



May 8, 2020

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Chinese Campaigns for Political Influence in Africa

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Thank you to the members of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission for the opportunity to testify on Chinese efforts to gain political influence in Africa. This testimony seeks to analyze aspects of China's political influence in Africa through political capacity building, political party training, media elites training, and engagement through its diplomatic corps. It also aims to assess the African response and reception to such Chinese efforts, which forms a baseline in understanding the effectiveness of the Chinese influence.

Historically, Africa's political importance was manifested in the fact that China's overarching goal was diplomatic recognition from African nations and the reinforcement of official ties that strengthen the political legitimacy of the Communist regime. Throughout the 1960s, the period when China was "striking with both fists" (in two directions: toward the United States and the Soviet Union), its support of African countries generally reduced the pressure on China brought about by the international isolation imposed by the two major powers. The emotional affinity of China toward Africa has since then been a constant factor in the relationship, although it has been gradually diluted, and in some cases replaced, by the pragmatic economic calculations on both sides in recent years.

China relies heavily on diplomatic support and cooperation from African countries on key issues in the international arena and in multilateral forums. Currently, the 54 African states account for more than one quarter of U.N. member states and votes. China has relied on African countries' support at the U.N. for its political agenda, including Beijing's assumption of its seat at the UN. In 2008, before the Beijing Olympics, the issue of Tibet became a controversial sore spot for China at the U.N. Human Rights Council. China relied on African countries to remain silent or issue statements supportive of China's Tibet policy in order to defuse and preempt hostile discussions or actions.¹ Today, on issues ranging from human rights to U.N. reform and from regional security to China's core national interests, China looks to Africa to be on its side.

As China's global ambition grows rapidly under President Xi Jinping, China has grown increasingly interested in portraying Africa as a strong supporter and testament of China's great power status, its reputation as a responsible stakeholder, and the leader of the developing world. Chinese economic engagement with Africa has been constantly cited to demonstrate the generosity of China as the largest developing country and the desirability of a new international order led by China. These agendas strengthen Xi Jinping's prestige and authority at home and abroad.

Another of China's key political aspirations in the relationship with Africa is to end Taiwan's diplomatic presence on the continent. For Beijing, it is a matter of fundamental regime legitimacy that Africa embraces the One-China policy and accepts Beijing rather than Taipei as the only lawful representative of China. The tug of war between Beijing and Taipei over diplomatic ties with African countries has lasted more than six decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Currently, Eswatini is the only African country that still maintains diplomatic ties with Taiwan. It is worth noting that since the Democratic Progressive Party assumed office in Taiwan in 2016, China has successfully established diplomatic ties with two of Taiwan's diplomatic allies: São Tomé and Príncipe and Burkina Faso. It is widely believed that China's economic enticement, especially the promises of aid and loans, has played a key role in the diplomatic tug of war.

As the largest and perhaps most effective authoritarian regime in the world, Beijing has always viewed foreign governments' recognition of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) successful political and economic policies as a powerful reinforcement of its legitimacy at home. Since the 2000s, China has begun to actively promote the experience and familiarization with such political and economic policies among other developing countries. China uses its own development model, which combines political authoritarianism and economic capitalism, to show to African countries that economic development and political stability can coexist without a democratic system. In many countries, "China's economic progress is cited by statisticians, protectionists, and thugs alike to 'prove' that keeping the state's grip on companies, trade, and political freedoms need not stop a country growing by 8%-plus a year."² From Beijing's perspective, the popularity of the China Model is the best way to validate the credibility, or even the desirability, of the Chinese system.

In this sense, China's ideological interest in Africa did not disappear after it directed its priorities toward economic development. Instead, it has taken a different, subtler form, one that supports Beijing's legitimacy through spreading and popularizing China's development model. The more countries identify with and adopt Beijing's approach, the less isolated China feels, and the stronger the legitimacy the CCP enjoys. Beijing would like to see non-Western, non-democratic governments survive and thrive in Africa simply because they help to validate China's political system and mitigate its international isolation by showing that Western democracy is not a universal value and that the Western democratic system does not have to apply in every country.

China is actively promoting this new model of political and economic development in Africa through government fellowships and training programs for African elites, which constitute a key component of Chinese foreign policy toward Africa. The goal is to educate African elites on China's experience in economic development and political governance, as well as help them to imitate such policies in their home countries. China states that the training programs are strictly

exchanges of opinions rather than an imposition of the China Model on African countries. In other words, China invites African political party cadres to China to study the Chinese way of governance on issues they are interested in, but whether they eventually adopt the Chinese way is purely at their own discretion. This approach does constitute capacity building, but it is perhaps less dictatorial compared to Western capacity-building programs.

China actively pushes African elites to personally experience China's economic success and systematically trains them on how to emulate China's paths to success. The conscious effort made by China to help African elites absorb, assimilate, and duplicate the Chinese experience does constitute a different type of ideological push. It is geographically expansive, institutionally systematic, and psychologically and politically impactful over the choices and preferences of African political parties and, thus, over the African political landscape.

In Western concepts, the Chinese political capacity-building program equates to the export of Chinese ideology, albeit in a more implicit and indirect form. However, in this case, China's power does not lie in its imposition but in its inspiration. It is noteworthy that China under President Xi Jinping is rapidly expanding the scope and scale of such capacity-building programs in Africa. In the 2015 FOCAC commitment, China committed to a total of 2,000 degree program opportunities, 30,000 government fellowships, visits by 200 African scholars, and training for 500 African youths and 1,000 media personnel. However, in 2017, the number of government fellowships jumped from 30,000 to 50,000 in addition to 1,000 African elites trained by China. Demonstrating China's keen interests in shaping the affinity of the next African leaders, China has quadrupled the number of African youths to be invited to China for exchanges. While these numbers are impressive, none are as jaw-dropping as the number of capacity-building and training opportunities China has agreed to provide: 50,000 training opportunities to African countries, including government officials, opinion leaders, scholars, journalists, and technical experts. These are essentially the African political, economic, and social elites as well as opinion leaders that will shape the future of the continent and its relations with China.

Political Parties and Elites

The Chinese Communist Party's party-to-party engagement with African political parties dates to the 1950s and 1960s, when CCP members sought to assist African liberation movements and nascent political parties with their pushes for independence. Though African countries generally did not adopt a Maoist ideology, this period forged strong relations between the CCP and the ruling parties of several African countries, such as Angola, Algeria, Zanzibar (now part of Tanzania), and the Congo. By the 1970s, when China began its domestic reforms and opening-up process, the good relations between the CCP and some ruling parties in Africa won China support in its bid to reclaim its U.N. membership, such as from Tanzania.³

Accelerating significantly since 2000, the CCP's engagement with African parties shifted from an overtly ideological dialogue on Chinese communism to a more subtle and expansive demonstration of the fruits of China's economic development. Based on the assumption that China's remarkable economic progress over the past few decades is attributable primarily to its political system, the CCP engages directly with African political parties, political leaders, and other elites to provide

political training programs in China. For African political parties interested in adopting CCP methods, such as cadre-training schools and public relations management, the CCP uses its long history of partnership in Africa and deep pockets to train thousands of political party members in African countries. Outside of political parties, scholarships, fellowships, and delegations funded by the CCP provide ample opportunities for current and future African leaders to spend time studying in China, see China's development firsthand, and strengthen relations between China and African countries.⁴

Just as support from African partners helped China win its bid for U.N. membership, the CCP's engagement with African political parties has significant geopolitical implications for China. As China's Belt and Road Initiative projects expand in Africa, the cooperation of ruling parties in African countries is critical for securing approval of major projects. Party-to-party relations provide a foundation for China to deepen its partnerships in Africa in contrast to Western countries, particularly the United States, whose development finance advocates for a different set of rules.

The efforts by the CCP also has certain concrete inspirations to offer African countries: a framework for governance that supposedly leads to reduced poverty; consolidation of ruling classes' hold on power; an alternative source of development finance and partnership other than the West; and a large source of assistance for education and party growth. It is true that the dialogues, forums, and other major engagement platforms seem to be largely China offering lessons learned to Africa, rather than a mutual exchange. However, the capacity-building opportunities remain attractive to African parties that are inspired by the CCP's longevity and level of control, as well as (a separate issue, but to what extent is debatable) China's economic development.⁵ The benefits to the CCP and to China will ensure that the CCP continues to cultivate interest in its model from African parties well into the future.

Media and Digital Space

The 2018 FOCAC Beijing Action Plan for 2019-2021 promotes the establishment of a China-Africa media cooperation network in which China would train African media officials and journalists and promote exchanges and visits. The Plan also states that China will support African TV programs and jointly produced documentaries and both sides will provide films and TV programs to each other's national broadcasting agencies.⁶ With the promotion of Chinese media resources by national agencies and private broadcasters with Chinese backing, the sparse media environments of many African countries could see Chinese monopolization of news and broadcasted arts to curry favor for Chinese worldviews or soft power.

Since 2014, the China-Africa Press Center has annually trained journalists in China with the primary goal to inspire admiration and compliment for China. The exact number of training programs and journalists trained remains opaque, but the efforts are visibly active. For example, the 2019 China-Africa and China-Asia Pacific press centers saw 50 journalists from 49 African and Asian countries.⁷ Some of the efforts render satisfying results: in 2018, China organized for 22 Zambian journalists to visit China and attend a special 2018 Zambia Media Think Tank Seminar, managed by the National Radio and Television Administration and featuring presentations by senior officials from the State Council Information Office and State Administration of Radio, Film

and Television of China.⁸ Following their return, one journalist published an enthusiastically pro-China piece, restating the freedom of speech and information afforded by the PRC Constitution and the “robust” media landscape in China.⁹

In recent years, Chinese ownership of African media companies has offered Beijing direct channels of influence over the content, tone, and preferences of the media. And Beijing has used these channels. China International Television Corporation and the China-Africa Development Fund together own 20% of South Africa’s Independent Media, the country’s second-largest media company.¹⁰ This financial influence has led to reported media censorship of journalists: immediately after publishing an article critical of China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims in 2018, one Independent Media contributor’s column was cancelled, and the piece was taken down.¹¹ Chinese company StarTimes also owns stakes in South African media companies, having rescued TopTV and bought 20% of On Digital Media.¹²

In addition to ownership of African media outlets, Chinese state-owned media has established a comprehensive foothold in print, television, and online media, where pro-China opinions are encouraged and spread widely. Although not as present as Western organizations like BBC or CNN, official Chinese media including the Xinhua News Agency, CGTN, and *China Daily* have bureaus on the continent, all headquartered in Nairobi: Xinhua’s Africa Bureau was opened in 1986, CGTN Africa opened in 2012, and *China Daily* has been producing a weekly Africa edition in print since 2012. It has been reported that Xinhua’s office in Nairobi has about 40 Chinese employees, including family members, and *China Daily*’s bureau in Nairobi has four staffers, including two Chinese.¹³ Apart from the heavyweight media companies, ChinAfrica, a monthly magazine, was launched in Beijing in 1988, and ChinAfrica Media and Publishing was inaugurated in Johannesburg in 2012, touting being “the first among China’s print media targeting African readers to establish a presence.” ChinAfrica is owned by the CCP-backed *Beijing Review*.¹⁴ China also runs *Radio China International* in local languages as well as English and French.¹⁵ In addition, as part of the Access to Satellite TV for 10,000 African Villages project, Chinese media company StarTimes broadcasts Chinese television and news to rural Africa.¹⁶

Chinese actors’ influence on African countries’ governance structures has a direct impact on norm-building on the continent, and this is particularly true in the digital space. China’s promotion of “internet sovereignty” in contrast to the Western multi-stakeholder internet model has been extended to African governments. In 2017, the Tanzanian communications deputy minister praised China’s control over the internet within its borders, calling China’s homegrown sites “safe, constructive, and popular.”¹⁷ A year later, the controversial “Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations” were introduced, which place fees on online content creators and bloggers. The effect has been the loss of diversified and smaller-scale online representation.¹⁸ It is believed that Uganda and Zambia have similar proposed legislation due to their close cybersecurity partnerships with Beijing.¹⁹

Chinese firms have also exported hardware and practices applicable to surveillance states. For example, Guangzhou-based startup, CloudWalk, signed in 2018 an agreement with the Zimbabwean government to build a national facial recognition and monitoring system, inciting fears of social credit systems in the country.²⁰ Tools such as cybersecurity and social-monitoring

technologies can solidify authoritarian governments or flawed democracies' less democratic practices. Ideologically on the international level, the export of the China Model not only boosts China's norm-shaping capability but also accumulates potential allies opting for an alternative to Western democratic governance within the international community.

The Impact of the Chinese Diplomatic Corps

Since 2016, China has successfully established diplomatic ties with two of Taiwan's diplomatic allies in Africa: São Tomé and Príncipe and Burkina Faso. Eswatini is the only internationally recognized country on the continent without Chinese diplomatic relations. In comparison with the U.S., China has diplomatic representation with all of Sub-Saharan Africa except Eswatini; the U.S. lacks active embassies in the Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

China's diplomatic corps in Africa is playing an increasingly active role in shaping African public opinion through diverse social media channels and communications strategies. While the strategic communications of China's diplomatic corps have previously been criticized for being bureaucratic and stiff²¹, since 2019 Chinese diplomats in Africa have launched Twitter accounts and engaged with comments to extend their messaging. As of April 2020, 25 Chinese ambassadors or embassies in Africa maintain Twitter accounts.²² The accounts engage with followers in multiple languages of the host countries. While heavily laced with CCP propaganda, the accounts represent an increasingly effective platform for China to communicate its interests and information at a time when social media usage in Africa is soaring. Interestingly, the Chinese embassy in South Africa, led by Ambassador Lin Songtian, has emerged as a vocal critic of U.S. policy and promoter of Chinese stances on Twitter.²³ The novel approach of China's diplomatic corps in Africa represents the Foreign Ministry's adaptive methods to engage African audiences.

It is particularly worth noting that China's diplomatic attention and resources devoted to Africa outpace that of the U.S. in measures of not only embassies but also high-level diplomatic visits. Beginning in 1991, the Chinese Foreign Minister has made Africa the destination of his first overseas trip of the year. In fact, Africa was the first place the Chinese Foreign Minister visited after the Tiananmen event in 1989 and African leaders were the first to visit China despite the international criticism and sanctions on China at the same time.²⁴ To date, Xi Jinping has visited Egypt, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, the Republic of the Congo, and Guinea each once and South Africa thrice. During the same period, President Obama visited Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia once and Senegal and South Africa twice; Donald Trump has never visited Africa as president.

China's high-level visits achieve three complementary geopolitical goals. First, they are a physical representation of China's continual commitment to Africa. By highlighting China-Africa engagement, China projects, advances, and continues its economic engagement, media impact, and political influence on the continent. Even without major announcements or developments, the visits show to African governments and citizens alike the consistent and substantial importance China attaches to Africa.²⁵ Second, the senior-level visits serve as a stark contrast to the U.S.'s Africa policy amid great power competition. In contrast to the Trump administration's critical messaging of China-Africa relations, China's senior-level visits represent direct engagement with the continent that recognizes Africans' agency in their own future. These soft-power gains have

been seen in African leaders' rebuke of Washington's warnings to Africa against Chinese actions and insinuation of African helplessness: in 2018, Sierra Leonean president Bio responded to such criticisms by stating "We are not fools in Africa... At difficult times, when we need help most, China was there for us."²⁶ Third, a direct channel to high-level Chinese officials allows African leaders to easily voice their interests, in ways relations with the U.S. or Europe do not permit.²⁷ This builds trust between China and Africa and strengthens China's international messaging of the benign and win-win nature of its foreign policy.

African Reactions

African governments and communities have, as a whole, lauded Chinese investment and aid as well as its political engagement with the continent. In one manifestation of the African reception, every African country except Eswatini sent representation to the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing, with the most senior officials attending for all countries except Tanzania, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, and Algeria. Many governments have publicly praised China, both for its political model and its economic contributions.

Politically, China represents to some Africans a model to emulate, and China's appeal as a comember of the Global South helps. Ghanaian president Akufo-Addo stated that Ghana aims to replicate China's success story, referencing "socialism with Chinese characteristics."²⁸ South Africa's African National Congress has lauded the CCP as "a guiding lodestar."²⁹ Economically, governments near-unanimously praise China's investment and aid, competing for the limited yet sizeable funds. Rwandan president Kagame stated at FOCAC 2018, "China has proven to be a win-win partner and sincere friend."³⁰ South African president Ramaphosa stated at the same event, "In the values that it promotes, in the manner that it operates and in the impact that it has on African countries, FOCAC refutes the view that a new colonialism is taking hold in Africa."³¹ Within public forums, African governments are overwhelmingly positive toward Chinese influence both political and economic.

There are different theories, even among Africans, on the content, purpose, and effect of the trainings and other CCP sponsorships of African political parties. While the curriculum of the training covers topics that seem designed to promote authoritarianism, such as influencing public opinions and managing criticism of the political party, African scholar Adams Bodomo notes in an interview that people who have attended training trips describe them as a public relations tour more than anything else.³² A tour, of course, still provides an important opportunity for the CCP to show off China's development achievements to African leaders. Regardless of the content of the training, some political party leaders in Africa also explicitly take inspiration from the CCP's structure and operation, such as leaders in South Sudan's ruling party SPLM and South Africa's African National Congress party, which attempted to establish a political leadership school similar to the CCP school in Shanghai in the 2010s.³³

Overall, existing African pushback against Chinese influence has heavily centered around China's economic rather than political influence. Central governments and local communities have notably raised numerous cases of malign Chinese economic influence spanning criticism of environmentally damaging resource extraction, unfair business practices and currency

manipulation outcompeting nascent African industries³⁴, excessive use of Chinese rather than local labor for projects, and occasional condescending approaches to Africans during negotiations or public statements.³⁵ Of note, Zambian opposition candidate Michael Sata elevated anti-Beijing rhetoric and the issue of Chinese business practices to presidential election discussions in his 2006, 2008, and 2011 campaigns.³⁶ He later backed down from his anti-Beijing rhetoric.

Notable is criticism of China's economic influence at the lower levels. African civil society and citizens have voiced concerns. Locals have chided perceived collusion between ruling parties and Beijing and perceived economic harm caused by China, with notable cases including: "the kidnapping of 29 Chinese workers by Sudanese rebels in January 2012;... the killing of four Chinese workers in South Africa in November 2011; violent labour strikes at Chinese-owned coal mines in Zambia in 2012; the arrest and deportation of Chinese miners in Ghana in June 2013; and demonstrations by workers and traders against Chinese goods in Ghana, Senegal, Kenya and Malawi over the last several years."³⁷

When civil society has criticized China's political influence, it has involved anti-authoritarian and pro-human rights voices. In Ethiopia, opposition activists allege that Beijing has hardened the ruling party's authoritarian tendencies, and insurgent groups have considered Chinese firms proxies or allies to the ruling party, leading to the deadly 2007 attack at the Abole oil field against Sinopec.³⁸ Recently, China has faced criticism about the treatment of Africans in Guangzhou during the COVID-19 pandemic (both from netizens and central governments, who have summoned Chinese ambassadors to explain their policies).³⁹

Recommendations

The Chinese approach to gain political and ideological influence in Africa has a critical impact on U.S. national interests on the continent. From exploitative economic relations to rising support and appeal of authoritarian principles and practices, from government accountability to the African media landscape, China presents a heightened competition with the United States over the future of Africa. While China will always remain an intrinsic actor in Africa, there are policies that the United States could consider to manage the competing narrative and growing influence from China:

Enhance U.S. engagement. A key reason that China is gaining momentum in Africa has been the lack of attention and resources from Washington toward the continent. The appeal of China's political agenda largely originates from the Chinese economic success and, partially, its economic engagement with Africa. If the U.S. is able to enhance its economic, political, and diplomatic efforts to offer African countries an alternative, it will mitigate the Chinese ability to dominate the discourse. Expanding USAID, the DFC, USADF, the State Department, and other government organs' efforts on the continent can provide ample opportunities for direct and positive interactions. U.S. engagement with the continent across multiple levels (the African Union, member countries, civil society, etc.) will increase competition across investment and governance structures and directly benefit African citizens.

Emphasize bidirectional communication channels. Reputational obstacles and historical legacies of colonialism that often accompany Western engagement with Africa can be mitigated by reinforcing the bidirectional nature of political, economic, and diplomatic interactions between the

U.S. and the continent. Because China's diplomatic success on the continent has stemmed from its continual engagement and offer of support where it perceives it needed, ensuring that U.S. diplomatic visits continue to highlight African countries' perspectives, needs, and initiatives can offer these countries even more opportunities to enhance African development. Capacity-building programs such as academic exchanges can also enhance the bilateral relationships between the U.S. and African countries.

Increase investment in African civil society. Soft power and people-to-people engagement have traditionally been a strength of the United States. But with China's enhanced efforts, the U.S. will need to ratchet up its level of effort. To better inform the African governments' decision-making, the U.S. should increase support of African civil society to strengthen local safeguards against Chinese negative intentions and malign activities and increase African self-autonomy and agency in the continent's own future.

Align with like-minded partners. The landscape of Africa's partnerships is changing quickly, expanding from traditional Western donors to emerging markets such as India and Turkey. Forming an alignment with like-minded partners in Africa will boost the available resources and credibility of the U.S. engagement, diminishing the perception that the U.S. interest is to compete with China in Africa rather than a genuine interest in the continent itself. It will also help to enhance the effectiveness of the engagement with the input and support of other donors and partners. The coalition of like-minded partners can offer an alternative to China's normative influences, such as those on internet freedom and open governance, and work together to promote human rights across the continent.

Limit the impact of great power rivalry on Africa. Despite the fact that China is increasing its effort to gain political influence in Africa, the challenges faced by the continent are so vast and diverse that great power rivalry should not hinder efforts, joint or unilateral, to assist African countries to battle their difficulties. The U.S. should avoid punishing Africa for the sake of competing with China.

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