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China's Engagement with Africa: Foundations for an Alternative Governance Regime

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Executive Summary

- Africa’s central role within China’s broader foreign policy dates to the early days of the Cold War and has been reemphasized by successive Chinese leaders. In recent years, China’s engagement has grown to span the continent.
- Through a series of strategic partnerships in each key African region, Beijing prioritizes its relationships with Africa’s most populous, economically dynamic, and culturally influential countries to advance its interests across the continent. Beijing maintains particularly strong ties with countries with which it has historically shared an ideological affinity, such as Angola, Ethiopia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.
- Beijing views Africa as a uniquely promising testing ground for the export of its political and economic governance concepts. Accordingly, it has made a focused effort to promote its model of state-led economic growth under one-party, authoritarian rule to African countries through party-to-party training and engagements, sales of advanced digital surveillance technology, and media influence. Through these and related efforts, Beijing has harnessed its growing influence on the continent to establish the foundations for an alternative, illiberal global governance regime.

Introduction

China has made Africa a central focus of its foreign policy since the early days of the Cold War. Over the last two decades, this focus has grown more pronounced as Beijing has significantly expanded its political, technological, economic, and security engagement with nearly all African countries. China’s deepening connections with Africa have helped the continent in many important ways, most notably through activities to address the severe infrastructure shortage many African countries face. At the same time, Beijing has sought to leverage its near-ubiquitous presence on the continent to promote an alternative political model that promotes state-led, illiberal governance. Amid the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, some African countries are pushing back against China, but it remains to be seen whether this will significantly erode Beijing’s considerable influence across the continent. This report examines Beijing’s political activities on the African continent, including China’s party-to-party training with African partners, Chinese interference in domestic politics on the continent, and Beijing’s growing dominance in Africa’s technological space. It also assesses Beijing’s penetration of African media and efforts to enlist African partners to support its priorities on the international stage. China has other important strategic and economic interests in Africa, particularly in resource acquisition, but this report focuses solely on Beijing’s political activities on the continent.

Foundations for a Chinese World Order

China views Africa as a continent uniquely suited to its political governance and economic development model, and in recent years has grown increasingly confident in its ability to export these concepts to African countries. To date, Beijing has released two white papers on its Africa policy, one in 2006 and one in 2015. In contrast to the 2006 white paper, the 2015 white paper articulates a clear, China-inspired governance model for Africa.¹ While the 2006 white paper emphasizes the ability of African countries to develop independently, the 2015 white paper highlights Beijing’s comparative advantages in a variety of domains—such as law enforcement, the judicial process, media, and science and technology—and more openly calls on African countries to learn from China’s experience.² The 2015 white paper also describes a number of deficiencies in Africa, such as “backward infrastructure,” “cyberspace management,” and “riot control,” and posits a Chinese role in guiding African countries to build up their capacity in these and other domains through training and exchanges.³ Indeed, according to the 2015 white paper, Beijing seeks to enlist “chosen African countries”—referring to China’s closest African partners—to promote state-led economic development across the continent.⁴

Beijing views its ties with Africa as a cornerstone of its broader efforts to revise global governance structures and norms. The 2015 white paper underscores Africa’s role in building a “community of common human destiny”—a

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formulation for a China-led global governance regime—to achieve a “comprehensive reform” of the current international system.⁵ In 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described Beijing as viewing its relations with Africa as a “template” for its community of common human destiny.⁶ In another instance, Foreign Minister Wang said China and Africa are “natural allies” in the quest to revise the global order due to their common experiences of colonialism and shared grievances over the current international system, a theme that is also reinforced in the 2015 white paper.⁷ Illustrating how highly Beijing regards its ties to the continent, Chinese foreign ministers have chosen Africa as the destination of their first overseas trip each year since 1991.⁸ Foreign Minister Wang repeated this pattern most recently with his visit to Burundi, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, and Zimbabwe in January 2020.⁹

In exporting its alternative model, China has deepened ties with countries across the continent while prioritizing its relationships with strategic partners located in each key African region. Some of Beijing’s top strategic partners on the continent include Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania in East Africa; Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa,* and Zimbabwe in Southern Africa; Egypt and Sudan in North Africa; and Guinea and Nigeria in West Africa.†¹⁰ Due to these countries’ status as leaders within their respective regions, the Chinese government believes they are best positioned to spread its model more broadly across the continent. These countries are also all significant destinations of Chinese investment in critical infrastructure, and many of them have deepening ties with China’s military.¹¹

Ideological affinity drawing on a shared socialist and anticolonial heritage plays a key role in a number of China’s strongest and most enduring partnerships, including those with Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Most of these countries have been governed since their independence by the former national liberation movements that China trained during the Cold War.¹² As Paul Nantulya, research associate at the National Defense University’s Africa Center for Strategic Studies, noted in testimony before the Commission in February 2020, most of these ruling parties’ “Maoist heritage and shared traditions offer China familiarity, predictability, and dependability on which it can craft strategically-focused relations.”¹³

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges for China-Africa relations and may alter China’s relationships and image on the continent. In recent weeks, African leaders have spoken out against China in unusually frank terms for its reported mistreatment of Africans living in China, including actions forcing evictions of some Africans living in Chinese hotels and preventing Africans from entering restaurants and shops.¹⁴ These actions were ostensibly taken to stop the spread of COVID-19.¹⁵ Many African countries—including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda—as well as the African Union have expressed alarm at this development, with the governments of Ghana and Nigeria summoning the Chinese ambassadors in their countries to voice their displeasure with this racially based discrimination.¹⁶ African leaders have also called for Chinese debt relief in light of the global economic slowdown caused by COVID-19. In April 2020, Ghana became the first African country to publicly call on Beijing for help in relieving the continent’s debt.¹⁷ Nigeria has also signaled it would discuss debt relief with China in the context of the ongoing pandemic.¹⁸ China has reacted to calls for debt relief and to the criticism of its treatment of Africans living in China by stressing themes of Sino-African solidarity, though Beijing’s ultimate response remains to be seen.¹⁹

* China has also used its membership in BRICS—an emerging-market group consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—to deepen its political ties with South Africa. In November 2019, General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping met with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa at the 11th annual BRICS summit in Brazil. According to a press release in Chinese media, the leaders discussed maintaining and developing their bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership. *Xinhua*, “Xi Meets Ramaphosa to Advance China-South Africa Ties,” November 15, 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/15/c_138555958.htm.

† Beijing has a multitiered system to rank its diplomatic partnerships with countries. The highest three levels of partnership are: comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, comprehensive strategic partnership, and strategic partnership relations. Thirteen African countries enjoy partnership relations with China across these levels. Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe are in the first category of comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa are in the second category of comprehensive strategic partnership. Angola and Sudan are in the third category of strategic partnership relations. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China’s Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests*, written testimony of Paul Nantulya, February 20, 2020, 3.

China's Deepening Political Influence

Under General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping, China has significantly stepped up its political activities in Africa. Through its political engagement on the continent, Beijing gains support for its national and international goals, promotes its model of economic growth with authoritarianism, and seeks to enlist African states to assist it in constructing a new, illiberal global governance regime.

Five major lines of efforts underpin Beijing's political engagement with African countries. First, China exports methods of authoritarian political control through party-to-party training. Second, Beijing actively intervenes in African domestic politics to ensure preferred African partners, especially ones that share its ideology and worldview, adhere to China's priorities. Third, Beijing promotes its model of techno-authoritarianism—political control facilitated by intrusive technologies and repressive internet governance—through the sale of advanced surveillance technology to African governments. Fourth, China shapes Africa's media landscape by promoting narratives favorable to Beijing in African media, sponsoring training for African journalists, and leading the continent's media migration from analog to digital technology. Finally, China leverages its influence to achieve other key objectives, such as garnering African support for Beijing's broader diplomatic priorities, especially at the UN.

Exporting Authoritarianism through Party-to-Party Training and Engagements

A key tool of Chinese influence in Africa is the CCP's party-to-party training, which China uses to spread its model of authoritarian, state-led development on the continent. China's cadre training program dates to the Cold War, when Beijing exported its Maoist revolutionary ideology to Africa and developing countries on other continents. Afterward, Beijing adopted a largely nonideological foreign policy toward Africa dating from the late 1970s until the latter part of the 2000s. The global financial crisis in 2007–2008, followed by General Secretary Xi's ascent to power in 2012, contributed to a shift in China's foreign policy and intensified Beijing's ideological approach to party-to-party training.²⁰ A key goal of this training has been to gain acceptance of the CCP's political values among a new generation of African political leaders.²¹ According to authoritative CCP commentary written in 2012, the expansion of multiparty democracy in Africa in the 1990s had a “negative impact” on Sino-African political ties, as Africa's new, democratic parties “lacked understanding” of the CCP.²² The CCP claims the appeal of this training is mutual, asserting that in recent years the desire among African political parties (especially ruling parties) to conduct party-to-party training and engagements has become increasingly strong.²³

Beijing uses its trainings and engagements to showcase what it calls its “new type of political party system”—referring to the CCP's political model that promotes state-directed economic growth with authoritarianism.²⁴ China itself is a one-party state, and the CCP's cadre training programs are explicitly political and intended to influence African regimes to adopt key elements of Beijing's governance and development systems.²⁵ Although the current trainings are not as ideologically rigid as those during the Mao era, they retain key ideological content and serve as optimal venues to convince African states of the superiority of China's state-led development model of governance.²⁶ These trainings vary based on the individual country, with some including teachings on the traditional Leninist party structure, such as in the CCP's trainings for the former ruling party of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).²⁷ However, their unifying theme is reinforcing the authoritarian tendencies of some African political parties. While in China, African party participants receive lectures and training on a wide range of topics, from the CCP's model of state-led governance to China's more controversial international positions, such as Beijing's vast territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁸ Training on governance is in line with the 2015 white paper, which stresses China's role in training African partners in Beijing's authoritarian version of law enforcement and judicial procedure.²⁹

Many African political parties participating in these trainings are keen to integrate the CCP's teachings on governance into their own domestic political system. This desire is especially strong among governing parties that already share elements of China's authoritarian political culture or ideological worldview. For example, during a training in China in 2011, Samson Gwede Mantashe, then secretary general and current chairperson of South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC), stated that “the Chinese Communist Party's ruling experience

and party building theory merits the ANC's study and to be used as a reference."³⁰ Cyril Ramaphosa—South Africa's current president—stated in 2009 that the ANC “gained so much” from party-to-party trainings and engagements with the CCP.³¹ Other parties that have participated in CCP trainings and engagements include Ethiopia's EPRDF, the National Congress Party of Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement of South Sudan, the South African Communist Party,[†] and the South West Africa People's Organization of Namibia.³²

Ethiopia: Once China's “Most Eager Student”

The EPRDF, which had been the dominant party in Ethiopia since 1991 until late 2019, is the best example of China molding an African party in its image through party-to-party relations. In December 2019, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed disbanded the EPRDF and formed a new political party.[‡] It is not yet clear whether this new party will retain the EPRDF's close ties with China, but the CCP's historical imprint on Ethiopia is significant.³³ The EPRDF historically shared with the CCP an antipathy for liberalism and a revolutionary leftist heritage; its guiding ideology of “Revolutionary Democracy” was partly influenced by Maoism, and early cadres were encouraged to read Mao's revolutionary writings.³⁴ Indeed, Yun Sun, senior fellow at the Stimson Center, described the EPRDF as China's “most eager student” for ideological training.³⁵

The CCP focused its trainings for the EPRDF on critical principles underpinning a Leninist party-state, such as organizational work, ideological work, propaganda, cadre education, and relations between the central and local party committees.³⁶ CCP financial support helped underwrite the EPRDF's cadre training system, which was modeled after the CCP's Central Party School.³⁷ According to Aleksandra Gadzala, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, like the CCP the EPRDF “reasons not in economic or developmental terms first and ideological terms second, but vice versa: economic and developmental considerations are to support ideology, not ideology [to support] economics.”³⁸ The CCP also assisted in consolidating the EPRDF's authoritarian rule through media control. For example, in 2015 a senior group of EPRDF cadres learned from the CCP how China monitors and “guides” public opinion.³⁹

The CCP also funds political schools to educate Beijing's African partners on China's governance model and development experience. In July 2018, Chinese construction firms broke ground on the Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania. Named after Tanzania's founding president and revolutionary leader, the school is being built with Chinese financial support and will act as a political training academy for the ruling parties of Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.[§] ⁴⁰ In his congratulatory message on the groundbreaking, General Secretary Xi stressed the CCP's intention to use the opportunity to enhance trainings

* President Ramaphosa also serves as chairperson of the African Union. Mia Swart, “South Africa Takes Over as AU Chair: What to Expect,” *Al Jazeera*, February 11, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/south-africa-takes-au-chair-expected-202009131603484.html>.

† The ANC and the South African Communist Party, together with the Congress of South African Trade Unions, form a political alliance in South Africa. The CCP was an early supporter of the ANC in its struggle against apartheid, and Mao Zedong purportedly gave his blessing to the movement in 1960. These ties were disrupted due to the Sino-Soviet split (1956–1966) in which the ANC backed the Soviet Union in its contest with China, but they were never truly lost. After the Cold War, former South African president and ANC leader Nelson Mandela established South Africa as a successful democracy, but the CCP's relationship with the ANC remains strong. Joshua Eisenman, “Comrades-in-Arms: The Chinese Communist Party's Relations with African Political Organizations in the Mao Era, 1949-76,” *Cold War History* 18:4 (2018): 429–445; Martin Plaut, “Why Is the ANC Following the Example of the Chinese Communist Party?” *New Statesman America*, January 6, 2015. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/why-anc-following-example-chinese-communist-party>.

‡ It was first reported in November 2019 that Prime Minister Ahmed was spearheading an initiative to reform the EPRDF into a new political party called the Prosperity Party. On December 1, 2019, the initiative appeared to have been successful and the EPRDF was disbanded. It is unclear what the implications of this reform would be for the relationship between Ethiopia and China, or for future relations between the CCP and other political factions in Ethiopia. In March 2020, Prime Minister Ahmed took a leading role in distributing medical supplies donated by Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, across Africa to fight the spread of COVID-19. Eric Olander, “Millions of Masks and COVID-19 Test Kits Donated by Alibaba's Jack Ma Arrive in Africa,” *China-Africa Project*, March 23, 2020. <https://chinaafricaproject.com/2020/03/23/millions-of-masks-and-covid-19-test-kits-donated-by-alibabas-jack-ma-arrive-in-africa/>; Tom Gardner, “Will Abiy Ahmed's Bet on Ethiopia's Political Future Pay Off?” *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/21/will-abiy-ahmed-eprdf-bet-ethiopia-political-future-pay-off/>.

§ These parties make up the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa, an influential regional grouping of former liberation movements that have been dominant parties in their respective countries since they achieved independence. All of these parties have strong, historic ties to the CCP. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China's Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests*, written testimony of Paul Nantulya, February 20, 2020, 4.

between the CCP and the ruling parties.⁴¹ The Political Work Department of China's Central Military Commission also supports several political party schools for African parties, such as Uganda's National Political School and the Oliver Tambo Leadership School, as well as Ethiopia's Political School in Tatek.⁴²

Beyond their content on governance principles, these trainings and engagements act as a useful tool for Beijing to promote its foreign policy.* Underscoring the role of these engagements in geopolitics, in October 2019 the CCP International Department[†] hosted a South African delegation led by Deputy President of the ANC David Mabuza (who concurrently serves as deputy president of the country) focused on supporting each other's "core interests"—a term used to describe issues to which Beijing is particularly sensitive, such as human rights and Taiwan.⁴³ In December 2019, the International Department hosted a delegation from the Mozambique Liberation Front. At the meeting, Sergio Pantie, a senior cadre in the Mozambique Liberation Front, emphasized Mozambique's "firm support" for China's suppression of the 2019 Hong Kong protests.⁴⁴ Also in December 2019, the International Department hosted a delegation from Nigeria's ruling All Progressives Congress, which focused in part on promoting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[‡] ⁴⁵

China has emphasized targeting younger African political leaders in the hopes of cultivating the next generation of African politicians to align with Beijing. Between 2011 and 2015, under the auspices of the Sino-Africa Political Party Leaders program, the CCP financed more than 200 young African political leaders.⁴⁶ In 2015, the program expanded, with Beijing advertising that it would host 1,000 young African political leaders by 2018.[§] ⁴⁷ According to Joshua Meservey, senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, it is clear the initiatives "give Beijing significant influence with officials who are likely to be part of their country's leadership in the future."⁴⁸

Violating the Noninterference Principle

To protect its interests on the continent, China has become increasingly brazen in its interference in African domestic politics and sovereignty. Beijing's actions are in stark contrast to its public pronouncements of noninterference in other countries' internal affairs, such as those articulated in its 2015 white paper.⁴⁹ China's political interference in Africa has almost always been carried out in an effort to support sympathetic elites, and has included meddling in African countries' elections and threatening to cut off relations with governments that oppose China's policies.

During the 2018 Sierra Leone presidential election, opposition news sources asserted that China provided "material and financial assistance" for the ruling All People's Congress (APC)—a party with which the CCP has had ties since the 1960s—in its failed contest with the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP).⁵⁰ The APC holds a favorable view of China and promoted Chinese economic investment in Sierra Leone, and a Chinese construction

* The political relations strengthened by these visits, in turn, offer China an opportunity to deepen its economic ties with African countries. For instance, China is the largest bilateral creditor to Mozambique (as it is with many other African countries), with \$2.2 billion in loans. Financing from China has become especially important since 2016, when the International Monetary Fund suspended lending to Mozambique after discovering the country had failed to disclose nearly \$2 billion in loans from outside creditors. Mozambican officials allegedly orchestrated the loans with bankers and businessmen for personal enrichment. Lauren Baker, "Bridging Perceptions: China in Mozambique," *MacroPolo*, August 27, 2019. <https://macropolo.org/analysis/china-mozambique-elite-perceptions/>; Lynsey Chutel, "A Search for Mozambique's \$2 Billion Debt Shows How the Global Banking System Aids Corruption," *Quartz*, January 10, 2019. <https://qz.com/africa/1519653/mozambique-finance-minister-arrested-credit-suisse-fbi-caught-up/>.

† The CCP Central Committee's International Department, an organization that is part of the CCP's semi-official diplomacy apparatus tasked with cultivating foreign officials and political parties, is the main interlocutor for cadre training. The International Department is also known as the "International Liaison Department." It is one of several organizations under the CCP's Central Committee tasked with managing perceptions of Party outsiders, along with the United Front Work Department and the Propaganda Department. See Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, August 24, 2018. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf; Joshua Eisenman and David H. Shinn, "China's Strategy in Africa," in Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham, eds., *China Steps Out: Beijing's Major Power Engagement with the Developing World*, Routledge, 2018, 148.

‡ Launched in 2013, China's BRI is a well-resourced, whole-of-government concept for regional and global connectivity. Since its inception, BRI has climbed to the top of Beijing's foreign policy agenda and has been extolled by General Secretary Xi as the "project of the century." *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2018, 261.

§ It is unclear if the CCP has been able to fulfill this goal.

firm built the APC headquarters.⁵¹ Under APC President Ernest Koroma, whose tenure as leader of Sierra Leone lasted from 2007 to 2018, Chinese investment in the country expanded dramatically and a series of Chinese projects were agreed upon, despite receiving criticism from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.*⁵² During the 2018 campaign, a news organization aligned with the SLPP asserted that China was openly supporting the APC and criticized what it termed “overt political interference of China” in Sierra Leone’s domestic politics.⁵³ Furthermore, it released footage depicting Chinese nationals participating in a campaign rally, marching in full APC party uniform alongside APC members.⁵⁴ Earlier, at a campaign rally in 2017, APC members chanted, “We are Chinese! We are Chinese!” in an effort to show support for China.⁵⁵ According to one APC participant, chanting support for China was a way of “pledging allegiance” to Beijing.⁵⁶

China has also interfered in the electoral process in Zambia. In the runup to the 2006 Zambian presidential election, the Chinese ambassador to Zambia threatened to cut off ties with the country if it elected the late Michael Sata, who ran on a platform critical of China.⁵⁷ As part of his platform, Mr. Sata explicitly called Taiwan a “sovereign country” and spoke out against Chinese labor practices in Zambia.⁵⁸ China’s ambassador further warned that “Chinese investors in mining, construction and tourism have put on hold further investments in Zambia until the uncertainty surrounding our bilateral relations with Zambia is cleared.”⁵⁹ Mr. Sata lost the 2006 election, but went on to win the 2011 election. However, once in office, Mr. Sata became an avid supporter of Chinese investment in the country, and members of his party—including current Zambian President Edgar Lungu—have welcomed China’s role in Zambia.⁶⁰

Protecting a Pro-China Regime in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is perhaps the most striking example of China intervening in the domestic affairs of an African country. Historically, Harare has been one of Beijing’s closest partners in Africa. China backed then guerilla leader Robert Mugabe in his struggle against both Soviet- and Western-backed forces in the Rhodesian Bush War from 1964 to 1979, which culminated in the establishment of an independent Zimbabwe under the leadership of Mugabe and his party, the left-wing Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF).⁶¹ China then diplomatically shielded the ZANU–PF regime—one of Africa’s most repressive—and provided it with vital economic support,[†] enabling the authoritarian regime to pursue ruinous economic policies and suppress popular opposition.

In 2017, Beijing appears to have approved of a military-led coup d’état in Zimbabwe to protect its interests and preserve the country’s pro-China regime. From 2016 to 2017, mass demonstrations occurred against Mugabe, with many prodemocracy groups backing or taking part in the protests, including the Movement for Democratic Change, the main opposition party, and the #ThisFlag movement, a liberal reformist group.⁶² Fearing an apparent collapse of the ZANU–PF regime as a result of the protests, then Vice President and current President Emmerson Mnangagwa led a coup that ultimately overthrew Mugabe.⁶³

Prior to the coup, regional media reported that Beijing provided safe haven to Mnangagwa in China after a purge by Mugabe forced him to flee Zimbabwe.⁶⁴ One week before the coup that overthrew Mugabe and installed a new regime under Mnangagwa, Zimbabwean General Constantino Chiwenga, who is close to Mnangagwa and was then still trusted by Mugabe, visited Beijing in what the Chinese Foreign Ministry dubbed a “normal military exchange.”⁶⁵

* Under President Ernest Koroma, a Chinese company was supposed to build the new Mamamah International Airport for \$400 million, despite the World Bank and International Monetary Fund criticizing the idea due to the heavy debt burden it would create. Sierra Leone canceled the project in October 2018 after the SLPP won the 2018 presidential election. *BBC News*, “Mamamah Airport: Sierra Leone Cancels China-Funded Project,” October 10, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45809810>; David Rogers, “Will China Still Fund Sierra Leone’s Fancy New International Airport?” *Global Construction Review*, January 25, 2016. <http://www.globalconstructionreview.com/perspectives/will-china-still-fund-sier7ra-leones-fa7ncy-n7ew/>.

† For instance, using its veto power at the UN Security Council, China has helped Zimbabwe escape sanctions that would have included an arms embargo and financial and travel restrictions for Zimbabwean senior government and military officials. Beijing also extended \$2.2 billion worth of loans to Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2017. Jevans Nyabiage, “China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi Backs Call to Lift Sanctions on Zimbabwe,” *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/print/news/china/diplomacy/article/3045881/chinas-foreign-minister-wang-yi-backs-call-lift-sanctions>.

Given the timing of Chiwenga’s visit and Beijing’s deep ties to Mnangagwa and Chiwenga’s political faction, evidence strongly suggests Beijing gave its blessing to the coup to ensure the survival of Zimbabwe’s pro-China regime.⁶⁶ Had the prodemocracy movement taken over as a result of the mass protests and China’s preferred partner—the ZANU–PF ruling party—not retained control of the country, Beijing’s diplomatic relations with Harare would have certainly been impacted negatively. The following year, the United States and the EU cited irregularities in the 2018 elections, including voter intimidation by ZANU–PF and the military against the opposition.⁶⁷ Since the coup, China’s relations with Zimbabwe have remained very close.⁶⁸ During his 2020 trip to Zimbabwe, Foreign Minister Wang called for the lifting of longstanding U.S. and EU sanctions on the regime. In return, Sibusiso Moyo, Zimbabwe’s minister of foreign affairs and international trade, reiterated Harare’s support for the CCP’s “core interests.”⁶⁹ Beijing has officially denied any involvement in the coup.⁷⁰

Beijing has also enlisted at least one African government to assist in targeting individuals and groups the Chinese government opposes, with the host country having effectively ceded sovereignty and enforcing Chinese laws with the overt cooperation of Chinese security forces. In July 2017, more than 200 Uyghur students, many of whom were studying at Egypt’s Al-Azhar Islamic University, were taken into custody by Egyptian plainclothes officers working alongside Chinese security agents. Subsequently, they were interrogated by Chinese security agents working alongside the head of the local Chinese Students and Scholars Association chapter regarding their religious activities. According to Radio Free Asia, detainees reported that they were “handled roughly, as if [they] were criminals who came to Egypt to destroy the country.”⁷¹ Out of the more than 200 Uyghurs detained in the July raid, dozens are believed to have been deported to China.⁷²

Exporting Tools of Techno-Authoritarianism

Another method China employs to spread its political model to African governments is the sale of advanced surveillance technology and export of a more repressive framework for internet governance. These efforts include Beijing’s promotion of the “Digital Silk Road”—a subset of BRI—through which China has greatly expanded the sale of its telecommunications and other digital technology to the continent. Through years of focused investment, notable Chinese technology firms such as Huawei, ZTE, and Hikvision have come to dominate the African telecommunications market. By May 2019, Huawei had constructed up to 70 percent of Africa’s information technology infrastructure.*⁷³

China’s dominance in the African technological market has allowed for China’s model of techno-authoritarianism to spread on the continent. According to Andrew Davenport of RWR Advisory Group, Africa’s importance to China, in addition to promoting its illiberal political values, “is at least as much about Beijing’s longer-term vision for recruiting foreign countries to embrace Chinese norms of governance in the digital sphere.”⁷⁴ To this end, Beijing has provided a blueprint on internet governance for African governments, trained African police and cybersecurity personnel on advanced surveillance technology—including through helping suppress political opposition—and sold digitally enabled surveillance technologies for African countries.

China’s dominance of Africa’s telecommunications market has created conditions for authoritarian leaders on the continent to further institutionalize their repressive inclinations through internet control. According to Adrian Shahbaz, research director for technology and democracy at Freedom House, “Chinese authorities are selling to local politicians not only products for ‘controlling’ their societies, but also a vision of how to build a prosperous and stable state without having to devolve power to the citizenry.”⁷⁵ A number of states have sought to learn from China’s approach to internet governance. For example, Brian Mushimba, Zambia’s minister in charge of transport and communications, has invoked a “China way” for internet governance, which includes threats to ban Google and Facebook to combat online disinformation.⁷⁶ As part of these efforts, Zambia is moving to enact legislation

* Huawei has established a ubiquitous presence in Africa and acts as a significant agent of China’s influence on the continent. Huawei and other Chinese telecommunications companies have been successful in Africa due to their ability to undercut the prices of competitors and their significant political and financial support from the Chinese government. Roselyn Hsueh and Michael Byron Nelson, “Who Wins? China Wires Africa: The Cases of Angola and Nigeria,” NYU/Giessen Development Finance Conference, New York University School of Law, New York, New York, April 9, 2013; W. Gyude Moore, “African Countries Should Stay Loyal to China’s Troubled Huawei – Regardless of Trump,” *Quartz*, May 27, 2019. <https://qz.com/africa/1629078/africa-will-stay-loyal-to-chinas-huawei-regardless-of-trump/>; Daouda Cissé, “Chinese Telecom Companies Foray into Africa,” *African East Asian Affairs* 69 (2012): 17–18.

on cybercrime and cybersecurity that would make posting online information deemed to harm national security punishable by jail time.⁷⁷ In fact, at least several Zambians have already been sent to prison on charges of defamation for criticizing President Lungu in social media posts.⁷⁸ Civil society organizations such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa Zambia and Bloggers of Zambia have criticized the government’s cybersecurity plans.⁷⁹

China has also influenced other African countries’ approach to internet governance. Melanie Hart, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, links Chinese technological initiatives in Zimbabwe with Harare’s 2019 passage of cybercrime and cybersecurity legislation that restricts internet freedom, including by targeting overseas Zimbabweans who use the internet to “cause harm back home.”⁸⁰ Nigeria—a key U.S. counterterrorism partner—also seeks to implement Chinese-inspired cybersecurity legislation. Speaking in November 2019 in support of the legislation, Nigerian First Lady Aisha Buhari stated, “If China can control over 1.3 billion people on social media, I see no reason why Nigeria cannot attempt controlling only 180 million people.”⁸¹

Providing Instruments of Political Repression

In addition to inspiring African governments to adopt repressive approaches to internet governance, Chinese telecommunications companies have provided autocratic regimes direct assistance in suppressing opposition figures. According to senior Zambian security officials, Huawei technicians helped the government access the phones and Facebook pages of a group of bloggers running a key opposition website that had repeatedly criticized President Lungu.⁸² At least two Huawei experts based in a cybersurveillance unit of Zambia’s telecoms regulator were in constant contact with police units dispatched to arrest the bloggers.⁸³ China has similarly assisted Uganda in cracking down on dissent. In August 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that in 2018, Ugandan authorities enlisted Huawei technicians to assist them in penetrating the digital communications of Bobi Wine—an opposition member of parliament who is running against President Yoweri Museveni in 2021—which led to the arrest of Mr. Wine and dozens of his supporters.⁸⁴ President Museveni is in his 33rd year of power.⁸⁵

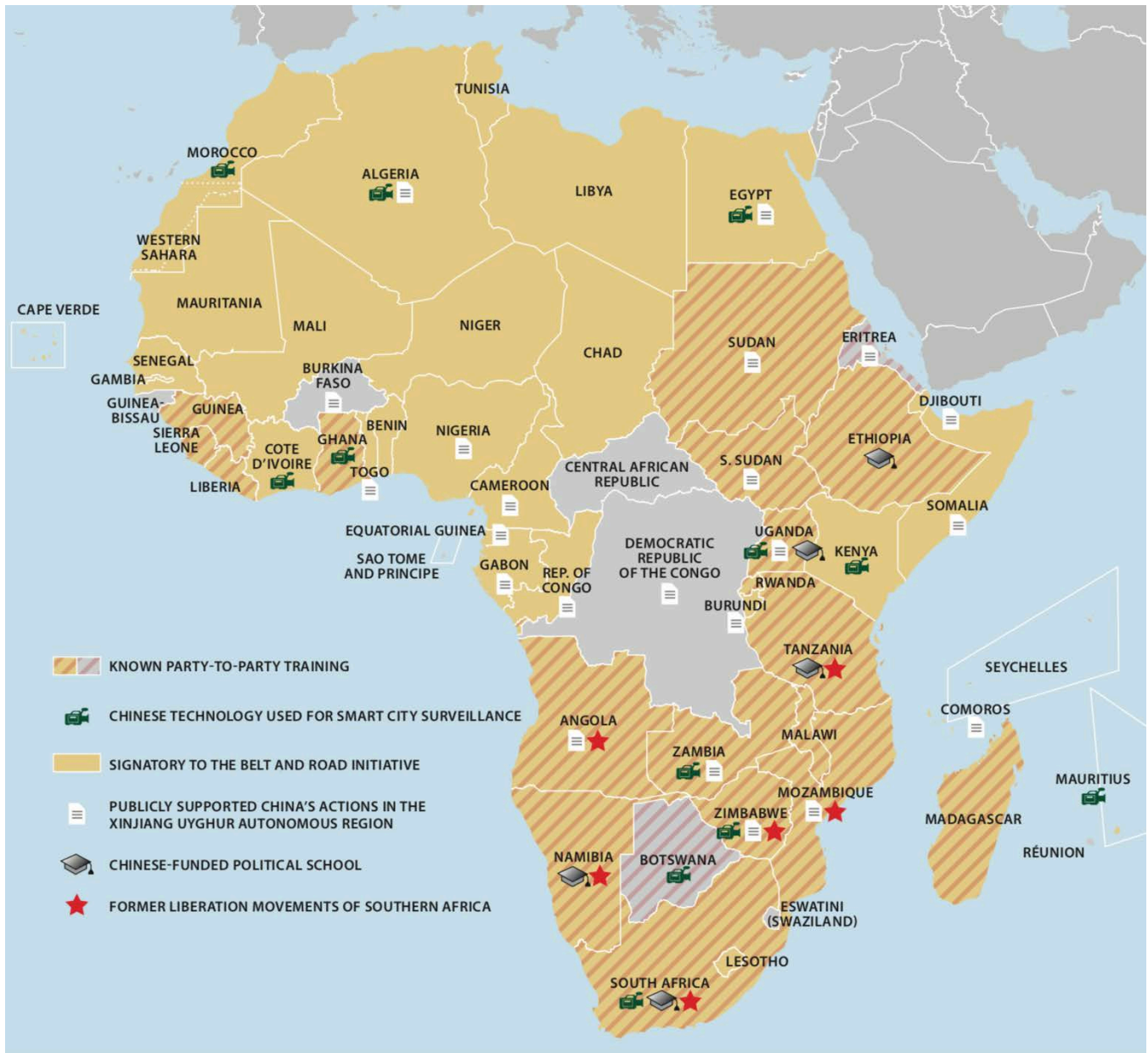
China is contributing to the growth of digitally enabled authoritarianism in Africa through the sale of “smart city” surveillance technologies,* a term used to describe high-technology digital surveillance ostensibly used to combat crime and to improve government efficiency. However, smart city surveillance technologies can be used in ways that contravene international human rights standards on civil and political liberties.⁸⁶ According to Steven Feldstein, nonresident fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 African countries currently use Chinese companies to supply their advanced surveillance technologies (see Figure 1).⁸⁷ In one example, South African firm Vumacam announced in 2019 that it planned to install 15,000 surveillance cameras in Johannesburg.⁸⁸ Some South Africans have criticized the project for not guaranteeing the protection of private citizens’ data and having inadequate public oversight, with one South African professor terming it “a recipe for disaster.”⁸⁹ Much of the technology for this project will be supplied by Hikvision, a firm that was added to the U.S. Entity List† in October 2019 due to its role in the Chinese government’s crackdown against Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups in China’s western Xinjiang region.⁹⁰ In Uganda, President Museveni signed a \$126 million deal with Huawei for a smart city surveillance technology project, part of which is focused on building a new digital surveillance unit for the police force and installing hundreds more street cameras in the capital,

* Smart cities use connected technologies including cameras, sensors, and GPS devices to collect a wide variety of data for urban management applications ranging from moderating traffic flow to policing and crime prevention. Smart city surveillance technology refers to advanced surveillance technology that can be used in smart cities, including cameras equipped with artificial intelligence applications such as facial recognition. Safe city systems provide immediate solutions for platforms to integrate and manage various surveillance tools. Nine African countries use safe city systems provided by Chinese firms: Botswana, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Morocco, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia. Steven Feldstein, interview with Commission staff, April 17, 2020; Steven Feldstein, “The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 17, 2019; Adam Segal, “When China Rules the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-08-13/when-china-rules-web>.

† The U.S. Entity List is published by the U.S. Department of Commerce. It contains a list of foreign persons—which includes businesses, research institutions, governments, and individuals—that are subject to license requirements for the export, reexport, and transfer of certain items to the country. Foreign persons are put on the U.S. Entity List if they are deemed by the U.S. government to pose a particular threat to national security. Zen Soo, “Explainer: Here’s What You Need to Know about U.S. Restrictions on Huawei and the ‘Entity List,’” *South China Morning Post*, May 20, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3010986/heres-what-you-need-know-about-us-restrictions-huawei-and-entity-list>.

Kampala.⁹¹ Ugandan opposition lawmakers have criticized the project for its lack of transparency and potential security risks, with one saying, “There appears to be a policy to hand over the country’s entire communications infrastructure to the Chinese.... It’s unwise given our concerns about spying and creating backdoor channels.”⁹²

Figure 1: Growing Chinese Political Influence in Africa



Source: Various.⁹³

China Shapes Africa's Media Landscape

China has also sought to shape the African media space to promote media narratives favorable to Beijing and its model of state-directed journalism. As Reporters Without Borders notes, “Beijing is trying to establish a ‘new world media order’ under its control, one in which journalists are shorn of their watchdog role and serve governments instead.”⁹⁴ China’s efforts have drawn further impetus from BRI, including through what Beijing has called its “Belt and Road News Network (BRNN).” First proposed in 2017 to garner international support for BRI, General Secretary Xi has called on participating media outlets to “tell the stories of [BRI] in a way that shapes favorable public opinion for BRI cooperation.”⁹⁵ The BRNN includes 182 media outlets from 86 countries, including a number of influential African outlets in Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zambia.^{* 96}

Beyond BRI-related programming, African outlets also increasingly publish Chinese-produced editorial content while offering no indication that the content was produced by a Chinese state-run media outlet.⁹⁷ For example, in November 2019 the Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation passed off as locally generated content a story lauding China’s efforts to “alleviate poverty” in Xinjiang, “when it’s clearly not,” according to Eric Olander, cofounder of the China-Africa Project, an independent information service.⁹⁸ In another example, in the leadup to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 2019, Kenya’s popular Standard Media published a piece entitled “China: From Underdog to Global Power in 70 Years,” which highlighted the achievements of the “New China”—a term used by the CCP to describe China under its leadership—and specifically lauds General Secretary Xi’s role in “pushing China to become the champion of the global commons.”⁹⁹ As Mr. Olander notes, this piece “retains many of the hallmarks of standard [Chinese] propaganda messaging.”¹⁰⁰

China also sponsors African journalists and media figures to travel to China to enlist their support for Beijing’s priorities and worldview.¹⁰¹ The China-Africa Press Center, an annual program launched by Beijing in 2014, is one such initiative where Beijing grants African journalists all-expense-paid trips to China for training.¹⁰² Approximately 25–35 journalists typically participate in this training each year.^{† 103} These types of visits include training on specific topics such as promoting BRI. African journalists who have attended Chinese trainings have been found to incorporate Chinese talking points into their home news outlets. According to Reporters Without Borders, a group of Zambian journalists who attended training in China afterward “made no attempt to conceal their enthusiasm [for Beijing] ... often incorporating standard Chinese propaganda phrases ... [such as] ‘The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China guarantees citizens’ freedom of speech and information ... [and Zambia should learn from] China’s media development.’”¹⁰⁴ David Bandurski, codirector of the China Media Project, notes that the goal of these trainings is not only to improve China’s image abroad but also to get “control of the narrative and legitimization of the [Communist] Party’s power and governance.”¹⁰⁵ Mr. Bandurski adds that China’s efforts to legitimize the CCP abroad might also create a shift in international journalistic norms.¹⁰⁶

Digitizing Africa’s Media Space: A Critical Soft Power Tool for Beijing

China’s leading role in modernizing African media from analog to digital technology has given Beijing added influence over the continent’s media space.[‡] Key to transitioning Africa’s media space from analog to digital technology is the “10,000 Villages” program announced by General Secretary Xi at the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit.¹⁰⁷ The program aims to provide digital satellite television to rural

* These outlets include: *Independent Media* (South Africa), *Ethiopian News Agency* (Ethiopia), *Thisday Newspaper* (Nigeria), *Alintibaha Daily Newspaper* (Sudan), *Guardian Limited* (Tanzania), and *Zambia Daily Mail* (Zambia). *Belt and Road News Network*, “Belt and Road News Network First Council Meeting Joint Statement,” April 25, 2019. <http://en.brnn.com/n3/2019/0425/c415308-9571930.html>.

† This figure refers to annual trainings held by the China-Africa Press Center under the China Public Diplomacy Association. The implementing unit is the School of Journalism at Renmin University. More broadly, Beijing is estimated to host about 1,000 media professionals in China for trainings, exchanges, and visits each year. Yun Sun, interview with Commission staff, April 13, 2020; *Economist*, “China Is Broadening Its Efforts to Win Over African Audiences,” October 20, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/10/20/china-is-broadening-its-efforts-to-win-over-african-audiences>.

‡ This objective was prioritized in China’s 2015 white paper. According to the white paper, China “will continue to promote the digitization of radio and TV broadcasting in Africa, provide related financing, technical support and personnel training, and encourage Chinese and African enterprises to engage in joint venture cooperation.” *Xinhua*, “Full Text: China’s Second Africa Policy Paper,” December 5, 2015. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/05/content_22632874.htm.

communities in 25 sub-Saharan African countries.¹⁰⁸ As of January 2020, China claims it has completed equipment installation in over 80 percent of the communities participating in the program.¹⁰⁹ StarTimes—a nominally private firm with deep ties to the Chinese government—is the sole contractor for the project.¹¹⁰ The fact that the company generally does not feature Western programming on its platform, offers cheap access to Chinese television, and is the sole contractor for the 10,000 Villages program makes it an important soft-power tool for Beijing. As Dani Madrid-Morales, an expert on global media at the University of Houston, notes, “There’s a huge ideological element [to StarTimes].... It’s very specific shows that showcase an urban China, a growing China, a noncontroversial view of China.”¹¹¹

The 10,000 Villages program has further entrenched StarTimes’ dominant position in Africa’s local media markets. As of September 2018, StarTimes had nearly 20 million users in more than 30 African countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.¹¹² As part of a deal to transition Zambia’s migration from analog to digital technology, Zambia’s state broadcaster formed a joint venture with StarTimes after securing a \$273 million loan from the Export-Import Bank of China.¹¹³ According to David Shullman, senior advisor at the International Republican Institute, the joint venture, which violated Zambian competition laws,* would allow Chinese entities to effectively control the national broadcasting service.¹¹⁴ In Kenya, the Pan-Africa Network Group, an entity partially owned by StarTimes, won the right to be one of two broadcast distributors in the country’s migration from analog to digital technology in 2015 in a deal mired in allegations of corruption.[†]¹¹⁵

Securing African Support on the International Stage

China has used its influence in African countries to secure diplomatic support on the international stage for its repressive domestic policies and disputed sovereignty claims. An important manifestation of this support is many African countries’ outright backing or tacit acceptance of China’s repressive policies that have otherwise faced strong international criticism. More than 20 African countries—many of them with large Muslim populations—have publicly supported China’s mass detentions of Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups in China’s western Xinjiang region.[‡]¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, the governments of Tanzania and Uganda have both made public statements in support of Beijing’s suppression of the 2019 Hong Kong protests.¹¹⁷ A majority of African countries have also openly endorsed Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, which have been found illegitimate by the International Court of Justice in The Hague.[§]¹¹⁸

China has also used its influence to win African votes at the UN in support of key Chinese foreign policy priorities. A study conducted by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary that collects international investment

* The joint venture obtained two licenses from the Zambian government (for signal distribution and content provision), which violated Zambian competition laws forbidding any single media company from obtaining that much influence over the market. David Shullman, “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy: An Assessment of Chinese Interference in Thirteen Key Countries,” *International Republican Institute*, 2019, 36.

† The deal was mired in allegations of corruption, as it was disclosed that one of the companies that owns the Pan-African Network Group, Excel Magic International, was incorporated in the British Virgin Islands. Despite claims of Excel Magic International’s shareholders being “Kenyan,” Kenyan officials later asserted that Excel Magic International was in actuality “100 percent foreign owned.” Aubrey Hruby, “In Africa, China Is the News,” *Foreign Policy*, August 13, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/in-africa-china-is-the-news/>; Isaac Thuku Wahome, “No Turning Back on Digital Move, Says Information Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiangi,” *Standard Media*, February 26, 2015. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000152904/no-turning-back-on-digital-move-says-information-cabinet-secretary-fred-matiangi>; *Daily Nation*, “China TV Firm Has Kenyan Partner,” February 18, 2015. <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Pang-British-Virgin-Islands-Digital-Migration/1056-2628208-u72kx0z/index.html>.

‡ In July 2019, the following African states signed a letter publicly supporting China’s Xinjiang policies: Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Comoros, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Togo, and Zimbabwe. Subsequent signers included: Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, Uganda, and Zambia. Catherine Putz, “Which Countries Are For or Against China’s Xinjiang Policies?” *Diplomat*, July 15, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>; Joshua Eisenman and David H. Shinn, “Evolving Principles and Guiding Concepts: How China Gains African Support for Its Core National Interests,” *Orbis* 64:2 (2020): 271–288; Aggrey Mutambo, “China Seeks Support from Africa on Uyghur Policy,” *Daily Nation*, October 13, 2019. <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/China-seeks-support-from-Africa-on-Uighur-policy/1066-5309938-fe4mxbz/index.html>.

§ Thirty-nine African countries have openly supported China’s position in the South China Sea disputes. For a list of these countries, see Wang Wen and Chen Xiaochen, “Who Supports China in the South China Sea and Why,” *Diplomat*, July 27, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/who-supports-china-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why/>.

data, shows that countries receiving foreign assistance from China were more inclined to vote in alignment with China's position in the UN.¹¹⁹ The study notes that there is strong correlation between Chinese aid disbursements and African countries voting in support of China. As AidData notes, if African countries voted with China “an extra 10 percent of the time,” they would receive an average 86 percent increase in aid.¹²⁰ African countries have in general supported other Chinese priorities at the UN. In 2017 and 2018, China introduced resolutions for the first time that enshrined language to revise human rights and governance norms into UN texts. Both resolutions, which the U.S. opposed, passed with near-unanimous African support.¹²¹ Ted Piccone, nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, asserts that “[Beijing’s seemingly] innocuous language hides deeper meanings in the discourse of international relations ... undermine[s] the legitimacy of international mechanisms to monitor human rights ... and weaken[s] protections for human rights defenders and independent media.”¹²²

In March 2020, Beijing enlisted the aid of South Africa and Russia at the UN Security Council to halt an Estonian push for a discussion on COVID-19, which originated in China. The discussion would have centered on the implications of COVID-19 for global peace and security. According to diplomatic sources, Pretoria and Moscow contended there was no direct link between the spread of COVID-19 and global peace and security.¹²³

African support has proven particularly important in helping China attain leadership positions in key UN bodies. Chinese officials lead four out of the 15 UN specialized agencies, holding more positions than any other member country.* In June 2019, Qu Dongyu—China’s vice minister of agriculture and rural affairs—was elected to lead the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a key body responsible for shaping global agriculture and food security policies, despite strong U.S. opposition to his candidacy.¹²⁴ African support for Mr. Qu was critical. In March 2019, a Cameroonian candidate for the position who was backed by the African Union dropped out of the race after Yang Jiechi, director of the CCP’s Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office, announced that Beijing would cancel roughly \$78 million in Cameroonian debt owed to China.¹²⁵ The timing of the announcement suggested a linkage between China’s debt forgiveness and Cameroon’s candidate dropping out of the race. Although the election utilized a secret ballot, the *South China Morning Post* reported that “insiders” said China was able to use its financial power to leverage support from African states to secure enough votes for Mr. Qu.¹²⁶

African Support for Isolating Taiwan

China has also used its political influence in Africa to further its global campaign to isolate Taiwan on the international stage. All African states with the exception of Eswatini (Swaziland) recognize Beijing over Taipei, with Burkina Faso being the latest to switch recognition in 2018.¹²⁷ Shortly after Burkina Faso’s switch, Foreign Minister Wang visited the country and pledged \$44 million to the G-5 Sahel Force, a regional organization focused on security and development, of which Burkina Faso is a member.¹²⁸ According to Shin Kawashima, professor at the University of Tokyo, Chinese promises of political and economic support create “domestic pressure for [African states] to establish diplomatic relations with China so that they too can benefit from the economic largesse.”¹²⁹ In January 2017 during a visit by Foreign Minister Wang, Nigeria’s foreign minister announced that the Nigerian government had told Taipei to move its representative office from Abuja, the capital, to Lagos.¹³⁰ In response, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Nigeria’s actions “help[ed] settle the legacy issue that bears on the political mutual trust between China and Nigeria once and for all, and remove[d] the stumbling blocks obstructing the sound development of bilateral relations.”¹³¹ China has even leveraged its influence in Africa to undermine Taiwan’s sovereignty and independent legal system. For example, in 2016 the Kenyan government decided to deport Taiwan citizens suspected of fraud to China instead of Taiwan at the request of Chinese diplomats, over the firm protests of Taipei.¹³²

Implications for the United States

China’s political engagement in Africa is often diametrically opposed to the U.S. goals of supporting good governance and strengthening democratic institutions in politically fragile countries. Since the end of the Cold

* Chinese nationals lead the Food and Agriculture Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Telecommunication Union, and the UN Industrial Development Organization. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *PRC Representation in International Organizations*, April 2020, 3-4. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/PRC_Representation_in_International_Organizations_April2020.pdf.

War, many African nations have moved toward a more accountable, representative, and transparent form of governance. Freedom House notes that in 1973, only 30 percent of sub-Saharan African countries were “free” or “partly free” with regard to political rights and civil liberties, while in 2019 that share had grown to 61 percent.¹³³ However, the trendline toward greater freedom and civil liberties on the continent has regressed since Beijing stepped up its engagement in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. In 2008, 71 percent of sub-Saharan African countries had been rated as “free” or “partly free.”¹³⁴

In contrast to the trend of democratization, China is actively supporting authoritarian and illiberal regimes, while providing them with new tools of repression, such as digitally enabled surveillance, eroding democracy and the values of open and transparent governance. To achieve its goals, Beijing has shown a willingness to intervene in African domestic politics to protect favored elites, brazenly violating its stated policies to not interfere in other countries’ domestic affairs. Beijing has already propped up regimes hostile to U.S. values and interests, and will likely become increasingly open in its support for illiberal actors and confident in its authority to provide an alternative governance model for the continent. In a strategy not dissimilar to the one it employed in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Beijing is now attempting to use the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to improve its image and advance its interests in Africa.

Africa, therefore, is fast becoming a battleground for competing ideologies and models of domestic and international governance. The more African states accept China’s model of governance and abandon liberal norms and multiparty democracy, the easier it will be for Beijing to enlist African support for other geopolitical objectives. This trend is not only injurious to U.S. interests on the continent but will also have adverse implications for the United States’ position globally.

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