable cost of Khrushchev's attempt to export socialist development to the post-colonial world, the growing din of complaints contributed to the partial withdrawal of the Soviet Union from African aid in the mid-1960s. David C. Engerman has examined how Soviet aid changed and developed in India. His Price of Aid shows how, in combination with the 'ebbing of Soviet optimism that revolution was around the corner' represented by S.A. Skachkov's more pragmatic approach to project aid, Alexei Kosygin's reforms in favour of profitability led to the dual admission that the state sector was not a 'panacea' and that resources seemingly squandered by Khrushchev's 'adventurism' might be better allocated to contributing to the military defence of 'states of socialist orientation'. 17 Similarly, Iandolo has also discussed how, in dialogue with global conversations about development policy, Soviet methods of non-capitalist development from the first half of the 1960s were 'streamlined' towards assisting in the development of regimes more aligned with Soviet ideology in the latter half of the decade.18

Meanwhile, there was also a growing emphasis on military aid, and, as discussed by Jeremy Friedman, China's anti-imperialist radicalism played a role into goading the Soviet Union into furnishing African countries with both 'guns and butter'. 19 This militarised assistance reached its zenith with Moscow's aid to the littoral zone of the Indian Ocean. As explored in greater detail by Radoslav A. Yordanov, the seizure of power by leftist military regimes in 1960s Eastern Africa in tandem with the exit of the UK from Aden caused Somalia and Ethiopia to occupy a central place in Kremlin policy both on an ideological and a pragmatic level.<sup>20</sup> The centrality of the African Horn and its proximity to key shipping routes led to the growing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>landolo, 'The Rise and Fall of the "Soviet Model of Development" in West Africa', 685–6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>W. Scott Thompson, Ghana's Foreign Policy, 1957–1966: Diplomacy, Ideology, and the New State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 274; Nkrumah's Subversion in Africa: Documentary Evidence of Nkrumah's Interference in the Affairs of Other African States (Accra-Tema: Ministry of Information, 1967); 'Ghanaian Dissatisfaction with Socialist

Aid', Foreign Office (FO) 1110/1697, TNA.

17David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

<sup>2018), 349, 354–5.

18</sup> Alessandro landolo, 'De-Stalinizing Growth: Decolonization and the Development of Development Economics in the Soviet Union', in The Development Century: A Global History, ed. Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 217-18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 146.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>Radoslav Yordanov, The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa During the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 255.

geostrategic importance of the Indian Ocean and the concomitant effort by Moscow to project its naval power into the region via these ostensibly socialist regimes.

The Soviet arrival on the newly independent Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius in 1968 was a small but important part of this. Before Mauritius declared its independence, the UK government excised the Chagos Archipelago (now known as the British Indian Ocean Territories). While the Mauritian government was granted fishing rights in the islands as well as offered the prospect of oil exploration by the UK government, this was for the purpose of furnishing the United States with a military base on the Chagossian island of Diego Garcia in 1965. The UK also maintained communications and defence agreements as well as a naval presence in Mauritius' sole harbour in Port Louis, Mauritius' capital city.<sup>21</sup>

Because of its geostrategic importance, this small island nation soon found itself garnering the attention of the wider Cold War world. In March 1968, Ramgoolam invited a Soviet delegation to attend the Mauritian independence ceremony. Relations between the two countries were established that same month. A year later, Mauritian-Soviet engagement began in earnest and quickly escalated. First, there were intelligence reports of a possible Soviet trade school manned by 25 Soviet technicians being set up in Port Louis. Weeks later, the Soviet Embassy in Mauritius requested that the Mauritian government consider jointly setting up cosmonaut rescue facilities. Soon after, on 16 April 1969, a letter requesting the establishment of a satellite tracking facility alongside a draft agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation was sent to the Mauritian government from the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the latter of which was signed that September. By the end of the summer of that year, the two countries signed a fisheries agreement.<sup>22</sup>

Both the UK and US governments were deeply concerned that these seemingly innocuous projects could be combined to offer suitable cover for Soviet naval and intelligence activities in the Indian Ocean. This could compromise not only the UK's remaining presence in Mauritius, but also threaten the security of the US base in the Chagos Archipelago. The Soviet Union's desire for a cosmonaut rescue facility in the Indian Ocean was understandable, but it also meant that Soviet long-range aircraft would be within reconnaissance range of Diego Garcia. The satellite tracking facility could similarly serve a dual purpose. As for the fisheries agreement, it seemed unlikely that its value to the Soviet Union was commercial in nature. Through the agreement, the Soviet Union would be able to rotate intelligence personnel disguised as fishermen in and out of Port Louis several times a year. Combined, the agreements seemingly established Port Louis as a more permanent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21,</sup>Ruling of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea Arbitral Tribunal about the Chagos Marine Protected Area', 18 March 2015, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. XXI, Near East Region, ed. Nina Davis Howland and David S. Patterson (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2000); Document 38, Letter From the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (McNaughton) to Secretary of Defense MacNamara'; 'Chiefs of Staff Meeting on 7 October, 1969, FCO 31/391, TNA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup>L.F. Il'ichev, SSSR i strany Afriki: Dokumenty I materialy, 1963–1970 gg.: V dvukh chastyakh. Chast' 2 (1967–1970 gg.) (Politizdat: Moscow, 1982), 99, 175; K.A. Wolverton's 3 March 1969 letter; 17 March 1969 Letter from the Embassy of the Soviet Union copied from the Prime Minister's Office; 'Russian Requests for Facilities in Mauritius'; 16 April 1969 Letter from the Academy of Sciences of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics copied from the Prime Minister's Office; 'Soviet Facilities in Mauritius'; 'Chiefs of Staff Meeting on 7 October, 1969, FCO 31/391, TNA.

base of support for its intelligence activities in the Indian Ocean, as before Mauritius' independence the Soviet Union had relied on 'floating bases' or auxiliary support ships anchored in international waters.<sup>23</sup>

In the words of a December 1970 National Security Study Memorandum addressed to US President Richard Nixon from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'the most important capability they [the Soviet Union] have so far achieved is a foot in the door'. <sup>24</sup> The US government expressed its misgivings to the UK government and encouraged it to dissuade its former colony from allowing the Soviets to take up residence on the island. The UK government carried out a concerted effort to persuade Ramgoolam and the Mauritian government to limit further Soviet penetration. This effort was shaped by the UK Ministry of Defence and the FCO. Using materials generated by the Information Research Department (IRD), the FCO drafted letters to Ramgoolam together with the Ministry of Defence and arranged face-to-face meetings directing him not to engage with the Soviet Union. The FCO distributed IRD materials to the Australian, South African and other Commonwealth governments and requested that they write their own letters of concern to Ramgoolam. In this letter writing campaign, the FCO even considered revealing confidential information to faraway Japan so that it could submit its own letter of concern. The final UK letter to Ramgoolam threatened to cancel Mauritius' fishing rights in the Chagos Archipelago and to withhold any future possibility of oil exploration there. Despite its efforts, however, the FCO worried that Ramgoolam was not entirely dissuaded from seeking aid from the socialist world. They were convinced he would continue his 'traditional attitude of supping with [the] devil with [a] long spoon'. 25

In January 1971, the Soviet Union sent a draft of an air traffic agreement to the Mauritian Ministry of External Affairs, Tourism, and Emigration. If accepted, this would extend Aeroflot's flight services to the island nation, with the proposed route being from Moscow to Khartoum, Entebbe, Nairobi, Dar-es-Salaam, and, finally, Mauritius' sole international airport, Plaisance. This Aeroflot route, ostensibly to convey Soviet tourists to the tropical island of Mauritius, was unlikely to be very profitable. Rather, it was seen as part of the Soviet Union's efforts to broaden the base of logistical support for its growing activity in the Indian Ocean, as well as to reinvigorate its ideological competition over African elites. A vital component of the logistical support for Soviet intelligence activities and competition over elites were air traffic agreements with African countries. Under the guise of commercial flights for Soviet tourists to locations like Mauritius, Soviet airlines could arrive in African capitals to pick up scholarship students to fly them back to Moscow to begin their studies. Moreover, with the air traffic agreement, Soviet personnel would be able to come and go from the country on a weekly basis, potentially increasing the turnover of intelligence personnel provided by the 1969 fisheries

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>5 December 1969 British High Commission Letter to Ramgoolam; 'Record of a Meeting between Representatives of Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence Departments'; 17 March 1969 Letter from the Embassy of the Soviet Union copied from the Prime Minister's Office; 'Russian Requests for Facilities in Mauritius'; FCO 31/917, TNA, 'Aeroflot'; 'The Indian Ocean Area – Soviet and Chinese Capabilities, Intentions and Opportunities', 1, LOC-HAK-10-5-16-7,

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA-FOIA). FCO 31/391, TNA.

24, The Indian Ocean Area – Soviet and Chinese Capabilities, Intentions and Opportunities', 1, LOC-HAK-10-5-16-7,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25,</sup>Record of a Meeting between Representatives of Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence Departments'; 'The Records of Maintaining Diplomatic Relations with the Soviet Union'; 'Russian Activities in Mauritius'; 17 December 1969 Telegram from Stewart; 5 December 1969 British High Commission Letter to Ramgoolam; FCO 31/917, TNA, 5 October 1971 cable from P.A. Carter. FCO 31/391, TNA.

agreement many times over. By providing access to the tourist destination of Mauritius, the agreement rounded out Soviet flight paths through East Africa for the purposes of picking up scholarship students and deploying intelligence gatherers nicely. However, the UK government once again protested against such an agreement and it faced opposition within the Mauritian parliament. In the end, Ramgoolam himself granted Aeroflot temporary access to Plaisance in September 1971 through a memo rather than by signing the agreement.<sup>26</sup>

That same year, Mauritius turned to the World Bank for assistance with a new international airport. However, it was unwilling to meet the bank's requirement that Mauritius conduct the survey and project viability work itself. In 1971, Port Louis was advised by the World Bank as well as French and Indian advisors to remodel its existing Plaisance International Airport and seek assistance for other more pressing projects instead. Undeterred, Ramgoolam persisted in seeking assistance for the construction of a new airport. It was speculated by the British High Commission in Mauritius that this was because Ramgoolam envied the new airport built in the Seychelles, but it is also possible that he sincerely believed in not only promoting Mauritius as a tourist hotspot, but also in enhancing the ability of Mauritius to connect with the world beyond its one harbour and one airport.<sup>27</sup>

Ramgoolam turned elsewhere. On 12 April 1972, just over six months after granting Aeroflot access to Plaisance, Ramgoolam made a state visit to Beijing, where he and Zhou discussed five technical assistance projects, coming to an agreement in principle on a Chinese aid package for Mauritius. At first glance, the proposed Chinese aid package was reminiscent of its other aid to African countries. Beijing offered an interest-free loan of £13.5 million for the implementation of projects to be determined by the two governments in concert. At the time, this was the largest extension of aid to Mauritius by any single country. Repayment of the loan would begin after 15 years and would be repaid one tenth a year for 10 years. Beijing further promised to dispatch experts and advisors to implement the projects.<sup>28</sup> Centrally, the largest of the projects Ramgoolam and Zhou discussed was the construction of a new international airport to replace Plaisance. Whereas Soviet interest in Mauritius began with a variety of projects likely intended to disguise intelligence activities, Chinese interest began with a new airport.

# The negotiation of the 1972 Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between Mauritius and the People's Republic of China

In May 1972, a Chinese delegation composed of Chargé d'Affaires Hu Jingrui, his interpreter and seven other officials including a pair of survey technicians arrived in Port Louis. Their 11 Mauritian counterparts were drawn from every relevant organ of the Mauritian government, with financial secretary Mr R. Pyndiah leading the group. At the opening meeting on 31 May, Ramgoolam extended a cordial greeting to the Chinese

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup>FCO 31/917, TNA, 'Air Transport Agreement with USSR'; 'Air Services Agreement with the USSR Government: Memorandum by the Prime Minister'.

27'The New Chinese Presence', FCO 31/1227, TNA; The World Bank, Mauritius – Transport Sector Memorandum

<sup>(</sup>English) (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1985), 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June at 2.45 p.m.'; 'The New Chinese Presence'; 'Terms of Sino-Mauritian Agreement'.

delegation and stated that the two tasks of the negotiators were establishing an embassy with the People's Republic and arranging for an agreement on technical assistance. The two delegations began their first full meeting on the same day. That meeting concluded with the Mauritian delegation offering to cover the expenses of the Chinese delegation during its stay in Mauritius, an offer which the Chinese delegation declined according to their custom.<sup>29</sup>

However, Ramgoolam and the Mauritian delegation's cordiality was despite the fact that it had already become clear at a preliminary meeting the day before that the negotiations would not be as straightforward as either side had anticipated. When the Chinese delegation arrived in Port Louis, they likely expected to have an agreement signed quickly before turning over the details of the agreement's implementation to the Chinese embassy there. This had been the case in earlier bilateral engagements with newly independent African governments. Meanwhile, the Mauritian side, no doubt aware of the lofty promises of Zhou's Eight Principles, had hoped it had found in China a convenient alternative to either the World Bank or the Soviet Union. Over the course of the negotiations, numerous differences led to confusion and disagreements between the two delegations. Although the agreement was ultimately signed, this was only after seven full meetings spanning two and half months.

From the very beginning, the kinds of diplomacy practised by the two delegations seemed entirely alien to one another. The most glaring difference between the two delegations was the procedure they expected the negotiations to take. At the preliminary meeting on 30 May, the Chinese delegation asked whether the agreement would be signed before or after the negotiations. Dr O.P. Nijhawan, the director of the Mauritian Economic Planning Unit, straightforwardly told the delegation that a signature was impossible until all the implications of the agreement were understood at the official level. Despite this, the Chinese delegation's leader repeatedly expressed his bewilderment about why the agreement could not be signed straight away, since the agreement had already been made in principle between the two governments on Ramgoolam's visit to Beijing. The Mauritian delegation reminded Hu Jingrui four times in the course of the negotiations that it was imperative that the negotiations produce a detailed, presentable agreement and that the Mauritian delegation would be answerable to both the parliament and the public. At the third full meeting between the two delegations on 6 June, Hu complained that the Mauritian procedure was different 'from that of other friendly countries'. 30 He asserted that the way China provided aid was to sign the loan agreement first before sending advisors to the receiving country to conduct preliminary surveys, which would in turn determine the projects to be pursued and the composition of the protocols accompanying the loan agreement.

To the frustration of Hu, this procedure was entirely unacceptable to the Mauritian delegation. At the preliminary meeting, Dr Nijhawan insisted that the two delegations had to at the very least agree to the projects to be funded before the signing of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of Opening Meeting of Negotiations with the Delegation from the People's Republic of China held on the 31 May 1972 at 9.40 a.m.'; 'Minutes of Proceedings of the Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on 31 May 1972 at 10.45 a.m.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of Preliminary Meeting with the Chinese Delegation on 30 May 1972 at 11.30 a.m.'; 'Minutes of Proceedings of the Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on 6 June 1972 at 2 p.m.'

agreement. At first, Hu stated that the projects to be pursued could not be agreed to until the agreement had been signed and the Chinese technicians had conducted their survey work, a step which was expected to take three months. That half of the 14 Chinese survey technicians had already been dispatched to Mauritius suggests that the Chinese side expected the agreement to already be signed by this point. This work was required to determine the feasibility of the projects. If they were found to be ill-advised, the Chinese procedure was to direct the agreed-upon funds towards other projects after further intergovernmental consultation.

Although these difficulties seemed to have come as a surprise, the Mauritian side was certainly aware of previous Chinese dealings with African governments. Beijing had enthusiastically promoted its alternative form of aid through the Eight Principles beginning in 1964. Yet what these idealistic eight principles meant in practice was unclear to the Mauritian side. At the first full meeting, the Mauritian delegation raised six points about which they had numerous detailed questions regarding the proposed agreement.<sup>32</sup> Their questions included how to define local costs, what mechanism was to be used for setting the prices of externally required materials and equipment, whether and how preferential trade arrangements could be set up, whether or not local costs could be defrayed with existing trade, and other questions ranging from problems as small as the setting of c.i.f. (cost, insurance and freight) costs to problems as large as the optimal use of Mauritius' diverse labour pool.

Hu Jingrui and the Chinese delegation were unprepared to answer such questions. Instead, the Chinese delegation began the second full meeting on 2 June by circulating a copy of the Eight Principles of which the Mauritian side was no doubt already aware. No precise answers were given to the questions raised by the Mauritian delegation in the previous meeting. The Chinese delegation asserted that the problems raised were 'of a subordinate nature' and could only be solved 'step by step in the implementation of the agreement' after it was signed through the exchange of notes between the Chinese Embassy in Mauritius and the Mauritian government.<sup>33</sup>

In response, the Mauritian delegation issued an ultimatum. They said that because they 'had already suggested its (Mauritius') needs, the Chinese side should be able to say whether it agreed to finance these projects or not'. Until this had been done, 'further discussions would be of no use'. 34 They continued, telling the Chinese delegation that the Mauritian government was answerable to parliament and that 'the latter would require details about the agreement and it would be embarrassing for both Governments if such details could not be provided'.

Ultimately, it was suggested that the notes could be signed at the same time as the agreement and protocol instead of after the fact.<sup>35</sup> Faced with this ultimatum, Hu broke with established procedure and allowed the seven Chinese technicians to begin their work before the agreement had been signed. Meanwhile, he had no choice but to await

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of the Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on 31 May 1972 at 10.45 a.m.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June at 2.45 p.m.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held in the Financial Secretary's Office at 10.00 am on 19<sup>th</sup> June, 1972 .

precise answers from Beijing to the questions raised by the Mauritian side and to begin working with the Mauritian delegation on drafting notes to go along with the still unsigned agreement.

Although the Chinese side was willing if unprepared to accommodate the Mauritian refusal to follow the typical procedure of 'friendly countries', there were also disagreements over institutional arrangements. With these, the Chinese side unwaveringly rejected any alterations to its established practice. The Mauritian side repeatedly insisted that the protocol include an article on the setting up of a joint committee to monitor and implement the agreement. The Chinese side resolutely declined to accept any such article in a protocol or anywhere else, insisting that the project would be under the direct supervision of Beijing's embassy in Port Louis, which was then yet to be manned. Working through the embassy was even the case for the local accounts from which the loan funds were to be drawn by the recipient government. This account was to be set up by the Chinese embassy and opened in the Mauritian Commercial Bank, a procedure that was prohibited by Mauritian bank regulations. The Mauritian delegation had no choice but to promise to make a special exception.<sup>36</sup>

Frustrated by the rigidity of the Chinese delegation on institutional arrangements, the Mauritian delegation insisted that the final agreement reflect some consideration of how China's assistance might be perceived by Mauritian society at large. As mentioned earlier, it was critical to the Mauritian delegation that the negotiations yield an agreement presentable to both their own parliament and to the public. For this reason, the delegation explicitly stated that 'it was good for psychological reasons that the responsibility for the execution of the project should rest with the Mauritian Government', or at least appear that way in the final agreement.<sup>37</sup> This was one of the reasons the Mauritian delegation sought to defray the costs of the projects with trade. Hu Jingrui disliked the idea of linking trade and aid, worrying that such an arrangement would effectively reduce the overall volume of Sino-Mauritian trade if not handled as a separate matter. The Mauritian delegation insisted. This was despite the fact that its government had already done the preliminary work to establish that such an arrangement would indeed lead to a shortfall between the goods traded and the goods needed for the projects, meaning the agreement would result in a guaranteed trade deficit. Ultimately, it was established by the agreement that the anticipated shortfall would be 'considered' later if it arose. This condition was acceptable to the Chinese delegation because it did not oblige them to do anything about the said shortfall. At the same time, it was acceptable to the Mauritian delegation because it suggested to the parliament and the public that the problem would be handled if it arose, without revealing that the problem was in fact already anticipated to arise and that there was no mechanism for it to be resolved.

There were other similarly semantic differences, not least of which being the first article of the protocol in which the Mauritian delegation took issue with the word 'provide'. They preferred that the article read, 'The Government of the People's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on Friday 23 June 1972 at 2.30 p.m.'; 'Minutes of Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on Wednesday 12 July 1972 at 4 p.m.'

Republic of China agrees to help the Government of Mauritius'. 38 Setting aside the reluctance to link trade and aid, the Chinese delegation took no issue with superficial changes like these.

Finally, the agreement was signed on 10 August 1972. The press release resembled that of almost every other Chinese aid agreement with African governments at that time, noting the amount of the loan and the general terms of its repayment. A month later, the first Chinese ambassador to Mauritius, Wang Ze, presented his credentials in Port Louis. The rest of the survey team got to work seeking a suitable location for Mauritius' new international airport in the island's north.<sup>39</sup> It seemed as if Ramgoolam and the Mauritian delegation had been able to entice an alternative to Western development assistance while also satisfying the UK's demand that they not allow further Soviet penetration of the island.

However, the airport was never built. Three obstacles stood in the way of the airport's construction, and each of these generated internal opposition to the implementation of the project. The first was economic. Mauritius, like many newly independent countries, was already heavily indebted by numerous development projects and, in the words of a UK Overseas Development Administration Official, likely to face 'a bout of financial indigestion'. 40 The easy terms of the Chinese loan did not change this. For an economy of Mauritius' size – the earliest World Bank records give a gross domestic product of £390 million in 1976 - drawing on the Chinese loan of £13.5 million all at once for the purposes of a new airport ran the risk of over-encumbering Mauritius' fragile postcolonial economy with debt. 41 Moreover, considering the underdevelopment of Mauritius and its dire need for other projects (including projects which were on offer not only by the Beijing government but also Taipei), it is unlikely that a new airport was a priority for anyone but Ramgoolam. This is especially the case considering that Plaisance was not yet at capacity, nor was the Mauritian economy prepared to absorb more tourists, the apparent rationale for the new airport.<sup>42</sup> For an overindebted and underdeveloped country like Mauritius, such a project could only be a proverbial 'white elephant'.

Second, there was also the matter of Mauritian anxieties about falling too deeply into the socialist sphere. Although the UK government denied being opposed to the project and consciously chose not to pre-empt the agreement with an offer of its own, the preindependence governor of Mauritius, Sir John Rennie, had personally warned Ramgoolam against getting entangled in China's 'web' in 1968. 43 Moreover, as discussed earlier, the FCO had worked to dissuade the Mauritian government from engaging with the Soviet Union only months before, and part of this effort was the targeted distribution of anti-communist IRD materials to Mauritian elites. Furthermore, there was the matter of the splits within Mauritian government and society between the Right and the Left, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Minutes of Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting between the Mauritian Officials and the Chinese Delegation held on Friday 23 June 1972 at 2.30 p.m.' Emphasis my own.

FCO 31/1227, TNA, Cable from P.A. Carter sent 10 August 1972; 'The New Chinese Presence'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Chinese Aid to Mauritius', FCO 31/1227, TNA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup>For reference, today, Mauritius's GDP is US\$14.2 billion and its International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) debt is US\$15.3 million. World Bank Open Data, web retrieved on 24 March 2020 from https://

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup>/The New Chinese Presence', FCO 31/1227, TNA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA, 'Chinese Aid to Mauritius'; 'Chinese Activities in Mauritius'; 'Ramgoolam's Mission to Peking'; 'The New Chinese Presence'.

minority Peking faction and the remaining supporters of Taipei. The question of becoming indebted to a socialist country and to China in particular was therefore highly contentious within Mauritius.

The third and final obstacle was the fact that the construction of an infrastructural project as vital as an international airport by any single foreign government compromises a government's impartiality and a country's security. Doing so could undermine Ramgoolam's credentials as a proponent of non-alignment, and beginning in the late 1960s multilateral alternatives were becoming more and more accessible. Supposing Chinese surveyors could find a suitable location for the new airport, it was unlikely that Chinese technicians alone would have been allowed to handle the construction of the airport even by Ramgoolam's government. In the minutes, the Mauritian delegation emphasised repeatedly that it already had the trained technicians necessary for the project and that Chinese technicians would only be allowed in the country through the explicit permission of the Mauritian government. What was seen as a boon to previous African governments in the 1960s - the provision of technicians and the promise of sharing expertise – was seen as a potential security threat by the Mauritian government in 1972. Although making full use of local technicians certainly had an economic rationale, the Mauritian delegation also sought to limit the Chinese presence to as few technicians as were necessary. After the signing of the agreement, the Mauritian government initially agreed to accept 33 Chinese technicians, but UK reports speculated that the Mauritian government would actually accept even fewer than that. 44 Furthermore, if Mauritian politicians were to listen to the line that '(c)oordination rather than competition between aid-givers is more likely to benefit the recipient' raised during the UK government's information campaign against engagement with the Soviet Union, it would seek multilateral aid in all projects and most especially in large infrastructural projects like airports. 45 Therefore, like the two delegations with their different ideas of negotiation procedure, the two countries had differing conceptions of what development aid should look like. China was prepared to offer a vertically implemented turn-key project like it had to Tanzania, and Mauritius sought an alternative source of funding for a project it had initially requested from multilateral development agencies.

Ultimately, the agreed-upon loan was indeed used as part of a multilateral development package. The survey work which had begun in 1972 and had been expected to take three months was finalised after a much longer period of time. After a hiatus of nearly seven years, the last Chinese survey team arrived in Mauritius on 12 January 1979 to finalise the plans for a new terminal building at Plaisance. This was what the World Bank had originally advised in 1971 when Ramgoolam first made the invitation for Aeroflot to extend its network to the island. In 1983, the Chinese government agreed to extend the loan's repayment period five more years and to allow the use of the funds alongside British and French assistance.46

 $<sup>^{44}</sup>$ lbid. For reference, this was at a time when the number of Chinese technicians in Africa was estimated to be around 18,000 with many working on the other major Sino-African infrastructural project of the time, the TANZAM railway. 'Chinese Aid in the Third World', 3, CIA-RDP08S02113R000100090001-9, CIA-FOIA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup>'Ramgoolam's Mission to Peking', FCO 31/1227, TNA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup>The World Bank, Mauritius – Transport Sector Memorandum, 15, 57; 《中非关系大事记》, 159.

This was not the last time that China's peculiar form of development assistance, born of a spirit of anti-imperialist Afro-Asian solidarity codified in the Eight Principles, was used alongside the 'neo-colonial' pounds and francs of former colonial powers. In 1987, Plaisance was renamed the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport after Mauritius' first prime minister who, despite never achieving his aim of constructing a new airport, had deftly navigated a complex geopolitical reality by using the overlapping conflicts of the global Cold War to draw on aid from all possible donors.

Returning to the negotiation itself, the procedure described by Hu Jingrui prior to the Mauritian ultimatum was consistent with previous instances of Chinese aid to Africa. Chinese bilateral agreements with African governments until that point were vague and have continued to be infamously opaque. Rather than precisely delineating how the aid package was to be implemented, the agreements generally established the same three broad points: 1) the amount of the loan or grant and the terms of its disbursement and repayment; 2) the principles and regulations governing Chinese technical personnel to be dispatched to the recipient country; and 3) that the manner in which the aid agreement would be used would be determined by the two governments in consultation with one another and that if the proposed projects were found to be untenable the agreed funding would be directed towards other projects in the country. According to the established procedure of the Chinese government, it was only in the protocols and notes passed between the two governments after the signing of the agreement where the particulars sought by the Mauritian delegation typically emerged.

According to Jamie Monson's Africa's Freedom Railway, the agreement to construct the TAZARA railway followed the procedure described by Hu point for point, beginning first with the signature of the agreement followed almost immediately by the arrival of a Chinese survey team whose work determined the drafting of the protocols attached to the agreement. 47 In the case of Chinese agricultural aid to Mali, the implementation of the 'Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement made between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of Mali' and the drafting of its accompanying protocols evolved over the course of years, with numerous notes sent back and forth responding to the specific requests of the government in Bamako. 48 In the case of China's military aid to Ghana in the mid-1960s, experts and advisors were deployed in the Ghanaian countryside to conduct guerrilla training months before the agreement governing this activity was finalised, suggesting that agreements with 'friendly countries', meaning nationalist governments in Africa, were considered formalities by Beijing. 49 Agreements made between Beijing and African governments were largely drawn from the same template, containing language found both in the Eight Principles and the Charter of the Non-Aligned Movement. The agreement with Mauritius was no different. As shown by the negotiation and final product of the agreement with Mauritius, whatever change led to the shift of China's efforts from smaller projects into infrastructural investment did not lead to a change in its overall template for negotiating and implementing aid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup>Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway*, 24–40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup>After the agreement was signed in Beijing on 22 September 1961, notes were passed between the Malian and Chinese government until at least 8 December 1964. <sup>49</sup>Nkrumah's Subversion in Africa, 6.

Instead, the negotiation minutes illustrate something about Chinese aid diplomacy in Cold War Africa which was not apparent in its early engagements with West Africa. The template of first signing a vague agreement committing China to the provision of a loan and technical assistance and then working in concert to determine how the Chinese aid was to be used was as old as Beijing's first engagements with Africa. During China's debut in Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this template was in direct contrast with the rigidly conditional and complex aid packages offered by the Soviet Union. Chinese loans and technical assistance were offered with easy terms of repayment and no conditions attached, and how they were to be used could be explored over time rather than decided immediately at the negotiation table. As the projects to be pursued were to be determined in concert after the signing of the agreement, Beijing could decline to fund projects it saw as untenable or ill-advised, avoiding the trap of burdening its new allies with 'white elephants', as the Soviet Union had become infamous for doing in the early 1960s. What could be perceived as the flexibility of China's aid was actually a result of Beijing's attitude towards 'friendly countries'. The rigid negotiation procedure preferred by Hu Jingrui suggests that the aid agreements themselves were drawn from a template which had survived the 1960s, just as Zhou's Eight Principles had.

However, while signing vague agreements and sussing out the details later might be an acceptable practice for one-party governments like Nkrumah's or Touré's, governments like Ramgoolam's, which were answerable to a divided parliament and diverse public opinion, were uncomfortable with the opacity of Chinese aid. Such concerns are felt even today and have spurred the persistent myth of Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy' in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. 50 The Mauritian delegation did not want to sign an agreement which they did not fully understand, especially when multilateral alternatives were available. Thus, despite only being authorised to sign an agreement, the Chinese delegation had to go to great lengths to accommodate the Mauritian delegation's detailed queries and assuage their concerns if they wanted to leverage their aid on the island. In the process, Beijing's established procedure was heavily adapted in the name of financing the construction of a new airport on a small island nation for which such a project was entirely unnecessary.

While they were willing to make changes to their established procedure in the negotiations, the Chinese delegation unswervingly refused to budge on institutional matters. The established practice was to organise and implement all Chinese aid work through the Chinese embassy in the recipient country, and in cases where Chinese aid workers would be remote the Chinese would make the specific requirement of being assisted in maintaining direct contact between the embassy and their personnel.<sup>51</sup> That the Chinese delegation so decidedly rejected any change in this arrangement suggests that although the scale of the projects it pursued had increased, Beijing still wanted to maintain direct control of these projects.

Why the Chinese delegation decided to finance this veritable 'white elephant' and did not insist on something more feasible is the central question, considering its established practices and the precedents it had set elsewhere in Africa. Although TAZARA illustrated

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup>See Deborah Brautigam, 'A Critical Look at Chinese "Debt-Trap Diplomacy": The Rise of a Meme', *Area Development* and Policy 5, no. 1 (2020): 1-14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup>In the case of the Chinese military advisors dispatched to Ghana, the Chinese side required that the advisors be furnished with a vehicle and driver to make weekly reports from their clandestine training camps in the Ghanaian countryside to the Chinese embassy in Accra. Nkrumah's Subversion in Africa, 6-8.

a change had occurred in its aid diplomacy in the late 1960s, saddling a newly independent country with a 'white elephant' was uncharacteristic of China's aid diplomacy to that point. China had turned down projects before, and it is not enough to say that they had not carried out sufficient preparatory work to make an informed decision. The official procedure was to sign the agreement and then carry out survey work, but relevant organs in China would have carried out extensive preliminary investigations into the feasibility of all kinds of aid projects as they had done for other countries.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the two governments had also discussed a number of projects which were cheaper and more suited to Chinese expertise, including a hospital, an affordable housing project and others.<sup>53</sup> Beijing was also in the midst of deploying a continent-wide system of agricultural assistance for the purposes of expelling Taipei's aid once and for all, and the construction of this airport does not appear to be connected to this.<sup>54</sup> Even the UK government was surprised at China's choice to go along with Ramgoolam's airport, as it had expected Beijing to attempt to take over one of its own agricultural projects in which it had made considerable investment before abandoning.<sup>55</sup>

One explanation for Beijing's agreement to construct the airport may lie in Mauritius' geostrategic importance, and this is the explanation suggested by the UK FCO's dossiers on the agreement. Mauritius, finding itself and its former territory (the Chagos Archipelago) a focus of the two poles of the Cold War, was considered by the UK government to be the 'Stella clavisque maris Indici'. 56 In the British High Commission's estimation, Mauritius was a place that Beijing 'cannot allow to go by default to other Powers, particularly the USSR'. 57 In the era of what Bill Rankin calls the 'pointillist empire', tiny island nations like Mauritius had become as important if not more strategically viable than large, contiguous colonial territories. Despite the fact that the UK had concluded that China would face steep opposition in the actual implementation of its projects, it also recognised that the massive extension of aid had nonetheless made it impossible to dislodge Beijing's influence from this increasingly important outpost in the Cold War arena of the Indian Ocean.

Another explanation may be far more banal. As discussed earlier, the Soviet Union concluded a temporary air traffic agreement with Mauritius in late 1971, seemingly hoping to expand its commercial airline presence in East Africa and provide access to Soviet tourists to the tourist hotspot of Mauritius. It was likely that it also had strategic aims aside from this, including the transit of scholarship students and intelligence personnel. Undermining this effort by providing a new airport and thereby staking a claim on Mauritian air traffic presented an opportunity to exclude the Soviets from potential economic and strategic gains. Moreover, China was not alone in this effort. The UK and others were already engaged in limiting Soviet penetration of the island nation. By gaining a stake in the relevant industries, China would thereby both gain an outpost in the Indian Ocean and deal its primary rival a small but meaningful strategic blow alongside the other anti-Soviet powers. If the Soviet engagement with Mauritius was a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup>Mauritius is given its own entry in internally circulated economic reports as at least as early as 1959. 《非洲经济贸 易参改资料》,对外贸易部行情研究所,1959年9月.

<sup>53</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA: 'The New Chinese Presence'; 'Chinese Aid to Mauritius'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup>See 蒋华杰, '农技援非(1971–1983):中国援非模式与成效的个案研究', 《外交评论》2013年01期第30-49页.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA: 'The New Chinese Presence'; 'Chinese Aid to Mauritius'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup>Indeed, this is its motto.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup>FCO 31/1227, TNA: 'The New Chinese Presence'; 'Chinese Activities in Mauritius'; 'Chinese Aid to Mauritius'.

'foot in the door' as the US national security memo put it, China could join the other powers in giving it a stubbed toe and driving it out. Moreover, although £13.5 million was a considerable sum, it is important to make the distinction between aid extended and aid drawn upon. Because the loan was not drawn upon until 1983, this strategic blow against a rival was, in a sense, cheaply purchased.

As pointed out in Li Danhui's Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, due to his 'real and imagined view' of both domestic and foreign threats, by 1964 Mao had begun to place the Soviet Union and the United States on a par under the rubric of neiyouwaihuan (内忧外 患, domestic trouble [internal revisionists] and foreign invasion).<sup>58</sup> This led to a redirection of China's foreign policy towards attacking both imperialism and revisionism, with the latter of the two increasingly being understood as a latent internal danger. By 1969, at the end of the most radical years of the Cultural Revolution, with Sino-Soviet relations at their nadir and facing the risk of a full-fledged war erupting on the Sino-Soviet border, Foreign Minister Chen Yi drafted a report titled 'A Preliminary Assessment of the Possibility of War' under Zhou's instruction. This report unequivocally labelled the Soviet Union as the primary threat to China.<sup>59</sup> In the 1970s, Beijing sought to confront this threat however it could through the improvement of relations with all countries regardless of their ideological affiliation. Mao proposed establishing a 'horizontal line' to 'commonly deal with a bastard [the Soviet Union]'. 60 It is against this backdrop that Beijing's aid diplomacy in this period should be considered.

Soviet-Mauritian engagement continued throughout the 1970s, and Ramgoolam remained outwardly friendly towards Moscow, but the deepening of Soviet influence on the island was halted and the two countries' relations were largely restricted to periodic renewals of the 1969 fisheries agreement. After the Sino-Mauritian agreement was concluded, Aeroflot was only ever able to operate in Mauritius on an ad hoc basis.<sup>61</sup> Even under the more left-leaning leadership of Mauritius' second prime minister, Anerood Jugnauth, Port Louis was reticent to accept Soviet assistance for a number of reasons, and Indian Ocean island nations as a group had swung westward.<sup>62</sup> When the loan was finally drawn upon in 1983, the Soviet Union's Aeroflot was not among the 10 airlines operating at Plaisance, nor were any of its Ilyushin aircraft being used by any other airlines operating there. 63 Meanwhile, Beijing's friendly relations with Mauritius deepened into the current day.

## **Conclusion**

During the Mao era, in contrast to other sources of economic aid, China was remarkable for its outward commitment to providing 'disinterested' aid to the countries of Africa. In the 1960s, this was ostensibly in the spirit of Afro-Asian solidarity against imperialism. This 'disinterested' spirit of the 'poor helping the poor' was marketed as the primary attribute of the Beijing branded alternative to other sources of aid, whether those be 'neo-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup>Li Danhui, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973: A New History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup>Barnouin and Yu, *Chinese Foreign Policy during the Cultural Revolution*, 139.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup>Li, Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 260–1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup>After the expiry of the temporary air agreement, special provision had to be made for Aeroflot to able to convey fishery personnel to Port Louis. Il'ichev, SSSR i strany Afriki: Chast' 1, 245–58.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Indian Ocean: Reaction to Soviet Initiatives', 1–2, CIA-RDP85T01184R000200850001-1, CIA-FOIA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup>The World Bank, Mauritius – Transport Sector Memorandum, 10.

colonialist' or 'social imperialist'.64 The comparatively smaller Chinese economic aid programmes had at first targeted agriculture and labour-intensive light industry, thus assisting the newly independent countries in rectifying their ubiquitous problem of chronic unemployment. However, in the mid-1960s, a change occurred. Beijing began pursuing not just irrigation projects and handicrafts training, but also massive infrastructural projects in African countries. This is most famously the case in the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority, but there was also the entry of China's aid into the traditionally Soviet field of energy sector development with its construction of a hydroelectric dam in Guinea in 1967 and its abortive attempt at the construction of a railway link between Mali and Guinea. 65 As Beijing's puzzling commitment to construct an airport for Mauritius illustrates, these were not the only examples.

As illustrated by the political will on the part of Beijing to fund an expensive and unnecessary airport when its apparent foreign policy aim of achieving diplomatic recognition had already been achieved and when other far more suitable projects were available, there were overlapping continuities and transformations occurring in Chinese aid diplomacy in the 1970s. The continuities were largely superficial and highlighted China's image as a third option between the West and the Soviet Union. Chinese aid was still attached to the language of the Non-Aligned Movement and Afro-Asian solidarity as well as hitched to established practices from the era of 'revolutionary foreign policy'. This included the idealistic Eight Principles and the dedication to 'disinterested' aid, but also the insistence on direct control of the projects and the persisting opacity of how its aid was governed.

The transformations were more substantial. By the late 1960s, Beijing began experimenting with forms of aid other than explicitly humanitarian ones or the agricultural and light industrial projects meant to alter the class composition of African societies. As shown by its agreement to construct both the Tanzam Railway in 1966 and the Mauritian airport in 1972, China became a player in the world of infrastructural development assistance. Moreover, countries like Mauritius, which lacked the same kind of antiimperialist zeal characteristic of Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, preferred such projects be implemented multilaterally rather than by any one power. As hinted at in George T. Yu's China's African Policy: A Study of Tanzania, which examines the dynamics between Swedish and Chinese aid provision to Tanzania in the late 1960s, China had become more and more accommodating of this trend beginning in the mid-1960s.<sup>66</sup>

This was because of the overarching process of the Sino-Soviet Split and, perhaps to an equal degree, because of Mao and Beijing's progressive reconceptualisation of both the 'third' and 'second' worlds. As Sino-Soviet relations approached their nadir during the most radical days of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing's aid to Africa was increasingly focused on the strategic exclusion of Soviet influence under the doctrine of 'opposing revisionism abroad and defending against revisionism at home' (fanxiu fangxiu, 反修防 慘). This effort ran in parallel with the interests of the former colonial powers. It was for this reason that while Moscow's engagement with Mauritius had engendered the anxiety of the United States and an effort by the UK government to prevent further Soviet

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup>Alaba Ogunsanwo, *China's Policy in Africa 1958–1971* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 201.

<sup>65</sup>Larkin, China and Africa, 98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup>George T. Yu, *China's African Policy: A Study of Tanzania* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

penetration of the Indian Ocean, China's engagement elicited ambivalence and was even welcomed as a counterbalance to Moscow. The FCO concluded in November 1972 that it was best to leave the Chinese effort unopposed and even collaborate where possible. <sup>67</sup> As argued by Friedman, Beijing's radicalism in the 1960s pressured Moscow to itself become more militaristic in Africa in the 1970s. 68 In an obverse sense, that the Soviet Union was able to rise to this challenge in the Horn of Africa might have pushed Beijing to use its aid more creatively, even if that meant acting in tacit cooperation with the former colonial powers. When the Cold War ended, it was through this tacit cooperation that Beijing had carved out a space for its aid to continue to evolve into the form it has taken today. In the case of Mauritius, Beijing continues to invest in its airport. It was even among the four African countries visited by Xi Jinping himself in 2018.

Meanwhile, the latticework of competition between not just the capitalist and socialist worlds but also between the two giants of the socialist camp made for an environment in which Ramgoolam could continue to 'sup with a long spoon'. Far from being a 'peripatetic mendicant' as he was condescendingly labelled by the British government, Ramgoolam and his government were circumspect about the variety of sources of aid available to their country and refused to be browbeaten into accepting terms they thought unfair, even by gargantuan countries like China. <sup>69</sup> In the environment of the global Cold War, even a small country like Mauritius could navigate between aid providers' different disputes and deliver ultimatums to prospective aid providers so as to acquire whatever they thought was the best possible aid package. By operating outside of the Washington-Moscow axis of the Cold War and leveraging not just Western and Soviet aid against one another but also Chinese aid offers, Ramgoolam was able to set the price of entry into the Indian Ocean at financing the ill-conceived airport.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

# **Funding**

This work was supported by the Keble College, University of Oxford [Keble Association Study Award]; Universities' China Committee in London [UCCL Grant].

#### **ORCID**

Thomas Burnham (b) http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9266-0281

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> 'Chinese Activities in Mauritius', FCO 31/1227, TNA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup>Friedman, Shadow Cold War, 218.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup>中国建筑承建的毛里求斯新机场首航成功',《中国建筑》,2013年3月19日accessed 27 January 2020 http:// www.cscec.com/zgjz\_new/xwzx\_new/gsyw\_new/201303/2761675.html. '习近平抵达毛里求斯共和国过境并进行友 好访问',《新华网》, 2018年7月28日, accessed on 24 March 2020 from http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-07/28/ c 1123188371.htm.