

**Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on:  
“China’s Strategic Aims in Africa”**

**May 20, 2020**

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Vice Chairman Bartholomew, Commissioner Borgeas, Commissioners of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. It is a great honor to appear before you again so soon to talk about China. Thank you for the invitation. This time I will discuss the People’s Republic of China’s efforts to position itself as a security and military partner of choice for its African partners.

**Setting the Larger Picture**

Africa in 2020 has emerged as a vital partner in China’s quest to reclaim a central role in the world. It was the first region to commit itself to building China’s *Community of Common Destiny*, a vision of a global order reflecting Chinese norms and values—a vision written into its constitution. At the 7<sup>th</sup> Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2018, the two sides resolved to defend one another’s core interests and those of the developing world. They also agreed to build a “new model of international relations” through a *Sino Africa Community of Common Destiny*, FOCAC’s driving objective.<sup>1</sup> *One Belt One Road*, China’s massive global infrastructure plan is the practical means through which Beijing is constructing the *Community of Common Destiny*, to challenge the Western-led global model.<sup>2</sup> The Belt and Road expanded into East Africa in 2014 and Southern Africa in 2016. In 2021, Senegal will host the 8<sup>th</sup> FOCAC to symbolize West Africa’s integration into this ambitious plan.

Under the New Partnership for African Development, Africans used three primary methods in their quest to reposition the continent. First, they pursued willing partners to amplify Africa’s agenda internationally. Second, they sought alternative models of development, experimenting with different systems. The African Union Agenda 2063, Africa’s seminal strategic guidance, envisions a self-sufficient Africa that moves from donor dependency to a genuine partnership. This builds on the Lagos Plan of Action, Africa’s overarching plan for self-reliance.<sup>3</sup> Third, Africans sought to equalize their relationships with powerful countries, fight for better representation in global agencies, and shape them to respond to their needs.

China deftly synchronized its Africa strategy with all three aspirations. It portrays itself as trustworthy given its support for Africa’s independence wars. Africans in turn view China as a partner in these struggles. Many Africans argue that China is more attuned to their needs having itself been colonized and underdeveloped. At the policy level, China adopted a “trade versus aid” assistance strategy, in line with the Lagos Plan of Action. China’s latest Africa policy calls Africa a “place of opportunity,” not a “mere aid recipient.”<sup>4</sup> In 2017, Chinese engineering firms in Africa generated around US\$51 billion, 10 times larger than China’s aid to Africa between 2007 and 2017, a reflection of the degree to which China profits from Africa.<sup>5</sup>

China aligned the Belt and Road with the *AU’s Agenda 2063* and the *Program for the Development of Infrastructure (PIDA)*. In international affairs, China supports the *2005 Ezulwini Consensus*, the African common position on international system reform. The two sides support one another at the multilateral level. In the past decade, the African bloc at the UN General Assembly, the largest regional grouping in terms of numbers, played a pivotal role in helping Chinese nationals secure leadership of four of the UN’s 15 Specialized Agencies (American nationals head only one).<sup>6</sup> Africans in turn lead three agencies, all of whom benefitted from Chinese mobilization efforts at the UN. This tight diplomatic partnership is in line with FOCAC agreements.

## **Geopolitical Battle of Perceptions in the Era of COVID-19**

Nowhere has China made its case for global leadership more thoroughly than in Africa as it fends off accusations that it initially withheld data about the pandemic's outbreak. China is also attempting to rehabilitate its image in light of seething anger over the mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou. The vast majority are there on Chinese government scholarships, making the latest fall-out even more damaging as higher education is a major Chinese soft power export. China wants to re-focus global attention on the pandemic. Its narrative is that it competently contained COVID-19 at home and now leads global efforts to defeat it, consistent with its role as a "responsible big power" (*zeren daguo*).<sup>7</sup> China is also re-writing the narrative to connote a larger geopolitical shift from the West to the East. According to this paradigm, the Chinese and larger Southeast Asian response was more effective and innovative than most of Europe and America. This editorial line has dominated African media coverage of the global implications of COVID-19 in large part due to China's heavy presence in Africa's media space.<sup>8</sup>

China primed its African media outlets to cover the arrival of 300 Chinese doctors in Italy and Beijing's donation of masks, ventilators, test kits, and protective equipment to Europe and several U.S. states. They also covered China's usually low-key military and civilian medical teams currently deployed in 44 African countries.<sup>9</sup> Yet another major story was Ethiopia's mobilization of 1 million test kits, six million masks, and 60,000 protective suits from Chinese billionaire Jack Ma for distribution to African countries. A snapshot of Google's South Africa search engine shows that this story generated over 2,000 news items across 54 countries between March 22 and April 2020. Three million African twitter users *liked* it over the same period.

Nairobi hosts Xinhua's largest overseas bureau where 150 journalists and 400 staff generate and distribute 1,800 stories monthly, notably a much greater focus on Africa than BBC or CNN.<sup>10</sup> Nairobi also hosts China General Central Television's (CGTN) largest foreign bureau. Also broadcasting from there is China Radio International's first overseas FM station with 19 hours of daily programming in Chinese, English, and Swahili. Xinhua also has a news exchange agreement with Kenya's Nation Media Group, the largest media house in East and Central Africa with 18 major brands (radio, television, and print) in four countries, 28 million social media followers, 11.3 million monthly page views, and 90,000 newspapers circulated daily.<sup>11</sup> China's Star Times, the second largest digital television provider in Africa after South Africa's Multi-Choice, distributes content from Xinhua, CGTN, and other Chinese entities to 10 million subscribers in 30 countries, and 10,000 villages in 25 countries.<sup>12</sup>

The analysis of 5,400 Chinese media items in Africa between February and April 2020 portrays Beijing as a global leader committed to Africa in a time of uncertainty. These same circles portray the U.S. handling of the pandemic at home and abroad as "incompetent," "sloppy," and "irresponsible."<sup>13</sup> These politically tinged stories—all written by African journalists—reinforce the narrative of China's resurgence and rejuvenation, and America's perceived decline and retreat from international affairs.<sup>14</sup>

## **China as a Partner of Choice for African Militaries**

### ***Ideological Affinities***

Party-to-party ties are the foundation of China's most important partnerships. China believes it has rock-solid support among Africa's National Liberation Movements (NLMs) whom it frequently describes as "all weather friends." Most were trained at Nanjing Military Academy from inception. Once in power, they turned to this school, along with others like Army Command College Nanjing and Nanjing Infantry School to build their militaries. These contacts were firmly in place decades before NLMs reached out to the U.S. military.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni discusses this lag in U.S./Africa relations in a September 2008 lecture published by the U.S. Command and General Staff College. He explains that NLM militaries engaged the U.S. much later in their development. While the gap had closed by the late 1990s, Museveni notes that NLMs and the U.S. military have “not yet synchronized their histories.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast ties between NLMs and the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) are rooted in common doctrine, traditions, and ideology. In the only publicly available assessment of African attitudes toward the PLA, African military authors argue that African armies relied more on China than the West for their basic army-building needs, particularly during their formative years.<sup>16</sup> Some of this book’s findings are supported by empirical data. For example, Army College Nanjing has trained more African non-commissioned (NCO), junior, and middle officers than any other school in the world. It also has deeper inter-generational contact with African leaders than any other Chinese institution. 190 trainees from 70 countries, nearly half of them African, are currently enrolled there.<sup>17</sup>

NLM militaries have also trained in the West, however, especially at the strategic level. Examples include the militaries of Angola, Algeria, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Sudan, South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania. However, the PLA remains a “core partner.” The Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) is a good example. It has longer contacts with China than most, yet its transformation from a guerilla army was supervised by a British Military Training Team (BMATT) embedded in every level of its professional military education (PME). When British parliamentarians demanded BMATT’s withdrawal from Zimbabwe in 2000 in light of the deteriorating situation, opposition parties pushed back, saying it provided a “moral safeguard” in an increasingly violent environment.<sup>18</sup>

Colonel Gary Donaldson, the then BMATT Chief of Staff spoke glowingly of Zimbabwe’s military: “What we have seen of it is impressive. This is one of the best armies in Africa.”<sup>19</sup> Yet BMATT’s undeniably heavy influence over the ZDF didn’t extinguish its ties to the PLA and by extension the North Korean military. The latter trained many ZDF units including the highly politicized 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade, accused of massive human rights violations in Matabeleland during the violent feuds between the ruling ZANU and its alliance partner, ZAPU. 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade stayed outside ZDF’s chain of command and British advisors had very little influence over its training and deployment. After BMATT eventually left, the PLA deployed a training and advisory team at Zimbabwe Staff College that has taught soldiers and civilians from Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, and Lesotho ever since.<sup>20</sup>

Uganda likewise has strong training relationships with Western militaries, sending officers regularly to higher-level schools such as the U.S. National Defense University and the UK’s Defense Academy. However the PLA, North Korean, and Cuban armies remain core partners in several areas including engineering, technology, military medicine, and tank warfare.<sup>21</sup> Mozambique is yet another example. China’s infantry schools and specialized colleges supported its army-building needs from independence. Indeed, 97 of Mozambique’s veteran military leaders graduated from Army Command College Nanjing alone.<sup>22</sup> However, Mozambique also trains with the U.S. military as do its peers around Africa.

### ***All-Round Partnership***

With the notable exception of the PLA’s naval base in Djibouti, Beijing has favored a “soft approach” mixing ideological, political, commercial, economic, cultural, security, and military elements. The PLA is keen to avoid an overt military presence, in part to downplay the strategic dimensions of China’s engagement and avoid generating suspicion among Africans. China also fears that a muscular posture might trigger more deployments into Africa by its competitors like the U.S., UK, and France, potentially undermining its influence. Indeed, authoritative writings by the PLA on overseas operations notes that China is keenly aware that it lags behind the West in power projection and basing.<sup>23</sup>

China markets itself differently to each audience. The models it uses to secure its interests also differ based on the type of relationship it has in each case. Beijing employs a five-tier system of partnership rankings to pursue a wide mix of options to protect its interests, some more direct than others. Countries classified in higher tiers merit more robust engagement to protect Chinese interests. The “Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership” ranking covers Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, the highest level of relations China can have with any country. Partnerships at this level are multifaceted and complex, with China’s other armed forces besides the PLA playing a greater role. For example in Kenya, China’s Ministry of Public Security trained an elite police division tasked with protecting the Chinese-built Mombasa-Nairobi-Naivasha Standard Gauge Railway, Kenya’s most expensive project since independence.<sup>24</sup>

In Mozambique, the Chinese government’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office plays a more visible role than in other contexts. It supported the creation of a “Police Civilian Cooperation Center” as a resource for “rapid response,” “technical defense equipment,” and “emergency assistance.”<sup>25</sup> These services are provided by a state-backed private company, the China Security Technology Group that runs similar operations in Angola, Kenya, and Nigeria. China uses less direct methods in other countries. Examples include Uganda and South Africa, which both enjoy “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Relations,” the second highest level in China’s partnership rankings. In Uganda, the national military officially protects Chinese interests and high-value firms. These deployments started in 2018, one year before Uganda and China upgraded their relations from the “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” level.<sup>26</sup>

In South Africa, China’s Ministry of Public Security works with the South African Police Service (SAPS) on crime-fighting, intelligence, and community policing skills to combat urban crime, a menace that also affects Chinese entities. Under this arrangement, 80 SAPS personnel from different metros have been trained in China and South Africa annually since 2013.<sup>27</sup> To address threats to Chinese nationals, 13 non-governmental Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centers have been established since 2004 in collaboration with the SAPS.<sup>28</sup> These were formed as part of the SAPS’ Community Policing Forums where communities form security forums in partnership with police.<sup>29</sup>

Counterterrorism emerged as a new area of engagement at the 2018 FOCAC which included the protection of “major domestic economic projects” and “safety of Chinese nationals, companies, and projects” into its remit for the first time.<sup>30</sup> China takes a “regime stability” (*weiwēn*), approach to counterterrorism, premised on “political security” and party survival. This is enshrined in an expansive National Security Law that permits the overseas deployment of China’s armed forces.<sup>31</sup> The *weiwēn* legal paradigm views social unrest, anti-government protests, and damage to China’s image, state property, and infrastructure as state security incidents as opposed to social conflicts.

Many African regimes, particularly those preoccupied with survival, tend to treat all forms of discontent in similar ways, creating fears that China’s *weiwēn* approach could reinforce negative practices as China/Africa security engagements deepen. Furthermore, many Chinese investments, such as ports, oil and gas pipelines, and transportation have a national security underpinning. Many African analysts worry that governments might react in ways that aggravate tensions if such interests are harmed in any way. For example, Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta threatened to hang vandals in a May 2017 speech shortly after China and Kenya launched the Nairobi-Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway. “I normally prefer to pardon the guilty and have them serve life imprisonment sentences but the railway is a different matter. Those who will be sentenced for destruction of public property, I want them to listen to me—God forgive me—I will approve their hanging.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Affordability and Accessibility*

China's "non-interference" principle gives customers access to weapons of all types regardless of their domestic situations. Beijing also offers flexible financing terms to undercut competitors and convince partners of its commitment to "solidarity" through "friendly pricing." Cheap prices made China a favored supplier of small arms and light weapons including Kalashnikovs (AK-47 rifles), easily the most popular item with governments and rebel groups. A wide menu of soft loans and re-scheduling options are on offer for heavy weaponry including tanks and combat aircraft. Chinese suppliers have also allegedly accepted commodities in exchange for weapons (such as copper from Zambia and chromate and aluminum from Zimbabwe) according to several media reports.<sup>33</sup>

China's flexible terms made it a major player in Africa's arms market. From 2013 to 2017, China's arms exports to Africa surged 55 per cent from the previous five-year period of 2008 to 2012, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.<sup>34</sup> Over the same period, China's share of total arms imports was 17 percent, up from 8.6 in 2008 while Russia's fell from 39 percent to 32 and the U.S. accounted for 11 percent.<sup>35</sup> This trend continued from 2013 onward. China delivered 24 battle tanks to Tanzania and 30 to Chad. Ghana, Kenya, and Namibia bought 76, 21, and 32 armored fighting vehicles respectively.<sup>36</sup> Other customers included Burundi, Chad, Mozambique, Gabon, and Rwanda. China delivered fighter aircraft and weaponized drones to Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Morocco and Sudan bought missiles and missile launchers. In 2014, South Sudan received 100 guided missile systems. Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Ghana, Niger, Rwanda, Sudan, and Tanzania bought caliber artillery systems. In 2018, Rwanda became the only foreign nation known to be equipped with the highly advanced Red Arrow HJ-9A Anti-Tank Guided Missile still in service in the PLA.<sup>37</sup>

China also deals with countries under Western and international sanctions, positioning itself as an "all-weather friend" that doesn't abandon its partners. It has sold weapons in recent years to Burundi, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Burundi and Zimbabwe were included on the list of six countries that China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, visited in January 2020. China's arms deals in crisis environments risks damaging international conflict resolution efforts in places like Burundi, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. This in turn could complicate China's relations with Africa's other external partners such as the U.S. and EU, and even with the AU itself.

Beijing's position as a choice partner is also boosted by the improved quality of its weaponry. Some African military experts argue many Chinese products like combat aircraft, tanks, artillery systems, and maritime patrol craft are now of the same quality as their Western equivalents.<sup>38</sup> This has driven up demand because the pricing remains comparatively lower and flexible, giving customers access to advanced systems at a fraction of the cost. China has served this growing demand by increasing the presence of its top-tier defense firms in Africa's defense sectors. For instance, North China Industries Corporation (NORINCO) has partnerships and joint ventures in countries like Angola, Algeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

By 2018, China's State Administration for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense had concluded bilateral agreements with 45 African countries on defense technologies and defense industries, marking a larger shift from a strategy initially focused on selling weapons to one that is shaping the African security sector more deeply.<sup>39</sup> Uganda stands out as a beneficiary of such assistance. In 2018, it started manufacturing and assembling its own infantry fighting vehicles incorporating lessons from South African prototypes it used in its peace operations in Somalia. That year it also announced plans to export these vehicles to the UN for use in regional peace missions.<sup>40</sup> Chinese defense firms have also played a key role in strengthening indigenous defense industries in Angola, Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, and Tanzania.

## Evolution in Officer Training and Military to Military Engagement

Anecdotal feedback from several African officers trained in the U.S. and China suggests that African militaries think highly of Chinese military education in two areas: 1) training of NCOs, junior, and mid-level officers, and, 2) technical subjects including engineering, geography, technology, and mechanics.<sup>41</sup> U.S. and Western PME is considered stronger, and more dynamic and refined at the senior and strategic level. It is looked at as an avenue for career advancement and international recognition. A 2019 attitudes survey of senior African officers conducted by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies finds that 97 percent of respondents across 37 countries hold American and international training in high regard.<sup>42</sup>

This general assessment is consistent with how Chinese officer training has evolved. China initially focused on helping national liberation movements (NLM) build armies out of guerilla movements based on the PLA's own experience.<sup>43</sup> The focus was on training African soldiers in basic skills for their branch or support function (ie. infantry, artillery, and armor). This was done at the PLA Army Infantry Academy, Hefei Institute of Artillery, and PLA Armored Tactical College among others. Nanjing Military Academy's seven specialist colleges, from tactics, military command and administration, to ground operations, and political work completed this training experience.

Those earmarked for leadership attended the PLA Nanjing Military Academy and other service academies including Dalian Naval Academy, and the PLA Air Force Aviation University. Ideological education was included at every level. Political commissars (*zhengwei*) who enjoy co-equal rank and authority with the commander of every unit, underwent additional training at the PLA Nanjing Political College in Jiangsu. Senior ones went to the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Party School in Beijing. China also sent instructors to NLM political and ideological schools across Africa from Algeria to Zimbabwe. This is still done jointly by the PLA, United Front Department, and the CPC International Liason Department. One of the latter's biggest ongoing financial commitments is the Mwalimu Nyerere Ideological School in Tanzania, a former training base for liberation movements. It will train around 400 civilian and military leaders and cadres from the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa annually.<sup>44</sup> The CPC in addition hosts numerous party exchanges at different levels, reaching around 200 African party cadres and officers annually. More recently, the China Executive Leadership Academy at Pudong (Pudong College for Cadres) stepped up training for government bureaucrats. It styles itself as China's version of the Kennedy School of Government.

This strong emphasis on ideological education is a legacy of the liberation movement tradition. The military is first and foremost an instrument of the party and civilian cadres see themselves as a "co-fraternity" of the armed forces. The party in turn exercises absolute control, a sacrosanct principle known as the "party commands the gun," (*Qiānggǎn zì lǐmiàn chū zhèngquán*).<sup>45</sup> This has many guises. In South Sudan, the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Moral Orientation, a replica of the PLA Political Work Department, instills the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement ideology across the force. Around 4,100 SPLM functionaries and leaders have trained in China's ideological schools since 2011.<sup>46</sup>

In Uganda, a Chief Political Commissariat carries out ideological education in every unit.<sup>47</sup> Political commissars play powerful roles as an optimal means of asserting subjective control of military, giving them significant political influence. Indeed, many move on to higher posts. Angolan President, João Lourenço, Mozambique's former President, Armando Guebuza, and Tanzania's former President Jakaya Kikwete were all political commissars. Senior officers in such armies were socialized to see themselves as guardians of the liberation values. They are "political militants" or "ideologues in uniform" in addition to soldiers to paraphrase Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Samora Machel, and Yoweri Museveni, the founders of the current militaries of Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde, Angola, Mozambique, and Uganda.

Says Museveni, “A revolutionary is first and foremost ideological; military is second... ideological training is even more important than the military.”<sup>48</sup>

Many regimes, from those that have historical ties to the PLA and those that don't, are keen to adopt the methods China's ruling party has used to exercise absolute control of the two million-strong PLA. This is particularly pronounced in authoritarian settings. Such governments argue that the PLA has never carried out a coup or splintered into factions. Furthermore, it has faithfully ensured the survival of the ruling party. The sharing of experiences in this particular area is yet another means through which China exercises its influence. Yet such regimes also send their officers to Western military schools teaching the exact opposite, namely, an apolitical stance and civilian control.

The expansion of Chinese military education to all countries irrespective of political alignments reflects fundamental shifts in China's foreign policy. By 2010, as many as 40 African countries were sending students to China's military institutions on a regular basis at Beijing's cost. Since the Belt and Road got underway in 2013, around 2,000 African students from over 50 countries attend Chinese military schools annually according to China's Ministry of Defense.<sup>49</sup> Senior ones attend China's National Defense University, its eight component colleges, and other senior schools such as the National Defense Science and Technology University and the PLA Academy of Military Science. Despite the influx of African students at the higher level however, China's PME is still perceived as more effective and relevant at the intermediate and lower levels, and in technical training. This is a legacy of China's heavy engagement with Africa's national liberation movements. At the same time, the receptivity in Africa for expanded U.S. engagements provides justification for strengthening and recommitting U.S. support to African PME initiatives.

China-Kenya relations are a microcosm of how the PLA's ties have evolved as well as the African proclivity to tap opportunities in the West and the East. Beijing had minimal contact with the Kenya military during the heyday of Africa's liberation struggles. A permanent British Army Training Unit for Kenya (BATUK), was based there, modelled on BMATTs in Nigeria, South Africa, and Sierra Leone and formerly in Zimbabwe. China opted to maintain its distance, concentrating instead on its special relationship with neighboring Tanzania, which allowed the PLA to train liberation movements on its soil. By 2000, however, Kenya had become a top priority in line with the “Going Out” strategy. From 2003 to 2016, Kenya hosted 10 senior-level defense meetings with China, the same number of meetings China held with Portugal, Uruguay, Spain, Israel, and Slovakia over the same period.<sup>50</sup> Angola, one of China's oldest partners in Africa, is the only other African country that hosted this many engagements. China/Kenya relations strengthened after Kenya emerged as a major strategic partner in building China's *One Belt One Road*. Since then, Kenyan officers have regularly attended China's higher academies such as its National Defense University. China also trains and supplies Kenya's paramilitary National Youth Service, which gives compulsory training to high school graduates. Yet Kenya also remains one of the strongest partners of the U.S. and UK in East Africa.

### **Conclusion**

China does not think of power in exclusively military terms. Soft and hard power are viewed as complementary, in other words, as Comprehensive National Power, a concept the Chinese government uses to guide its national security strategy. This lies at the heart of the China/Africa relationship where military partnerships are tethered to party-to-party and revolutionary ties where these exist. The ideological element has expanded to include the promotion of the Chinese governance model as an alternative.

China believes its vision of world order and the solutions it offers find more support in Africa than any other part of the world, making the continent an essential foundation of its foreign policy and a pillar in building the *Community of Common Destiny*. China's dedication to outcompeting the West, coupled with Africa's perceived receptiveness to China's global ambitions, means that its African engagements will intensify.

COVID-19 will undoubtedly lead to some reassessment and recalibration as economic ties shrink due to the pandemic. Moreover, the impact of the alleged racist incidents against African communities in Guangzhou and other Chinese cities will likely be long-lasting. Such tensions are long-running but have taken on stronger political undertones in the context of China's management of COVID-19 within its immigrant communities. However, on a strategic level, Africa remains tied to China's global strategy and firmly integrated in the architectures China is constructing to re-shape international relations. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

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