

The Perils of Megaphone Diplomacy: Malawian-Mozambican Relations Following The Shire-Zambezi Waterway Project



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Introduction

Malawi – one of the poorest countries in the world – is landlocked, a status that places a huge burden on its economy and renders most of its exports uncompetitive. Landlocked countries rely on rail and road transportation, which in turn result in high costs. Most transportation of goods in Malawi is undertaken by road, and compared to other developing countries, its percentage of transportation costs to total production costs is extremely high (AfdB 2011). Indeed, Malawi's transport costs alone are among the highest on the continent, which in turn increase the cost of consumer imports (UNECA 2016: 179). Such costs are further exacerbated by the rising cost of fuel and hence there is a constant desire in political and administrative circles to initiate projects that reduce transportation costs.

The landlocked geo-political situation has been a dominating theme that has influenced Malawi's foreign policy since independence in 1964. Apart from surrounding Malawi and sharing large parts of its borders, Mozambique also offers the closest port city available for Malawian trade and commerce. For purposes of trade, Malawi uses four so-called corridors – Dar es Salaam, Beira, Nacala and Durban – three of which pass through

Mozambique. Since its independence, however, Malawi's diplomatic relations with Mozambique have not been harmonious. Indeed, Malawi's quest to deal with its geo-political disadvantage of being landlocked often appears to collide with Mozambique's national interests.

This article critically discusses a recent and highly controversial effort undertaken by Malawi to improve its geo-political position under the umbrella of the Shire-Zambezi Waterway project. The main goal of the project was to provide Malawi with access to the Indian ocean through Mozambique's port city of Chinde. Despite its significance, this case has surprisingly not attracted much scholarly attention. We argue that despite making economic sense, the 'megaphone diplomacy' that the former Malawian president pursued with Mozambique resulted in the failure of the project. Indeed, the Malawian president appeared to overlook the socio-political interests of Mozambique. And rather than using more established and sombre diplomatic approaches, the tactics used by Malawi angered the Mozambicans. Despite the popularity of concepts such as 'globalization', 'regional integration' and 'partnerships', we demonstrate how the national interest continues to reign supreme in diplomacy. We argue that since Malawi was operating from a position of low power, the Malawian President's use of megaphone diplomacy was not an ideal option. Indeed, we find that the megaphone strategy can be a useful tool when the one initiating it has comparatively more power and influence. Our methodological approach builds on a range of sources. We conducted an extensive literature review of available academic texts, media reports and institutional reports. These were supplemented by a few interviews with key informants conducted in 2018-2019.

This article is divided into four parts. We begin with a theoretical background on diplomacy in international relations followed by a discussion on Malawi's geographical status and its historical influence on the country's diplomatic strategy. The third section discusses the impact of

megaphone diplomacy in relation to the Shire-Zambezi Waterway project and the extent to which it resulted in a clash of national interests. In the concluding section, we offer some overarching conclusions of our study while also briefly discussing the current status of the project and its future viability.

Diplomacy and International Relations

Modern-day diplomacy may be traced back to the era of the French Revolution when early forms of the modern state emerged (Scott 2011). Scholars have offered various definitions of diplomacy, although certain salient features

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– such as "negotiation" among states and the "pursuit of peace" – are frequently highlighted in the literature. In practice, there is a strong link between diplomacy and foreign policy. Consequently, the term 'diplomacy' has often been used as a "synonym for foreign policy" or specifically, diplomacy may refer to one of the tools for the implementation of a foreign policy (Lee and Hocking 2011: 1). For example, Stanzel (2018: 7) defines diplomacy as "a pragmatic approach to manage the relations between states and other institutions in the intergovernmental space with the aim of arriving at peaceful conflict resolutions". Lee and

Hocking (2011: 1) claim that "in its broadest sense, diplomacy refers to the conduct of human affairs by peaceful means, employing techniques of persuasion and negotiation". Sharp (2009) argues that while diplomacy does not normally feature highly in everyday life, it assumes greater importance when something goes wrong in international politics. Stanzel (2018) offers a different perspective, arguing that the contemporary general public is getting increasingly interested in the work of diplomats and (using mostly civil society organizations) are often seeking ways to influence the process.

Foreign policy can generally be described as a strategy, which reflects a state's own goals and objectives or interests in the international arena as well as specific actions undertaken to achieve

those goals. At the centre of foreign policy is the concept of “national interest”, whose definition varies, depending on actors involved. As Alden and Aran (2017) put it, national interest can simply be defined as “attainment of power”, whether economic, military or cultural.

Among the dominant theories in the field of international relations are realism and liberalism.

Prominent realists such as Edward Carr, Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz argue that states are, more often than not, focused on their own survival and hence pursue foreign policies that protect their national interest. And since states cannot simply protect their interests and survive without power, the international arena is fraught with activities aimed at acquiring and consolidating such power. By contrast proponents of liberalism (or idealism) argue that states are generally good and tend to seek cooperation. Thus, Wight (in Sharp 2009: 8) claims that idealism “presents the world in terms of interests and power ... how to survive and prosper in it ... Its focus is on exploring attempts to reform and improve international relations by the application of reason to the problems”. Although Sharp (2009) argues that diplomacy and diplomats are typically guided by almost all applicable theories of international relations, Alden and Aran (2017) claim that realism has significantly influenced diplomacy in theory and practice. Similarly, others argue that diplomacy is mainly analysed with “analytical frameworks drawn almost exclusively from the realist tradition” (Lee and Hocking 2011: 2). The dominance of the realist perspective is aptly reflected by Henry Kissinger (in Dlamini 2003: 171) who once remarked, “Nations have pursued self-interest more frequently than high-minded principle, and have competed more than they have co-operated”. Kissinger also added another critical statement, when he stated, “there is little evidence to suggest that this age-old mode of behaviour has changed or that it is likely to change in decades ahead”. Similarly, Roberts (2009: 2) observes, “the urge to expand territory and the determination to resist are still with us”.

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Megaphone diplomacy

Megaphone diplomacy is generally understood as an activity in which political leaders or policy makers use the mass media to indirectly convey their message to the other party in a conflict when it has been deemed as practically impossible or simply not desirable to do so directly. According to Ruhlig (2018: 12), megaphone diplomacy consists of “government representatives making public statements on sensitive ... issues”. Others believe that that megaphone diplomacy “involves presenting information to journalists in newsworthy formats and hoping it will be picked up and reach the other side, as the sender of the message has relinquished all overt control over the way the message is communicated” (Sparre 2001: 89-90). In addition to these perspectives, we go a step further and add an additional element to the definition. We suggest that megaphone diplomacy is a diplomatic strategy in which country ‘A’ deliberately makes decisions that may ultimately affect country ‘B’, but country ‘B’ is bypassed or nominally involved so that eventually country ‘B’ is forced to adopt the decision made by country ‘A’.

Some claim that megaphone diplomacy is the “antithesis of diplomacy” (Robert 2009: 9) and that it is often not an appropriate approach to pursue for several reasons. For example, megaphone diplomacy is a product of the need of political leaders, for domestic political purposes, “to talk toughly and often roughly even when it will damage their longer term aims” (Ibid.). Other reasons could include the embassy or ambassador of a country not being kept up-to-date on the decisions being made by the political leadership back home. And when they do become aware of what has been said by their leaders, it is often too late to act prudently. In other words, “It’s often the diplomat on the ground who has to attempt to repair the damage done by resorting to megaphone diplomacy” (Ibid.).

Some scholars argue that megaphone diplomacy is the opposite of “quiet” diplomacy (Moyo 2012; Dlamini 2003). For example, Collins and Packer (2006: 10) claim that the best way to explain the various approaches to diplomacy – public, megaphone and quiet diplomacy – is to distinguish these according to their purpose. Public diplomacy typically targets the domestic audience while megaphone primarily aims at courting international attention on a particular issue. By contrast, “the aim of quiet diplomacy is to create conditions in which parties feel comfortable to act, in particular allowing parties calmly to evaluate positions and interests, to weigh options and consider independent and impartial advice” (Ibid.). Quiet diplomacy is not secret but rather confidential and discreet. Nations usually benefit from quiet diplomacy because among other things, it “uses media tactfully and tactically”. Megaphone diplomacy, on the other hand, may still be useful when other approaches have failed to achieve their purposes (Ibid.: 12).

In order to demonstrate the value of quiet diplomacy, Roberts (2009: 15) cites the case of the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, whereby they managed to hold, for 10 years, “active discreet negotiations” that settled a 60-year dispute about British property that was seized by Russians during their political revolution. Similarly, Thambipillai (2017: 5) cites the case of Brunei and the numerous political challenges it faces, particularly in relation to contentious sea borders with its big neighbours. Despite being one of the smallest countries in Asia, Brunei’s astute foreign policy strategy has helped it enjoy “peace, stability and development, status quo for over a century” because it embraces “quiet diplomacy, not megaphone diplomacy”. The general consensus in the literature is that quiet diplomacy ought to be preferred over megaphone diplomacy. As a former Danish Foreign Minister put it in the context of managing difficult Danish-Chinese relations: “I do not believe in megaphone diplomacy, where you end up shouting at each other. I’m sure that the Chinese side will be well aware of our position on human rights by the end of our meeting [quiet diplomacy]” (Forsby 2018: 32). Indeed, as Dlamini (2003: 175) argues, “as soon as you shout from the rooftop you cease to be diplomatic”.

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Malawian-Mozambican Relations

The current shape of Malawi is like a knife that penetrates into Mozambique and is in many ways symbolic of the uneasy relationship that these countries have historically experienced. The contemporary international boundaries between Malawi and Mozambique were drawn up under controversial circumstances when compared to the boundaries that Malawi shares with Zambia and Tanzania. Indeed, the process of drawing up the borders between Malawi and Mozambique was a product of intense rivalry between Portugal and Britain that almost resulted in a war (Winslett 2008). The British interest in the region can be traced back to the exploits and adventures of Dr David Livingstone (Ross 2009; McCracken 2012). After he had explored much of the African interior, particularly in central Africa, Livingstone recommended that Scottish missionaries should settle in the area to preach the gospel as well as establish viable commercial

activities to counter the slave trade that continued to thrive in the area. Several groups responded to Livingstone’s call and mission stations were established in what is modern day Malawi. However, despite well-established settlements by Scottish missionaries in the area, Britain never made any official claim to the territory (McCracken 2008). Things changed, however, after the 1884 Berlin conference, when the Portuguese demanded a trans-African corridor that would connect its colonies – present day Mozambique and Angola. This corridor

was to pass through what today is Zambia and Zimbabwe (Winslett 2008). The Portuguese also sent their military expeditions up the Shire river with the intention of occupying the territory that is present day Malawi.

The above two actions threatened the long-term prospects of the established Scottish missionaries in the region who became increasingly suspicious of Portuguese influence. Cecil Rhodes, a British-South African millionaire who had a vision of extended British influence from Cape Town to Cairo (Winslett 2008; McCracken 2012) sympathized with such concerns. Following the intense lobbying by the Scottish missionaries and Cecil Rhodes, the British Prime Minister Lord

Salisbury issued an ultimatum to the Portuguese on 11th January 1890 to withdraw their claim over the said land (Winslett 2008; Ross 2009). The Portuguese withdrew and after lengthy discussions, the Anglo-Portuguese Convention of 1891 produced, among other things, the modern day boundaries of Mozambique and Malawi (Winslett 2008, McCracken 2008; McCracken 2012). The 1891 agreement gave the British full rights to the Portuguese port of Chinde and well as navigation rights on the Zambezi-Shire river.

Diplomatic relations during the Kamuzu Era

It is well-established in the academic literature that Malawi and Mozambique have not enjoyed cordial diplomatic relations, and Seda (2015: 134) argues that the two counties have historically “developed political relationships based on mistrust”. Kamuzu Banda, Malawi’s first president, had a keen interest in ensuring that Malawi have its own port in the eastern parts of the country. Such an ambition meant that Malawi needed to acquire land from Mozambique. Hence, in the 1960s, Banda began claiming that a large part of Mozambique, including the port of Beira, was in fact a part of the ancient Maravi Kingdom which had its headquarters in present day Malawi (Chiume 1975). By claiming this piece of land, Banda began articulating a vision where Malawi would no longer be land-locked. Not surprisingly, Banda’s claim was dismissed at the 1964 OAU summit held in Cairo that re-affirmed the previously established borders as sovereign and legitimate (Munene 2015: 125).

Unlike Tanzania and other countries in the region, the Malawian government under Kamuzu Banda never supported Frelimo freedom fighters during their struggle for independence in Mozambique; on the contrary, Banda established diplomatic links with the Portuguese colonizers (Hedges 1989). And following Mozambique’s independence from Portugal in 1975, Malawi – with the help of the apartheid regime in South Africa – provided logistical and intelligence support to the Renamo rebels who were fighting against the Mozambican government (Hedges 1989, Mukuse 2011). Malawi’s attempt to thwart the actions of the new government of Mozambique can be partly explained in the context ideological differences in southern Africa that emerged during the Cold War period. Malawi embraced a pro-Western ideology while Mozambique was pro-East and

received considerable support from the Soviet Union. There were also frequent reports that Mozambique allegedly provided safe spaces for Malawian socialist rebels such as Attati Mpakati who opposed Kamuzu Banda’s dictatorial rule (Mukuse 2011).

During a Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) meeting in Blantyre in September 1986, Samora Machel (Mozambique), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia) and Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe) tried to persuade Kamuzu Banda to stop sponsoring Mozambican rebels. When Mozambican President Samora Machel died in a plane crash in Mbuzini, South Africa the following month, several rumours began floating around implicating the apartheid regime in South Africa in the accident (Hedges 1989). And according to one rumour, South Africa’s actions were in response to reports that Machel was planning to attack Malawi (Seda 2015). Such rumours and allegations increased the political tension between Malawi and Mozambique and damaged Malawi’s reputation vis-à-vis other countries in Africa (Chirambo 2004).

Despite such tensions, the signing of the peace accord between Mozambique’s Renamo and Frelimo movements in 1992 and the democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 positively reinforced diplomatic relations between Malawi and Mozambique (Mukuse 2011). Moreover, a few years earlier, a Mozambique-Malawi Permanent Joint Commission on Defence and Security was formed in 1986/7, with the goal of tackling emerging security issues. Another factor that helped ease tensions and bolster Malawi’s reputation was its willingness to admit around Mozambican refugees, who numbered around 780,000 by 1989 (Seda 2015: 125).

The Shire-Zambezi Waterway

Explorers and missionaries were among the first to routinely use the Shire and Zambezi rivers for inland transportation. The approx. 380 km route stretched from the Indian ocean along Mozambique’s coast line to Nsanje, a district in southern Malawi. David Livingstone, upon using the Shire-Zambezi Waterway in the 1850s and 1860s, described it as “God’s highway to the interior” (Barrett 2013: 18). By this time, the Portuguese were already established on parts of Mozambique’s eastern coast. Inspired

by Livingstone's exploits, the African Lakes Company was established in 1877 and began conducting the earliest commercial navigation of this waterway. It also maintained close links with Scottish missionaries who had established mission stations (White 1993). The main aim of the African Lakes Company was to support missionary activities in the African interior by providing, among other things, reliable forms of water transport. The company, which had several steamboats, established trading posts along the Shire river as well as in Lake Malawi. The port of Chinde at the mouth of the Zambezi River became the entry point into this waterway. In order to avoid conflict with the Portuguese, the Anglo-Portuguese Convention of 1891 allowed the British to lease the waterway for one hundred years starting from the year 1892 (White 1993). Over the years, three major events ultimately resulted in the closure of this Shire-Zambezi Waterway. First, a major cyclone in 1922 destroyed much of Chinde, which in turn adversely affected agricultural development and Malawi's economy. Thereafter, two specific events – the establishment of the trans-Zambezi railway and establishment of Beira Port – proved to be the death knell for the waterway (Vail 1975; White 1993).

In the early 1970s, the waterway witnessed a revival when sugarcane began being transported with the help of a privately-operated barge service from Chiromo in Malawi to Chinde port in Mozambique (AfDB 2011). Following regional unrest and associated disruptions, Malawi began exploring alternative trade routes including Durban and Dar-es-Salaam (Ibid.). Currently, Malawi's trade consists of using four so-called corridors – Dar es Salaam, Beira, Nacala and Durban – all of which pose challenges. For example, Beira port is shallow and must be dredged often. And although Nacala is a deep-water port, it has undeveloped rail and road access. While a reliable route, shipping time and costs from Durban are very high (AfdB 2011).

The Malawian government submitted a concept note on the waterway project in April 2005 to the heads of state and governments of the implementation committee of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). During this event, Malawi's minister of transport remarked that the waterway would be of "immense economic importance" not just to Malawi but also to others in the region as it will drastically curtail transport costs.¹ Starting in 2006, several feasibility studies were

conducted on the viability and navigability of the Shire-Zambezi waterway. The project, which is regulated by various agreements on shared water a management in Africa, has also received considerable political support from the African Union and SADC (Ibid.). Several studies, while positive on the navigability of the waterway, recommended further attention on economic and environmental impacts. In April 2007, Malawi signed an MoU with Zambia and Mozambique for the project. Subsequently, a Zimbabwean firm was contracted to undertake a feasibility study in 2009-2010, although this was never completed. Thereafter the international consultancy company *Hydroplan* was commissioned for a study. Its report concluded that the project was not viable. The waterway included a 20 km stretch of marshland on the river Shire, and sections of the Zambezi was characterised by seasonal sandbanks that would require constant dredging. The report also concluded that Chinde was not suitable for large vessels and that Beira should be the preferred option.

The Malawian government nonetheless went ahead with its plans and contracted a Portuguese company to develop the infrastructure of Nsanje port. In 2010, and without seeking permission from Mozambique, Malawi sent barges along the waterway on three separate occasions for test runs with the aim of proving the viability of the project in the absence of feasibility studies. Upon completion of the first phase, the Malawian government officially organised an opening ceremony for project at Nsanje in October 2010, where the presidents of Zambia and Zimbabwe attended together with Malawian President Bingu Mutharika. The Mozambican president declined the invitation to attend. The three presidents waited in vain for the arrival of the inaugural barge as it was impounded by Mozambican officials, who claimed that they had not provided permission for passage. The Mozambican perspective appeared to be largely shaped by the conclusions of the *Hydroplan* report and the need for additional environmental impact studies before allowing commercial barges to ply on the route. The Mozambican government was also of the view that Malawi's president had unilaterally taken a decision to announce an international trade route without consulting them.²

1 <http://www.ipsnews.net/2007/05/trade-southern-africa-new-zambezi-waterway-planned/>

2 <https://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/vainglorious-waterway-quest-leaves-presidents-stranded/6093/>

The waterway project in relation to events following the re-introduction of democracy in Malawi

After three decades of autocratic rule, Kamuzu Banda's presidency finally came to an end in 1994 when Malawi re-introduced a multiparty system of government. Banda's successor – Bakili Muluzi, leader of United Democratic Front (UDF) party – embarked on a strategy to 'demonize' the Kamuzu Banda regime in an effort to cultivate improved with countries in the southern African region (Patel and Hajat 2013). An important thrust of Malawi's revamped foreign policy consisted of promoting the idea of peaceful co-existence with Mozambique. These efforts of "opening up" was largely welcomed by Malawi's neighbours and the traditional route to the sea was maintained, albeit not questioned.

After serving his two terms, and following a failed attempt to change the constitution that would allow him a third term in office, Bakili Muluzi nominated Bingu Wa Mutharika as the presidential candidate of the UDF party. While Mutharika won the May 2004 elections with Muluzi's backing, he quickly began pursuing policies that were radically different from his predecessor. Mutharika subsequently formed his own party – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – and broke away from the UDF on whose ticket he had won the elections. A major difference in foreign policy priorities between Mutharika and Muluzi was the former's admiration of Kamuzu Banda. While Muluzi had tried as much as possible to erase the name of Kamuzu from all public infrastructure projects in the country, Mutharika did the opposite by reinstating Kamuzu's name wherever possible. For example, the international airport and main hospital in Lilongwe were now reinstated with the Kamuzu name. In addition, and at a huge cost of US\$600,000, Mutharika ordered the construction of a mausoleum in honour of Kamuzu Banda, with four pillars inscribed with Kamuzu's much publicized principles of unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline (Kayuni and Tambulasi 2010). Such hero-worship of Banda began to also benefit

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Mutharika, who was bestowed, by a group of traditional authority leaders ("chiefs"), the title of "Ngwazi" (warrior), which had previously been so revered that it was only conferred on Kamuzu Banda. Kayuni and Tambulasi (2010: 419) aptly capture the close links between Kamuzu Banda and Bingu Mutharika:

Mutharika's leadership is similar to that of Dr Banda. Just like Dr Banda, with Mutharika you cannot predict his next move. He just acts. He has no permanent friends and people don't know him – not even those who think that they are too close to him; in this case, we have another Kamuzu [Banda] in the making... Mutharika's leadership style shows similarities with that of Dr Banda ... With regard to the way he speaks, Mutharika's speeches, like the Ngwazi's, almost always emit authority, and he even mentioned that he is 'ready to be called a dictator'".

Just like Kamuzu Banda, an important component of Mutharika's foreign policy focus was the pre-occupation of doing something to address Malawi's landlocked status. Mutharika concluded that the flagship project of his administration was going to be a revamped Shire-Zambezi Waterway. The goal of the project, which included three countries, was officially "to contribute to the socio-economic development of the region including Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia through the reduction of the cost of transportation by the re-opening of the Shire -Zambezi Waterway for navigation to the Indian Ocean" (ADB 2011).

Mutharika's commitment to the project almost became an obsession and not surprisingly, this directly affected his country's relations with Mozambique. As one former cabinet minister put it, Mutharika said that "If this project is completed, I will be able to die in peace knowing that I have done a great service to the nation. This will be my legacy."³ Similarly, a leaked document from

3 Interview with former cabinet minister, 18 December 2018 (name withheld, Lilongwe)

the US embassy in Lilongwe noted that “The Shire-Zambezi Waterway is clearly a project that is close to President Mutharika’s heart, and he sees it as an important legacy of his presidency” (Lilongwe USA Cable 2006).

The project was heavily publicized on Malawian state media and often mentioned by the president in his speeches. Taking into consideration that at that time Mutharika had just resigned from the UDF party that had elected him to power and had established his new political party – the DPP, getting support in the politically strategic area that is popularly known as “lower Shire” was crucial. The lower Shire area – which comprises of Chikwawa, Nsanje and parts of Mwanza districts – is the area through which the Shire river flows and consequently to be the likely major beneficiaries of the project. The president, in particular, highlighted the economic value of the project and claimed that using the Chinde corridor would reduce the transportation costs from 56% to 30% (GoM 2013). Such reasoning made economic sense and the distance between Malawi’s commercial capital Blantyre and major port cities in the region was envisioned to be significantly reduced if Chinde port was used (see table 1). Currently at 825km (the shortest distance through Beira by road), the Chinde route (416 km) would reduce the distance by half.

Table 1: Distances to Blantyre from main ports

| | Destination | Point of Origin | Distance in Km | Mode of Transport |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Durban | Blantyre | 2,340 | Road |
| 2 | Dar-es-Salaam | Blantyre | 1,978 | Road |
| 3 | Beira | Blantyre | 825 | Road |
| 4 | Beira | Blantyre | 951 | Rail |
| 5 | Nacala | Blantyre | 989 | Rail |
| 6 | Chinde (Mozambique Port) ⁴ | Blantyre | 416 | Boat and Rail |

Source: GoM 2013, with authors’ additional information/modifications

4 GoM (2013) puts distance from Nsanje in Malawi to Chinde in Mozambique at 238 km while AfDB (2011) puts it at 380 km. Whatever the case, the distance still remains significantly shorter using the Shire-Zambezi waterway.

Mutharika’s megaphone diplomacy

Bingu Mutharika deployed a combination of three types of strategies to achieve his goals and put pressure on a reluctant Mozambique to comply with his demands.

First, Mutharika wanted to gain regional and international support for the project. In doing so, he did not wish to commit the same mistake as Kamuzu Banda who had disregarded other African leaders while pursuing policies that resulted in his country’s isolation from the African community. Therefore, Mutharika began by persuading other African leaders when he presented a concept note at an African Union forum in April 2005 as well as SADC and NEPAD. In the case of NEPAD, the concept note was included in the Framework for Sustainable Regional Development. More importantly, the African Union chairperson Alpha Oumar Konaré was invited to Malawi in 2006 and Mutharika gave him a helicopter tour of Nsanje port. As a result of his lobbying efforts, the 2009 African Union Heads of State and Governments Summit endorsed the Shire-Zambezi Waterways project “as a priority project in the promotion of regional integration in the sub-region” (AfDB 2011: 2). By selling the idea to regional African leaders

and gaining their support, Mutharika believed he could put pressure on Mozambique to act according to his preferences.

Second, Mutharika aimed to bolster the credibility of the project by formally and informally broadening its base by including others. Although it was Malawi that was the obvious focus and beneficiary of the project, he managed to rope in Zambia in addition to trying to influence Mozambique to join the project. He, moreover, also ensured that any agreement reached between the parties ought to be formalized and hence the three countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in April 2007 with the following three objectives (Canhanga 2014):

- To contribute to the provision of an efficient transport system, with affordable costs and reliable modes for the three Countries [Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia];
- The Project proposal foresees the opening up the Shire and Zambezi Rivers for navigation to Indian Ocean;
- The implementation of the proposed project should be preceded by a feasibility study for the navigability of Shire-Zambezi Waterway (SZW).

Despite the fact that only three countries were formally committed to the project, Bingu Mutharika (and later his brother Peter Mutharika as well) used every opportunity at international meetings to include several other countries as beneficiaries including Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Tanzania and Rwanda (Chimwala 2005; Mutharika 2014). The goal was to project the image that this was not just a narrow Malawian issue but a wider regional project that could not be ignored by other countries. Mutharika's strategy was thus one that articulated a vision of greater regional integration. Given his background as a former Secretary General of the Preferential Trade Area of East and Central Africa (PTA), Mutharika understood the significance of putting a value on projects that clearly demonstrated the regional integration aspect in foreign policy.

Third, the Malawian President insisted that the project should be completed as soon as possible without considering the views of his Mozambican counterpart. It is possible that Mutharika knew from the beginning that Mozambique would be reluctant to fully participate. He may have thus reasoned that if he demonstrated that he was fully committed, Mozambique would be forced to comply for the sake of maintaining good relations with its neighbour. Thus, without undertaking proper consultations with the Mozambican government and after almost a year in power, Mutharika organized a highly publicized ground-breaking ceremony in Nsanje in October 2005. During this event, he announced the immediate excavation of the riverbank on the place where the port was going to be constructed. This was even before Malawi signed the MoU with Zambia and Mozambique in 2007. This failure to consult was emphasised by a former member of the Malawi/Mozambique Joint Permanent Commission on Defence and Security (JPCDS):

To my knowledge, there was no formal and significant communication between Malawi and Mozambique in the project initiation and implementation, apart from the MOU that was signed in 2007 about the feasibility study. Generally, there were no serious communications in the initial stages of the project, for instance, on how the two countries will work together to maintain security, navigation and immigration and customs control on the water- way. Bingu just started the construction of the port platform in Nsanje without any agreement with the most valuable and strategic partner" (Interview with Malawian former JPCDS committee member, 11th April 2019).

Malawi also contracted a group of Japanese companies (Central Consultant Inc, Nippon Koei Company Ltd, Yachiyo Engineering Company Ltd and Tostems Inc) sponsored by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which provided favourable assessments of the planned waterways project in a joint report published in 2012 (JICA 2012). However, Mozambique remained unconvinced and rejected the report under the pretext that Malawi had undertaken the exercise unilaterally.

Without consulting the Mozambican government, Malawi then engaged Mota-Engil,

a private Portuguese company, to begin phase one of the construction of the port on a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) basis. This phase was quickly completed, and Mutharika's government went ahead to publicize the official opening of the port. Billboards were erected across the country with the words "The dream becomes reality: Nsanje Port opens October 2010". Those invited included the presidents of Zambia (Rupiah Banda) and Zimbabwe (Robert Mugabe) as well as a large gathering of DPP party supporters and the general public. It was also planned that on this day, a barge carrying 60 tonnes of fertilizer was going to sail up the river and arrive to a standing ovation. However, Mozambican authorities impounded the barge and detained the four Malawians who were in the barge for navigating the river without authorization. Mozambique claimed that "an economic feasibility study and an environmental impact assessment (EIA) had not yet been completed for the project" (*The Economist*, 01 December 2010) and that Malawi had not requested official clearance. The Malawian version of the story offers a different perspective. According to the former JPCDS committee member, Mozambique was deliberately sending a message that the project could not proceed without them:

I personally spoke to the Defence Attaché ... and he said the Mozambicans were lying that he did not notify them about the intention to navigate on the water way. He said all the protocols were followed during the whole process, but the Mozambicans did all this to show their muscle and relevance in the whole project. It was essentially sending a message that this project cannot be done without them (Interview with Malawian former JPCDS committee member, 11th April 2019).

It is particularly worth highlighting that before the official opening of Nsanje port in October 2010, Mutharika had undertaken a three-day official visit to Mozambique in August 2009. The agenda for the visit included discussions on the future of the planned Shire-Zambezi Waterway. However, the visit ended prematurely and

apparently nothing of significance was discussed. Mutharika decided to rush back home after an incident in the border district of Ngauma, where Malawian Security forces had set fire to a Mozambican police office following a dispute over the unfair treatment of Malawian nationals by the Mozambican police (Seda 2015). This incident worsened the already fragile relations between the two countries and the progress of the Shire-Zambezi waterway project was adversely affected.⁵ It remains unknown whether this visit, if completed successfully, would have led to renewed hope for the project with Mozambican consent.

The final straw in this whole diplomatic debacle was when a feasibility report was published in September 2013 by *Hydroplan*, a German Consulting company contracted by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) with a US\$ 3.5 million funding from the African Development Bank (AfDB 2011). The report concluded that the project "is technically feasible but not financially viable without investment from beneficiary countries Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia" (Meki 2017; Chimwala 2016; Times 2016). The report also mentioned that Mozambique was unwilling to be involved "because the transport policy in Mozambique is to develop transport by rail and road and [the country] has no industry based along the Zambezi river" (Ibid.). The findings of the report were discussed by the ministers of transport from Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia in Lilongwe in September 2015. However, they could not reach an agreement on the way forward (Chimwala 2016). Finally, in 2017, the government of Mozambique formally communicated that it was withdrawing from the MoU thus effectively killing the project. One commentator aptly summed up Mutharika's gamble:

Mutharika's impatience to find a solution is understandable – too many African infrastructure projects are still gathering dust despite the urgent need for new and improved transport routes. *But it is foolish to fall out with your neighbours in a quest for glory*" (Games 2010, emphasis added).

5 "Malawi's Bingu snubbed by Mozambique President, forced to return 13th August 2006", *The Zimbabwean*, <https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2009/08/malawis-bingu-snubbed-by-mozambique-president-forced-to-return/>

Failure of Megaphone Diplomacy or Clash of National Interests?

Was the failure of the project due to Malawi's megaphone diplomacy or was it simply because Mozambique had already developed its national plans, which did not include the Shire-Zambezi Waterway? Indeed, some may argue that irrespective of Malawi's intentions, Mozambique was never really going to change its opposition on the project. We therefore begin by discussing Mozambique's position in relation to the Shire-Zambezi Waterway before addressing the question of whether Malawi's megaphone diplomacy is to be blamed.

Even before the MoU was signed between the three countries in 2007, Mozambique's development plans had no mention of the Shire-Zambezi Waterway. Indeed, Mozambique's priorities in the 2007 period consisted of reinforcing other transport corridors involving other countries. As Dibben (2007: 13) explains:

"the priority in recent years [for Mozambique] has been for transport corridors: the Maputo corridor linking South Africa's Gauteng Province with Maputo, the Limpopo Corridor linking southern Zimbabwe with Maputo, the Beira Corridor linking central Zimbabwe with Beira, and the Nacala corridor linking Malawi with the northern port of Nacala".

Mozambique was at that time actually strengthening its road and rail networks which connect with other countries. For example, the Sena line, which connects Beira to Malawi, was earmarked for rehabilitation by 2009 with a US\$ 130 million World Bank funded package (Dibben 2007: 13). Furthermore, the 2011 Mozambique Poverty Reduction Paper made no mention of the Shire-Zambezi Waterway but instead called for "Maximizing the use of Beira Port" (Govt. of Mozambique 2011: 143). Thus one explanation would be that although Mozambique signed the MoU, it was not really keen on the project and was merely agreeing to it to maintain good relations with Malawi.

From a realist perspective, the entire issue can be explained by the desire to protect the national interest, which in turn was most likely interpreted

differently by the various stakeholders in the project. It appears relatively clear that Mozambique was uninterested in the project as it already had made other plans. Thus, it was not in Mozambique's national interest to promote the Shire-Zambezi. The Malawian JPCDS committee member described Mozambique's reluctance in the following manner:

The [feasibility] study did not indicate that it's not viable, but that it will be hugely expensive than using the road and rail transportation... My personal opinion is that, there is no good will from the Mozambican side on the project ... they want to remain relevant and have fears that Malawi and Zambia will use the waterway more ... and they will eventually lose out on revenue (Interview with former Malawian JPCDS committee member, 11th April 2019).

From a diplomatic perspective, Malawi did not appear to recognise Mozambique's understanding of its national interest. Realists argue that each country has its own set of interests that it wants to protect. Thus, all countries cannot always have similar interests. It is the role of decision-makers to use different strategies to ensure that their national interest goals are achieved despite conflictual interests in the international arena. The perception of Malawi on the Mozambican side was that Mutharika wanted to expand into Mozambican territory not physically but indirectly by gaining free access to the sea. Gaining a free foothold in the Indian Ocean port was what the colonial British government fought for, and which led to the Anglo-Portuguese Convention of 1891. While Kamuzu Banda fought for the same goal using a strategy that antagonized several regional leaders, Mutharika's use of megaphone diplomacy led to the ultimate collapse of the project. Indeed, Malawi's approach to partnership with Mozambique was ill-prepared and not strategic.

Taking into consideration that Mozambique was operating from a position of power (it controls access to the sea and at the same time was unlikely to benefit much from the Shire-Zambezi Waterway), the use of megaphone diplomacy was not the best strategy for Malawi. As Thambipillai (2017: 5) argues, a country, which is operating from a position of low power, needs to take the strategic position of quiet diplomacy for it to

achieve its goals in the international arena. The megaphone diplomacy tactic actually appeared to reinforced Mozambique's reluctance. The Mozambicans thus felt undermined when Mutharika began the project without any tangible agreement that could be legally binding on both parties.

The Shire-Zambezi Waterway Project after Bingu

After his sudden death in April 2012, Bingu Mutharika was succeeded by Joyce Banda who tried to improve Malawi's relationship with Mozambique by not actively advocating for the waterway. However, Banda lost the May 2014 elections and was succeeded by Bingu Mutharika's brother, Peter Mutharika. A few months after taking over as President, Peter Mutharika resuscitated the Shire-Zambezi Waterway project in a speech to business leaders in New York in September 2014. He declared:

My brother and I, before he died, went to Hamburg to see how they have done their inland port there which has opened that whole Baltic area in Germany. So, the port will go from Nsanje Port, Shire, Zambezi to the Indian Ocean, a distance of about 128 km ... it will be the largest single project in Africa since the Aswan Dam in 1959 in Egypt. It will cater for Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania (Mutharika 2014: 10)

Malawi's finance minister subsequently stated in Parliament that Nsanje Port was going to be prioritized by the government in the 2017/18 budget (Chiphwanya 2017). This renewed focus on the waterway project did not go down well with the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCCI), which had repeatedly warned that the project could end up being a white elephant (Ibid.). MCCCI reiterated the numerous difficulties associated with the project – siltation in the river, the possibility of paying double handling costs, uncertainty of the water table, and the need for additional investments for improving road connectivity between Blantyre and Nsanje.

Mozambique has continued its policy of reinforcing its existing road and rail network as well as improving the Beira port. For example, in 2017 Beira port was upgraded, which more than tripled its capacity to handle containers. In December 2017, the Mozambican Deputy Minister of Transport, Manuela Rebelo, officially inaugurated the new extensions and upgrades in order "to attract traffic from other countries of the Southern African Development Community region, such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo". More importantly, during this event, the Deputy Minister said that "it had always been the government's dream to make Beira a competitive port, and to ensure a continual increase in traffic through the port".⁶ Mozambique also approved an additional US\$ 290 million investment in Beira by concession holder Cornelder de Moçambique (CdM). In this approval, it was expected that "CdM intends to strengthen the port's cargo processing capacity, which involves adding additional berths and parks, terminals, warehouses and other facilities", which in reality means doubling the capacity of the port (Macauhub, 16 November 2018).

Despite re-introducing the Shire-Zambezi Waterway in the 2017/18 budget, it appears that the Malawian government has now accepted (though not explicitly) that the project has failed and that it is no longer prioritized by its neighbours. For example, the current ruling party's 2019 manifesto does not refer to this project at all. However, the project resurfaces in public discussions every now and then as politicians do not wish disappoint the inhabitants of the lower Shire area. For instance, during a political rally in held in Nsanje and Chikwawa districts of Malawi on 8th September 2019, President Peter Mutharika said that the Nsanje Port project would be completed as soon as it receives the approval of the Mozambican government (Chauluka 2019). However, this was contradicted by the Head of the Department of Bilateral Cooperation in Mozambique's Ministry of Transport and Communication, Horacio Parquinio said that:

6 *The Herald*, 15 December 2017.

At a recent meeting on the Nacala Corridor project, they [Malawi delegation] wanted to bring the issue of the port of Nsanje to the table and we, the Mozambican delegation made it clear that this was no longer a matter for discussion and the issue was taken off the agenda (Chikoko 2019).

Conclusion

Malawi's landlocked status and its quest for a favourable access to the sea has been a perennial problem since independence. Although successive Malawian leaders have tried to improve the situation, the national interests of Malawi and Mozambique have never been fully harmonized. Consequently, Malawi's choice of megaphone diplomacy has not been an ideal approach because instead of improving the situation, it actually deepened the tensions with Mozambique. Operating from a position of lesser power than its neighbour, Malawi would have been better served using quiet diplomacy. The negative historical experience also reinforced Mozambique's interpretation of Malawi's intentions.

From our above analysis, we conclude that the waterway project may work out in the future on two possible grounds: if and when Malawi changes its diplomatic approach and when the national

interests of both countries are harmonized. For instance, in April 2019, Malawi and Mozambique signed technical and commercial agreements that allows the Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM) to purchase 200 megawatts (MW) of power from Mozambique starting in 2022 (African Leadership 2019). Having secured financial backing to the tune of 20 million Euros from the World Bank and a Norwegian Trust Fund, power lines are expected to cover a distance of 210 kilometres from Matambo in Tete Province of Mozambique to Phombeya in Balaka district of Malawi (African Leadership 2019). What is particularly interesting about this collaboration in the power sector is that this idea started in 2007 when both Malawi and Mozambique were willing to undertake it. However, in a possible retaliation act to Mozambique's impounding of the Malawian barge sailing on the Shire-Zambezi waterway, Bingu cancelled the deal in 2010. The current spate of power shortage and chronic blackouts in Malawi has forced the country to go back to this abandoned project. This is a clear case of a project that has finally worked out because both countries share a common national interest. Indeed, the Malawi—Mozambique electricity interconnectivity project shows that when interests are harmonized, it possible to implement a major international project. In terms of completion of the Shire-Zambezi waterway, either Malawi has to change its diplomatic strategy or wait for an opportune time in future when Mozambique's interests will be in tandem with that of Malawi.

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