*asia policy*, volume 17, number 3 (july 2022), 1–78
http://asiapolicy.org

ROUNDTABLE

# Expanding Engagement: Perspectives on the Africa-China Relationship

*Rachel Bernstein*

*Cobus van Staden*

*Mandira Bagwandeen*

*Ovigwe Eguegu*

*Bulelani Jili*

*Obert Hodzi*

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## Introduction

*Rachel Bernstein*

Over the last decade, China's presence on the global stage has shifted dramatically: the country is now an economic powerhouse and increasingly influential in international organizations. As China rises, questions also arise pertaining to its strategic objectives toward many regions and in many domains. China appears to be seeking a "loose, partial, and malleable" hegemony over the global South—making the African continent a strategic priority for Beijing.[1]

This *Asia Policy* roundtable is a result of a current research initiative at the National Bureau of Asian Research, "Into Africa: China's Emerging Strategy," which aims to better understand China's strategic ambitions in Africa and assess how the continent fits into China's envisioned global order. The first three reports in this project to date have examined China's expansion into Africa from Beijing's perspective, often relying on Chinese-language sources to draw conclusions and analyze China's strategy.[2] Yet, only looking at Beijing's viewpoint to get a fuller grasp on China-Africa relations would be a gross oversight that would provide an incomplete impression of China's engagement with the continent.

Africa is a continent with 54 countries and a population of more than 1.3 billion people. China's engagement with the continent, of course, does not have the same level of impact or influence in all these countries, and not all states share the same opinion regarding China's presence. This roundtable seeks to share, highlight, and examine African perspectives regarding China's engagement with and influence on the continent. The essays here provide both regional and functional case studies examining different facets of the China-Africa relationship from the perspective of African

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1 Nadège Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), NBR Special Report, no. 83, January 2020, 6.

2 Nadège Rolland, "A New Great Game? Situating Africa in China's Strategic Thinking," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 91, June 2021 ~ https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-new-great-game-situating-africa-in-chinas-strategic-thinking/; Nadège Rolland, ed., "(In)Roads and Outposts: Critical Infrastructure in China's Africa Strategy," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 98, May 2022 ~ https://www.nbr.org/publication/inroads-and-outposts-critical-infrastructure-in-chinas-africa-strategy; and Nadège Rolland, ed., "Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 100, June 2022 ~ https://www.nbr.org/publication/political-front-lines-chinas-pursuit-of-influence-in-africa.

states, ranging from medical diplomacy and infrastructure development to smart cities in Kenya and the Digital Silk Road to local responses to China's growing influence and image campaigns in Zambia and Mauritius.

Cobus van Staden evaluates China's medical diplomacy as the Covid-19 pandemic becomes endemic. While China's mask diplomacy in the early phases of the pandemic was effective and garnered positive responses, its later vaccine diplomacy suffered setbacks. Although Beijing appeared to overpromise and underdeliver, he concludes that vaccine and medical diplomacy can be considered a diplomatic victory for China, compared to the West's disappointing and underwhelming response.

Looking at another area of diplomacy and outreach, Mandira Bagwandeen discusses China's infrastructure investments and application of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in African countries as well as key outcomes from the Eighth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in November 2021. Amid accusations of debt-trap diplomacy and the financial pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic, she finds that China has demonstrated some willingness to negotiate debt-relief measures with African states. Discussions at FOCAC, however, indicated that China intends to begin re-directing its development assistance away from financing infrastructure development through large loans and toward trade facilitation.

Also under the BRI umbrella is the Digital Silk Road, which is focused on improving states' infrastructure for information and communications technology and digital capabilities. As Ovigwe Eguegu explains, the Digital Silk Road is attractive to many African governments, including Ethiopia, Senegal, Gambia, and Zimbabwe, due to China's emphasis on digital sovereignty, which aligns with their development priorities. However, obstacles, such as a lack of digital infrastructure, still must be overcome before the Digital Silk Road becomes fully popularized in Africa.

Bulelani Jili also addresses technology development in Africa, focusing particularly on smart cities in Kenya as a case study. He argues that China's "no strings attached" lending practices, especially for technology development, create opportunities for technology to be abused in societies where few data and privacy regulations exist. Jili asserts that it is not necessarily the sharing of the technologies that is worrisome, but the local governance conditions that can enable unjust surveillance practices in smart cities and using smart technologies.

Obert Hodzi examines the effect of China's rise and presence in Africa on democracy and development, looking specifically at Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. He argues that while China does not promote its authoritarian model, by highlighting alternatives to democracy that underscore weaknesses in democratic societies, it provides countries with an alternative governance model to consider. Moreover, China's indifference to regime type in its aid and lending policies enables authoritarian actors in Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia to use their relationship with Beijing to secure regime survival.

Using Zambia as a case study, Chiponda Chimbelu shows that reactions toward Chinese engagement and aid have been mixed. Many Zambians recognize the economic benefit Zambia has derived from engagement with China but remain skeptical of the investment and jobs created by Chinese companies and are critical of Zambia's debt to Beijing.

Lastly, Roukaya Kasenally looks at China's relationship with one specific country: Mauritius. She overviews Mauritius's unique context, including the history of China's relationship with Mauritius, and discusses China's investment in the Mauritian media and information environment as a means to influence the narrative surrounding China. Kasenally shows that China continues to invest heavily in Mauritian media to "tell China's story well" at the same time that Western media is beginning to withdraw and decrease its presence in the country.

While the roundtable highlights diverse—and at times contrasting—opinions on China's role and presence in Africa, a common thread exists: China offers an attractive alternative in governance, investment, aid, and development to the United States and the West more generally. Even though China is not always the preferred country for engagement, the West's lack of engagement and failure to focus on African-centered development has left some countries with few realistic or viable alternatives. ◈

# Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy in Africa

*Cobus van Staden*

Medicine has long played a key role in the Africa-China relationship. Since 1963, China has sent teams of medical volunteers to the continent annually to provide primary healthcare to underserved countries and targeted care related to particular diseases, notably malaria.[1] China has also been instrumental in the development of a new generation of malaria medication, and the Ebola crisis of the 2010s created space for collaboration between China and other external partners on the continent. But most recently and most starkly, the Covid-19 pandemic has both validated and raised doubts about China-Africa medical cooperation, even as the virus ruthlessly exposed the realities of Africa's wider global position.

This essay assesses China's diplomacy and cooperation with African countries in two stages of the Covid-19 pandemic: the early phase that focused on virus mitigation through personal protective equipment (PPE) and healthcare supplies, and a second phase that has focused on Covid-19 vaccine production and distribution. It argues that although China was more successful in partnering with Africa early in the pandemic, China has enjoyed diplomatic gains from the second stage due to the failure of the global North and its multilateral institutions to live up to their promises regarding sharing vaccines and vaccine intellectual property (IP). The essay examines China's diplomacy and then turns to look at similar efforts of the global North. It concludes with observations about the recent Eighth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the lasting effects Covid-19 responses may have on Africa's relationships with China and with traditional Western partners.

## *The Early Stages of the Covid-19 Epidemic and PPE Diplomacy*

In the earliest stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was still contained in China, several African countries provided emergency

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1 Li Anshan, "Chinese Medical Cooperation in Africa," Nordic Africa Institute, Working Paper, no. 52, 2012 ~ http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:399727/FULLTEXT02.pdf.

assistance to China in the form of PPE and other support.[2] China managed to control the epidemic earlier than other countries, and as the virus spread internationally, China stepped into the role of providing PPE, ventilators, and other medical supplies to countries around the world, including in Africa. While the Chinese government was the figurehead of this outreach, Chinese companies were key to the rollout. This was due not only to China's massive production capacity but also to the logistic muscle underlying its global distribution capacity. For instance, e-commerce giant Alibaba played an important role, especially given its transport and logistics networks. This capacity to aid was boosted by additional funding from the Jack Ma Foundation. The founder of Alibaba, Ma became the face of early Covid-19 outreach to Africa, which added to the political impact of the cooperation until Ma's subsequent fall from grace in China and disappearance from public view. This event was part of China's marked shift from PPE diplomacy to vaccine diplomacy.

Ethiopian Air, Ethiopia's national carrier, played a key role in shaping Covid-19 diplomacy between the continent and China, especially during the early phase of the pandemic. As the crisis gathered steam in China, airlines increasingly started reducing flights to the country or discontinuing service completely. Ethiopian Air, however, continued its flights, soon becoming the only carrier to remain in service between Africa and China.[3] This made Ethiopian Air a key partner for Chinese PPE diplomacy. Ethiopian Air worked with Alibaba to facilitate PPE deliveries to all African countries, using Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport as a logistics hub. The collaboration between the Jack Ma Foundation, Alibaba, and Ethiopian Air filled planes with masks, ventilators, and other supplies, and the planes touched down to make deliveries in African capital after capital as an iconic emblem of solidarity, especially as demand in the global North for masks and other equipment made it nearly impossible for African countries to source such goods.[4]

The position of African students in Wuhan and other Chinese cities also became an issue early in the pandemic. China's facilitation of

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2 R. Maxwell Bone and Ferdinando Cinotto, "China's Multifaceted Covid-19 Diplomacy across Africa," *Diplomat*, November 2, 2020 ⤳ https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/chinas-multifaceted-covid-19-diplomacy-across-africa.

3 Salem Solomon, "Ethiopian Airlines Resists Pressure to Cancel Flights to China," Voice of America, February 13, 2020 ⤳ https://www.voanews.com/a/science-health_coronavirus-outbreak_ethiopian-airlines-resists-pressure-cancel-flights-china/6184200.html.

4 Dawit Endeshaw and Guilia Paravicini, "Coronavirus Supplies Donated by Alibaba's Ma Arrive in Africa," Reuters, March 22, 2020 ⤳ https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-africa/coronavirus-supplies-donated-by-alibabas-ma-arrive-in-africa-idUSKBN2190JU.

these students' evacuation strengthened diplomatic ties. For example, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa publicly thanked the Chinese authorities for their help in arranging the evacuations.[5] However, the status of Africans in China also led to a major diplomatic row when numerous Africans were evicted from lodgings in Guangzhou in a local government crackdown following rumors that African migrants were involved in Covid-19 transmission.[6] The subsequent controversy on social media caused significant diplomatic fallout, including Nigeria's speaker of the House of Representatives summoning the Chinese ambassador to account for the mistreatment of Nigerians in China.[7] The incident was an unprecedented breach in African-Chinese relations, and the summoning of the ambassador acted as a demonstration of an African government's willingness to push back against China. However, the controversy stayed contained at this diplomatic level without national leaders addressing it. It also has not played a significant part in exchanges related to Covid-19 as the pandemic has moved into later phases.

Ethiopian Air's key role continued later in the pandemic. As vaccines became available, Ethiopia Air partnered with Cainiao, Alibaba's e-commerce logistics wing, to set up cold-chain transport and storage for vaccines to the continent, with hubs in Dubai and Addis Ababa.[8] Notably, the pandemic experience, defined by resource-hoarding by Africa's traditional partners in Europe and North America, seems to have strengthened links between China and Africa in general, and with Ethiopian Air in particular. The carrier has recentered its business focus on China, implemented Chinese-made rapid-testing facilities, and recently announced that it would purchase five additional airplanes and build a new warehouse at Bole International Airport in response to vastly expanded e-commerce between China and Africa.[9]

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5 Chris Alden and Yu-Shan Wu, eds., *South Africa-China Relations: A Partnership of Paradoxes* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

6 "African Nationals 'Mistreated, Evicted' in China over Coronavirus," Al Jazeera, April 12, 2020 ~ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/12/african-nationals-mistreated-evicted-in-china-over-coronavirus.

7 Eric Olander, "Nigeria's Speaker of the House Publishes Video Admonishing Chinese Ambassador Zhou Pinjian about the Situation in Guangzhou," China Africa Project, April 13, 2020 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/2020/04/13/nigerias-speaker-of-the-house-publishes-video-admonishing-chinese-ambassador-zhou-pingjian-about-the-situation-in-guangzhou.

8 Yujie Xue, "Alibaba Logistics Arm Cainiao to Speed Up Covid-19 Vaccine Shipments with China's First Cold Chain Air Freight Service," *South China Morning Post*, December 2, 2020.

9 Ethiopian Airlines, "Ethiopian Launches High-End Covid-19 Testing Lab at Its Hub," Press Release, April 22, 2021 ~ https://corporate.ethiopianairlines.com/Press-release-open-page/ethiopian-launches-high-end-covid-19-testing-lab-at-its-hub; and "Ethiopia Plans to Build African E-Commerce Logistics Hub," TechCentral, January 24, 2022 ~ https://techcentral.co.za/ethiopia-plans-to-build-african-e-commerce-logistics-hub/206944.

### *Chinese Vaccine Outreach to Africa*

If the dominant image of Chinese outreach to Africa in the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic was planes laden with PPE landing in African capitals, the later vaccine phase was considerably less iconic. Whereas China's PPE diplomacy was targeted at all African countries equally, its vaccine distribution showed considerable differences both between African countries and between the continent and other regions in the global South.

In May 2020, Chinese president Xi Jinping told the World Health Assembly that when a Chinese vaccine against Covid-19 was developed, it would be made available to the world as a "global public good."[10] This wording was subsequently repeated by Chinese officials and official media.[11] However, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbing soon amended that statement to say that a vaccine would be available "at a fair and reasonable price."[12] This vacillation between a global soft-power payoff and the hard economics of vaccine distribution has characterized China's provision of vaccines to Africa ever since.

Despite the prominence of the Africa-China relationship in the media, the global pattern of Chinese vaccine distribution showed that the continent was relatively low on Beijing's list of priorities. At the time of writing, China has delivered 120 million doses to the continent, according to the Beijing-based Bridge Consulting.[13] This stands in sharp contrast to the Asia-Pacific region, where China has delivered 854 million doses, and to Latin America, where 285 million have been delivered.

China clearly prioritized its immediate neighborhood of the Asia-Pacific in its Covid-19 outreach rather than the longer-distance relationships it had set up under the Belt and Road Initiative. The low delivery rates to Africa were also blamed on slow approval of Chinese vaccines by the World Health Organization (WHO), which delayed their addition to the global COVAX initiative. COVAX is co-led by the

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10 Sarah Wheaton, "Chinese Vaccine Would Be 'Global Public Good,' Xi Says," *Politico*, May 18, 2020 ~ https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/18/chinese-vaccine-would-be-global-public-good-xi-says-265039.

11 "Update: China to Make Covid-19 Vaccine Global Public Good: Official," Xinhua, June 7, 2020 ~ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/07/c_139121625.htm.

12 Eric Olander, "Remember When China Said It's Going to Give Africa Access to Its C19 Vaccine? Well, There's a Catch…" China Africa Project, October 1, 2020 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/2020/10/01/remember-when-china-said-its-going-to-give-africa-access-to-its-c19-vaccine-well-theres-a-catch.

13 "China's Vaccines in Africa," Bridge, 2022 ~ https://bridgebeijing.com/our-publications/our-publications-1/china-covid-19-vaccines-tracker/#China8217s_Vaccines_in_Africa.

Global Vaccine Alliance (Gavi), the WHO, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The initiative originally aimed at providing fast, global access to Covid-19 vaccines to 92 low- and middle-income countries that lack the technology to produce them. The delays in acceptance of the Chinese-made vaccines by Sinovac and Sinopharm to COVAX were at least partly due to the fact that these vaccines had been shown to be less effective than the mRNA vaccines from Western companies such as Pfizer, a point acknowledged by the Chinese authorities.[14] China joined the COVAX alliance in October 2020, and in mid-2021, Chinese pharmaceutical companies pledged to deliver more than 500 million doses to the initiative.[15] That said, China's vaccine distribution is still characterized by bilateral ties.[16]

While Chinese authorities criticized Western countries for holding back vaccine exports, the country's own export levels fluctuated as well, in part due to massive domestic vaccination efforts. China also tended to focus on getting countries to purchase vaccines, rather than donating them. Bridge Consulting estimates that, as of May 2022, China has pledged to donate 74 million doses and sold 186 million doses to African states. Of these, 125 million doses have already been delivered, of which 31 million were donated.[17] Many African countries lacked the ability to purchase large amounts of vaccines upfront and instead relied on COVAX.[18] This tendency has led to some controversy regarding pricing opacity with the Chinese vaccines. For example, it was reported that Hungary paid $36 per dose—well above the prices of Western competitors.[19] Similarly, Senegal was

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14 Joe McDonald and Huizhong Wu, "Top Chinese Official Admits Vaccines Have Low Effectiveness," Associated Press, April 11, 2021 ~ https://apnews.com/article/china-gao-fu-vaccines-offer-low-protection-coronavirus-675bcb6b5710c7329823148ffbff6ef9.

15 Eric Olander, "COVAX Gets a Shot in the Arm from Chinese Vaccine Makers with Half a Billion Doses Promised over the Next Year," China Africa Project, July 13, 2021 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/2021/07/13/covax-gets-a-shot-in-the-arm-from-chinese-vaccine-makers-with-a-half-a-billion-doses-promised-over-the-next-year.

16 Alex Henderson et al, "China Surpassed 1 Billion Vaccine Exports: But What More Can It Do?" China Africa Project, November 15, 2021 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/analysis/china-surpassed-1-billion-vaccine-exports-but-what-more-can-it-do.

17 "China's Vaccines in Africa."

18 Uwagbale Edward-Ekpu, "China's Vaccine Outreach Is Falling Short of Beijing's Pledges," Quartz, May 21, 2021 ~ https://qz.com/africa/2011220/how-many-vaccines-has-china-sent-to-africa.

19 Sui-Lee Wee and Benjamin Novak, "Hungary Pays Big for a Chinese Vaccine," *New York Times*, May 12, 2021 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/world/hungary-sinopharm-covid.html.

reported to have paid $19 dollars per dose.[20] Beyond these disparities, these prices far exceed comparable ones offered by COVAX.

The dominance of bilateral distribution relationships partly explains the large variance in China's country allocations. Bridge Consulting reports a startlingly wide range of deliveries among different African countries. By far, the most have gone to Morocco (45.5 million doses at the time of writing). In fact, six countries make up the bulk of the 196 million doses sold and the 58 million pledged as donations to Africa. After Morocco, the leading countries are Egypt (16.1 million doses), Zimbabwe (13.2 million), Angola (7.3 million), Algeria (5.2 million), and Libya (5.1 million). While only a few African countries have not received any Chinese vaccines, the vast majority have only received a small amount, most much fewer than 1 million doses.[21] The bilateral nature of this vaccine provision has added to its role as a diplomatic gesture, particularly between organs of the Chinese state and their foreign counterparts. For example, by the end of 2021, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had donated vaccines to 28 foreign militaries, including the South African National Defence Force, to which the PLA offered 300,000 doses.[22]

More important have been moves toward the establishment of vaccine manufacturing facilities in Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco.[23] These initiatives, as well as the distribution of vaccines, reveal that vaccines have been less a direct tool of diplomacy and more a reflection of preexisting diplomatic ties. The prominence of Zimbabwe and Angola as vaccine destinations, for example, reveals the preexisting long-term ties between those countries and China, due in part to pressure from Western countries. In this sense, vaccine diplomacy seems to have strengthened extant diplomatic relationships rather than forged new ones. This tendency also seems to be reflected in the global distribution noted above—the preponderance of vaccine provision to China's immediate neighbors seems to indicate a similar bolstering of established relationships.

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*20* Eric Olander, "Senegal's First Batch of Covid-19 Vaccines Arrive from China," China Africa Project, February 18, 2021 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/2021/02/18/senegals-first-batch-of-covid-19-vaccines-arrive-from-china.

*21* It is important to note that Chinese vaccines require two doses per person, so these allocations do not represent a significant step toward herd immunity.

*22* Tebogo Tshwane, "Beijing's Soft Power: China Offers 300,000 Vaccine Jabs to SANDF Soldiers," News24, December 14, 2021 ~ https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/beijings-soft-power-china-offers-300-000-vaccine-jabs-to-sandf-soldiers-20211214.

*23* Clara Ferreira Marques, "China-Africa Ties Could Use a Few Million Shots in the Arm," Bloomberg, October 22, 2021 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-10-21/china-should-step-up-vaccine-diplomacy-in-africa?sref=uMuyuNij.

The Eighth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which took place in Dakar, Senegal, in November 2021, provided a chance for China to begin to reset its Covid-19 diplomacy. At the forum, President Xi pledged 1 billion vaccine doses to the continent. The Dakar Action Plan that arose from FOCAC also pledged Chinese support for a range of health-related endeavors, including developing the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, building Africa-China friendship hospitals, and transferring greater pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity to Africa.[24] However, due to successive waves of the Omicron variant triggering massive lockdowns in China during the first few months of 2022, global shipments of Chinese vaccines have fallen to near zero. While there are indications that China is developing new mRNA vaccines specifically targeting the variant, it is unclear when shipments will increase, whether the new vaccine will be ready for mass manufacturing, and whether reaching the 1 billion dose pledge is currently feasible.[25]

Overall, China's vaccine diplomacy has been less successful than its initial PPE diplomacy. Controversy about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines, the dominance of bilateral agreements, and uncertainty about the pricing of Chinese vaccines were all factors that muddied any diplomatic message Beijing wanted to send during the height of the pandemic. Specifically, the fact that China insisted on mostly selling vaccines to the global South instead of donating them undermined its initial pledge of making vaccines available as a global public good. However, China largely remained insulated from any real diplomatic backlash from these inconsistencies by the wholesale failure of Western responses to the pandemic in Africa and to developing countries around the world.

## *Western Vaccine Distribution to Africa*

In theory, the relative paucity and geographic imbalance of Chinese vaccine provision to Africa could have caused tensions in African countries' relationships with China, especially compared with the optics of China's previous highly successful PPE diplomacy. In reality, however, any lapses on China's side were overshadowed by the massive multilevel failure of

24 "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022–2024)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (People's Republic of China), November 30, 2021 ~ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202112/t20211202_10461183.html.

25 Eric Olander, "Chinese Vaccine Shipments around the World Plunged 97% Last Month and We Now Know Why," China Global South Project, May 9, 2022 ~ https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/chinese-vaccines-shipments-around-the-world-plunge-97-last-month-and-we-now-know-why.

Western engagement to the extent that President Xi's announcement of the donation of a billion Chinese-made vaccine doses at FOCAC can be seen as a Western-enabled diplomatic coup.

Key to this Western failure was disappointment in COVAX. The COVAX model intended orders from low- and lower-middle-income (LMIC) countries to be supported by donor aid via an advanced market commitment (AMC), while high-income countries would self-finance their own vaccine purchases. The AMC would help fund the early development of vaccines, while keeping costs low across the board. Once the vaccines were market-ready, both self-financing and non-paying LMIC countries would receive consignments at a similar rate, according to the sizes of their populations.[26]

However, Western countries upset this plan by also making direct deals on the side with the vaccine manufacturers. By August 2020, the United States had made deals for 800 million vaccine doses, enough to fully vaccinate 140% of its eligible population. The European Union made deals for 500 million doses, while the United Kingdom secured enough doses to cover its whole population two and a quarter times over.[27] These early deals and payments essentially meant that these countries leapt to the front of the queue, with manufacturers rushing to fulfill these orders and pushing COVAX to the back. At the same time, many of these countries also did not deliver their full pledges to COVAX, which meant that the alliance could not afford to deliver enough vaccines to the LMICs that signed up.

In response, Gavi added incentives to try to lure the high-income countries into fulfilling their pledges. These efforts included the option to order greater consignments and the option to choose which specific vaccine they would get. The effect was that even though these countries were flooded with vaccines they procured independently, COVAX was still contractually forced to provide high-income countries with one-fifth of the vaccines procured on its watch.[28] The May 2021 shutdown of Indian vaccine exports, due to massive domestic infection rates, also greatly exacerbated delays in delivering vaccines to LMICs. These problems with COVAX further weakened the rollout in the global South, arguably lengthening the pandemic.

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26 Ann Danaiya Usher, "A Beautiful Idea: How COVAX Has Fallen Short," *Lancet*, June 19, 2021 ~ https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)01367-2.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

These were not only failures of logistics or organization. They also represent a massive failure of optics, which is arguably altering the soft-power profile of these countries in the global South over the long term. As developing countries struggled to even vaccinate frontline workers, populations around the world received media from the United States and elsewhere daily highlighting popular domestic opposition to the vaccine rollouts, in part facilitated by right-wing conventional media and social media. The result was a toxic mix of popular resentment and seeping disinformation in the LMIC countries, amplified by social media.

The pharmaceutical companies, located in North America and Europe and heavily invested in lobbying there, were deeply complicit in this inequity. In 2021, Amnesty International released a report which found that, as of September 2021, 98% of Pfizer/BioNTech consignments had been allocated to high- and upper-middle-income countries. The same was true for 88% of Moderna's output and 79% of Johnson & Johnson's.[29] The report also found that these companies made significant profit from these sales, many of which were priced at above the industry standard. At the time of writing, their collective projected profit from Covid-19 vaccines in 2021–22 was about $130 billion. Just 8% of Pfizer/BioNTech's production and 3.4% of Moderna's vaccines were allocated to the COVAX alliance.

One of the key factors in the failure of Covid-19 vaccine provision to the global South has been limited production combined with the fact that some vaccines require ultra-cold storage. As a result, localized regional production would be much more practical than transporting doses from centralized production hubs. To facilitate this process, in October 2020, India and South Africa requested that the World Trade Organization temporarily waive IP rights on the vaccines to facilitate their mass rollout in developing countries.[30] The United States, UK, and the EU aggressively campaigned against the measure, saying it would stifle innovation at these companies.[31]

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29 "A Double Dose of Inequality: Pharma Companies and the Covid-19 Vaccines Crisis," Amnesty International, 2021 ~ https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/POL4046212021ENGLISH.pdf.

30 Ann Danaiya Usher, "South Africa and India Push for Covid-19 Patents Ban," *Lancet*, December 5, 2020 ~ https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32581-2.

31 Ashutosh Pandey, "Rich Countries Block India, South Africa's Bid to Ban Covid Vaccine Patents," DW, February 4, 2021 ~ https://www.dw.com/en/rich-countries-block-india-south-africas-bid-to-ban-covid-vaccine-patents/a-56460175.

Toward the end of 2021, U.S. president Joe Biden expressed support for the IP rights waiver in response to the Omicron variant.[32] However, despite this call, no progress has been made toward waiving the IP rights on the Covid-19 vaccines; in fact, the issue has become a major sticking point between Africa and its traditional partners in the global North. With less than 1% of Africa's population having received a booster shot, "vaccine apartheid" can be seen in Africa's relationship with the United States, the UK, and the EU. This was particularly visible during the rise of the Omicron variant in late 2021 when these countries implemented travel bans against several southern African states, although travel from similarly affected countries in the global North was not targeted.[33] This division remained stark as the EU spent the joint February 2022 summit with the African Union fighting against the IP waiver, even as the WHO unveiled its own mRNA vaccine initiative to be set up between various African countries.[34]

Well aware of these negative optics and determined to deflect attention from the IP waiver issue, the United States and Europe have shifted to promoting their vaccine donations to the continent. In December 2021 (two full years after the initial detection of Covid-19 in Wuhan), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced Global Vax, a "whole-of-government" initiative for bolstering cold-chain supply and logistics, service delivery, vaccine confidence and demand, human resources, data and analytics, local planning, and vaccine safety and effectiveness.[35] Instead of engaging with Africa's demands for an IP waiver, the plan allocates $10 million to boosting in-country vaccine production:

> This investment will support countries poised to produce vaccines themselves to help them build regulatory capacity,

32 "Biden Calls for Intellectual Property Waivers on Covid Vaccines," Al Jazeera, November 26, 2021 ~ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/26/biden-calls-for-intellectual-property-waivers-covid-vaccines.

33 Duncan Craig, "Outrage in Africa as Omicron Unleashes Another Wave of Double Standards," *Times* (United Kingdom), December 3, 2021 ~ https://www.thetimes.co.uk/travel/comment/outrage-in-africa-as-omicron-unleashes-another-wave-of-double-standards.

34 Martina Stevis-Gridneff, "African and European Leaders Meet against Background of Enduring Problems," *New York Times*, February 17, 2022 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/europe/europe-africa-summit-eu.html; and David Meyer, "Europe Is Throwing Its Weight Behind Africa's mRNA Covid Vaccine Push—Except on One Key Point," *Fortune*, February 18, 2022 ~ https://fortune.com/2022/02/18/europe-africa-who-mrna-vaccines-von-der-leyen-ramaphosa-trips-waiver.

35 United States Agency for International Development (USAID), "USAID Announces Initiative for Global Vaccine Access (Global Vax) to Accelerate Vaccine Access and Delivery Assistance around the World," Press Release, December 6, 2021 ~ https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/dec-6-2021-usaid-announces-initiative-global-vaccine-access-global-vax.

> transfer "know-how" to train emerging manufacturers, and provide strategic planning and other assistance.[36]

Yet even when so-called fill-and-finish production of Western vaccines has been allowed in the global South, access was not increased. In 2021 for example, it was revealed that Johnson & Johnson's facility in South Africa was producing vaccines for export to Europe despite dangerously low vaccination rates on the African continent.[37]

Despite Global Vax only being launched in December 2021, by February 2022 USAID was already claiming that it was significantly increasing vaccination rates in sub-Saharan Africa.[38] These claims may be true, but they do not account for the significant downsides to focusing on donated doses rather than fully engaging with in-country production. Chief among these is the reality that many doses are donated so close to their expiration date that countries end up having to dispose of them.[39] In early 2022, it was revealed that Johnson & Johnson had shut down production at one of its factories that delivers to developing countries to focus on an unrelated, more profitable vaccine.[40] These continuing trends keep adding to a central truth: Covid-19 has revealed a crisis in the relationship between Africa and its traditional Western partners, a reality deftly exploited by China.

### *Conclusion: The Future of Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy after FOCAC*

China's vaccine pledge at the Eighth FOCAC is a significant step in the fight against the pandemic on the continent. The action plan also reveals a new level of diplomatic consensus between the Chinese and African sides around Covid-19-related issues specifically. For example, the joint declaration for cooperation on the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention was a direct rebuke of Trump administration pressure on the

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36 USAID, "USAID Announces Initiative for Global Vaccine Access (Global Vax) to Accelerate Vaccine Access and Delivery Assistance around the World."

37 Rebecca Robbins and Benjamin Mueller, "Covid Vaccines Produced in Africa Are Exported to Europe," *New York Times*, August 16, 2021 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/business/johnson-johnson-vaccine-africa-exported-europe.html.

38 USAID, "New Case Studies Show Significant Rise in Vaccination Rates in Sub-Saharan Africa Following U.S. Government's Targeted 'Global Vax' Interventions," Press Release, February 17, 2022 ~ https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/feb-17-2022-new-case-studies-show-significant-rise-vaccination-rates-sub-saharan-africa.

39 "Covid Vaccines: Why Is Nigeria Unable to Use Its Supply?" BBC, December 9, 2021 ~ https://www.bbc.com/news/59580982.

40 Rebecca Robbins, Stephanie Nolen, Sharon LaFraniere, and Noah Weiland, "J&J Pauses Production of Its Covid Vaccine Despite Persistent Need," *New York Times*, February 8, 2021 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/business/johnson-johnson-covid-vaccine.html.

African Union to lessen its cooperation with China.[41] The document also positions China and Africa in solidarity against Western-led efforts to locate the origin of the virus, stated in terms of opposition against "any attempt to politicize, label or stigmatize the virus."[42] This was a major show of African support for China on a controversial point. It was also clear at FOCAC that African concerns about Covid-19 vaccine distribution have been heard by China. Both the Dakar Action Plan and Xi's keynote speech explicitly commit China to the waiving of IP over vaccines.[43]

Overall, the Eighth FOCAC can be seen as a significant diplomatic victory for China in Africa. It managed to cement its position as an all-weather partner to the continent while minimizing the many embarrassing aspects of its own Covid-19 battles, not least the issues around the pricing of Chinese vaccines, the vaccines' relatively low efficacy, and the firestorm over the treatment of African migrants in Guangzhou early in the pandemic.

Yet very few of these victories were due to Chinese diplomatic prowess per se. In fact, China's vaccine diplomacy has had a relatively spotty track record and does not support the lofty pronouncements made early in the pandemic that a Chinese vaccine would be provided as a global good. However, almost wholly due to the conduct of Western countries during the pandemic, China has experienced a solid diplomatic victory nonetheless. From vaccine hoarding to their refusal to temporarily waive IP rights, Western governments and companies negatively reshaped their own image in the eyes of the global South in a way that will affect these relationships for decades to come. In the process, China has ended up as many countries' "least worst" option. Western responses to the Covid-19 crisis inadvertently bolstered two of China's most fundamental diplomatic messages to developing countries: that it is a more dependable partner than Western countries, and that Western rhetoric about the global good will always be trumped by parochial concerns. Whether those are fair allegations, they seem to have been taken on board at FOCAC. In the

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41 Katrina Manson and David Pilling, "U.S. Warns over Chinese 'Spying' on African Disease Control Centre," *Financial Times*, February 6, 2020 ~ https://www.ft.com/content/cef96328-475a-11ea-aeb3-955839e06441; and Jevans Nyabiage, "After U.S. Retreat, China Breaks Ground on Africa CDC Headquarters Project," *South China Morning Post*, December 16, 2020 ~ https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3114052/after-us-retreat-china-breaks-ground-africa-cdc-headquarters.

42 "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022–2024)."

43 Xi Jinping, "Uphold the Tradition of Always Standing Together and Jointly Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era" (keynote speech at the opening ceremony of Eighth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Ministerial Conference, Dakar, December 2, 2021) ~ http://www.focac.org/eng/ttxxsy/202112/t20211202_10461079.htm.

end, diplomacy is about shaping a shared worldview. China's vaccine diplomacy, however inconsistent, seems to have achieved that goal in spite of itself. ◈

# Changing Realities: China-Africa Infrastructure Development

*Mandira Bagwandeen*

Through an extensive portfolio of infrastructure investments, China has played a crucial role in helping Africa reduce deficits in its infrastructure. Over the past decade and a half, Chinese state-owned or state-aligned construction and engineering companies have strategically entered African markets with assistance from the Chinese government. Under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese companies took on mega-infrastructure projects, especially in the energy and transport sectors, that could aid African countries with achieving higher levels of development. However, these mega-BRI projects came with hefty price tags that have contributed to compounding the debt stress of several African nations. In this regard, many international (and especially Western) actors have accused China of predatory lending practices and debt-trap diplomacy. This narrative has been further amplified amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had significant ramifications for BRI projects in Africa and around the world. The pandemic has created some doubt about whether Chinese-funded and -built infrastructure projects can be completed and, more importantly, whether African states have the fiscal capacity to repay these development loans. With reduced revenues available to African governments, the risk of defaulting on loan repayments is high. Moreover, because of the burden of loan repayments, African states are handicapped in their response measures to Covid-19 and its economic consequences. The Eighth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in November 2021 demonstrated that due to changing realities—including China's domestic economic concerns, U.S.-China trade tensions, the global economic impact of Covid-19, and Africa's pandemic-induced debt stress—Beijing seems to have realized that it cannot continue to be Africa's go-to bank for financing infrastructure development.

This essay outlines that China may not be as willing as it was in past years to finance infrastructure development projects in Africa. It explores the impact of Covid-19 on the development of BRI infrastructure projects in Africa and briefly assesses the validity of the debt-trap and predatory lending accusations leveled against China. Additionally, the essay addresses

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the Eighth FOCAC summit, which indicated that China is likely to reduce its focus on development financing for hard infrastructure in its cooperation with African countries.

### *China's Belt and Road Infrastructure in Africa and Covid-19*

As of 2019, China was the single-largest source of finance for African infrastructure, having "finance[d] one in five projects and construct[ed] one in three."[1] Although the continent's enormous infrastructural investment gap cannot solely be met by Chinese financing, Beijing's role in contributing to the development of the region's infrastructure has been crucial. The China-Africa infrastructure partnership was strengthened under the impetus of BRI, which was introduced in 2013. The initiative closely centers on the Chinese proverb that "if you want to get rich, build a road first" and the argument that "infrastructure investments presuppose economic growth and enhance quality of life."[2] This logic is particularly appealing to African states that are desperate to reduce their deficits in infrastructure. Several African scholars have opined that BRI could play a critical role in Africa's industrialization and infrastructure development through the building of synergies between Agenda 2063, the pan-African development plan of the African Union (AU), and BRI.[3] Even individual African leaders and the AU welcomed China's infrastructural drive on the continent motivated by BRI.

In January 2015, China and the AU signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate on developing major transport infrastructure networks (high-speed railways, aviation, and highways) and industrialization infrastructure. With the ambition to connect all 54 African states through transport infrastructure projects, this memorandum complements and aligns with Agenda 2063, which in turn aims to accelerate continental integration through the development of transport infrastructure and industrialization. Massive national and regional projects worth billions of dollars, mostly in the transport and

1 Hannah Harais and Jean-Pierre Labuschagne, "If You Want to Prosper, Consider Building Roads," Deloitte, Insights, March 22, 2019 ~ https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/china-investment-africa-infrastructure-development.html.

2 Kemel Toktomushev, "The Belt and Road Initiative: The March of White Elephants," China-U.S. Focus, February 22, 2019 ~ https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/the-belt-and-road-initiative-the-march-of-white-elephants.

3 Bhaso Ndzendze and David Monyae, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Linkages with the African Union's Agenda 2063 in Historical Perspective," *Transnational Corporations Review* 11, no. 1 (2019): 38–49; and Yu-Shan Wu, Chris Alden, and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, "Where Africa Fits into China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Conversation, May 28, 2017 ~ http://theconversation.com/where-africa-fits-into-chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative-78016.

energy sectors, began to pop up across the continent. As of April 2019, China had BRI projects in 42 different African countries,[4] and by January 2021 a total of 46 out of 54 African countries had signed on to become official members of the initiative.[5]

However, the Covid-19 pandemic threw a wrench in the works for many BRI projects worldwide, including in Africa. The temporary closure of borders and reduced economic activity around the globe disrupted supply chains, causing significant delays and, in some cases, increasing the costs of projects. Restrictions on travel, disruptions in the supply lines of raw materials, and the hinderance of trade transportation across borders, together with local measures such as lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus, were the main reasons for the delay or halting of BRI project construction in Africa and other parts of the world.[6] The pandemic ostensibly showcased the vulnerability of BRI projects' dependence on China.[7] Most projects are financed by China and implemented by Chinese construction companies that employ a cohort of semi-skilled and skilled Chinese workers and import resources from mainland China. If local communities had been more involved in developing and implementing BRI projects, it would have been easier for these ventures to adapt to changing realities on the ground.

Since Covid-19 has strained many African economies, African BRI partners may not remain dedicated to projects. With little budgetary leeway to absorb shocks such as those posed by the pandemic, many African countries do not have the financial capacity to push ahead with infrastructure development plans. Consequently, African governments are likely to delay or shelve transport and industrial projects that require massive investments. The viability of projects in the development phase is likely to be reassessed, and those in the implementation stage could be renegotiated because of possible liquidity difficulties or changes in feasibility outlooks.[8]

4 Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "China's African Belt & Road Initiative—It's Not What You Think It Is," Silk Road Briefing, March 3, 2021 ~ https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/03/02/chinas-african-belt-road-initiative-its-not-what-you-think-it-is.

5 "China, Botswana Sign MoU on BRI Cooperation," Xinhua, January 8, 2021 ~ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2021-01/08/c_139650064.htm.

6 Gabriel Crossley, "China Says One-Fifth of Belt and Road Projects 'Seriously Affected' by Pandemic," Reuters, June 18, 2020 ~ https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-silkroad-idUSKBN23Q0I1.

7 Frank Mouritz, "Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic on China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Connections* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 115–24.

8 Emmanuel Amoah-Darkwah and Ricardo Reboredo, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Infrastructure Development in Africa," China Africa Project, July 2, 2020 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/analysis/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-infrastructure-development-in-africa.

Africa's status as a supplier of primary commodities (such as minerals and metals, petroleum, and agricultural products) means that it is greatly affected by international developments and global shocks. As such, the global economy's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic will likely determine the amount of capital available for regional infrastructure projects.[9] Two factors are important to consider more closely in this analysis: the idea often promoted in the West that BRI projects entail "debt traps" for developing countries and Africa's call for debt relief amid the unprecedented global economic conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

*The debt-trap narrative.* Various academic circles and policy groups, mostly in the West, have argued that BRI projects increase the debt stress of developing regions, with some even accusing China of "debt-trap diplomacy" and predatory lending practices. However, several scholars, such as Deborah Brautigam, and research at think tanks and organizations, such as Chatham House and the Rhodium Group, have in recent years debunked the notion that China is practicing debt-trap diplomacy.[10] There are several problems with the debt-trap narrative about BRI. The debt-trap accusation assumes that China is behaving as a unitary actor. In reality, the Chinese government is a huge, sprawling enterprise with numerous competing factions, special groups, and state-owned corporate interests that all have their own agendas.[11] As such, it would be difficult to pull off a cohesive strategy such as debt-trap diplomacy because numerous actors would need to closely coordinate their interests, agendas, and activities.

Furthermore, the debt-trap narrative denies African agency in engagements with Beijing. The narrative undermines African officials' leverage and characterizes them as being naïve toward Beijing's intentions. It also tarnishes China's image as a responsible power by conveying that Beijing deliberately intends to trap developing countries. This reasoning partly explains why Beijing aggressively denounces accusations of debt-trap diplomacy and why African leaders take exception at being portrayed

9 Amoah-Darkwah and Reboredo, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Infrastructure Development in Africa."

10 See, for example, Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme," *Area Development and Policy Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019), 1–14; Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy,'" Chatham House, Research Paper, August 19, 2020 ~ https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy/1-introduction; and Agatha Kratz, Allen Feng, and Logan Wright, "New Data on the 'Debt Trap' Question," Rhodium Group, April 29, 2019 ~ https://rhg.com/research/new-data-on-the-debt-trap-question.

11 Eric Olander, "China to Cut Back Lending to Africa in the Post-Covid-19-Era," Africa Report, December 1, 2020 ~ https://www.theafricareport.com/52806/china-to-cut-back-lending-to-africa-in-the-post-covid-19-era.

as targets that China can easily hoodwink. However, it is worth questioning if China is being a responsible lender. As one of the world's largest lenders, China is not transparent and does not clearly articulate its agenda. Civil society organizations and the general public therefore cannot judge the terms and conditions of loans to recipient countries to determine whether they will be socioeconomically beneficial. As a result, Chinese loans and intentions are usually viewed with suspicion by Western nations and, in many cases, the citizens of recipient countries.

Despite China being an opaque lender, debt-trap and predatory lending arguments are weakened by the fact that it has demonstrated a willingness to engage in debt restructuring and cancellation with African countries over the years. Researchers from the China-Africa Research Initiative at the Johns Hopkins University documented sixteen cases of Chinese debt restructuring, worth $7.5 billion, in ten African countries between 2000 and 2019. In the same period, China also canceled 94 interest-free loans amounting to approximately $3.4 billion.[12]

China is a "shrewd negotiator,"[13] however, willing to impose stringent conditions on sovereign borrowers to secure repayment priority over other creditors. Its lending policies can include:[14]

- confidentiality clauses that commit the debtor not to disclose any contract terms unless required by law;
- requirements in some contracts for the borrower to maintain an escrow or special account, usually with a bank, "acceptable to the lender" that serves as security for debt repayment;
- "No Paris Club" clauses that instruct the borrower to exclude Chinese debt from restructuring in the Paris Club and from any comparable debt treatment; and
- a variety of cross-default clauses that include acceleration of payments, suspension of disbursements, and contract terminations in many loan contracts.

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12 Kevin Acker, Deborah Brautigam, and Yufan Huang, "Debt Relief with Chinese Characteristics," China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), Policy Brief, no. 46, 2020 ~ https://africa.isp.msu.edu/files/4916/3616/1711/PB_46_Acker_Brautigam_Huang_Debt_Relief.pdf.

13 Brad Parks, Ammar Malik, and Alex Wooley, "AidData Publishes a Controversial $200m Chinese Loan Contract for Uganda's Main Airport," AidData, February 27, 2022 ~ https://www.aiddata.org/blog/aiddata-publishes-a-controversial-200m-chinese-loan-contract-for-ugandas-main-airport.

14 Anna Gelpern et al., "How China Lends: A Rare Look into 100 Debt Contracts with Foreign Governments," AidData, Center for Global Development, Kiel Institute on the World Economy, and the Peterson Institute for International Economics, March 2021 ~ https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/how-china-lends-rare-look-100-debt-contracts-foreign-governments.pdf.

Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese lenders have also demonstrated that they are willing to accept raw materials as a form of repayment on infrastructure loans, commonly referred to as resources-for-infrastructure (RFI) deals. Examples of RFI deals include Angola's oil-backed Chinese credit lines and Ghana's bauxite-for-infrastructure deal with Sinohydro, a hydropower engineering and construction state-owned enterprise. RFI deals play to many African countries' comparative advantage as resource suppliers. However, because of the volatility of global markets, resource profits can fluctuate widely, making it difficult to repay Chinese debt (as is the case with Angola). In efforts to ensure repayment, China is also willing to use revenue generated from Chinese-built infrastructure as a form of repayment. For instance, AidData reported in February 2022 that in efforts to secure repayment for the $200 million loan used to finance the expansion of Uganda's Entebbe International Airport, the Export-Import Bank of China required that "all revenue generated by the [airport] be used to repay the loan on a priority basis for 20 years."[15]

*China's response to Africa's call for debt relief amid Covid-19.* Given that many African governments must divert a significant share of revenues to international loan repayments, financing the economic response to the Covid-19 pandemic is challenging for some countries. In this context, debt-relief initiatives are necessary to provide African states, especially those under stress from debt, leeway to channel their limited financial resources to improve health measures and provide fiscal packages to support businesses and households.[16] With approximately 20% of all African governments' debt being owed to China as of 2018, Beijing holds a special position in the debt-relief campaign for Africa.[17]

China has chosen to pursue debt relief for African countries via multilateral initiatives, such as the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) of the G-20 and the Catastrophe Containment Relief Trust of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as debt cancellation under FOCAC and through ad hoc bilateral debt-relief negotiations.[18] At the

15 Carlos Mureithi, "Is Uganda's Entebbe Airport at Risk of Seizure by China?" Quartz, March 3, 2022 ~ https://qz.com/africa/2136934/will-china-take-over-ugandas-entebbe-airport.

16 International Monetary Fund, "Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa: Covid-19: An Unprecedented Threat to Development," 2020, 2.

17 David Brennan, "China Would Consider Debt Relief for African Countries Struggling against Coronavirus," *Newsweek*, April 14, 2020 ~ https://www.newsweek.com/china-debt-relief-african-countries-struggling-coronavirus-1497733.

18 See CARI, "Global Debt Relief Dashboard" ~ http://www.sais-cari.org/debt-relief.

China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against Covid-19 in June 2020, China announced its willingness to cancel interest-free loans on a bilateral, case-by-case basis behind closed doors.[19] China canceled interest-free loan debts due to mature at the end of 2020 for fifteen African countries; the cancellations announced for seven of these totaled approximately $113.8 million.[20] Furthermore, at the Eighth FOCAC, Chinese president Xi Jinping noted in his keynote address that Beijing would exempt Africa's least-developed countries from making repayments on interest-free loans due at the end of 2021.[21] Although interest-free loans make up less than 5% of African debt owed to China, cancellation of these loans will nonetheless prove helpful in allowing debtor nations to free up fiscal resources to better address economic and healthcare challenges.[22]

China is, however, reluctant to consider debt-relief measures for commercial loans. Although it is a part of the DSSI, Beijing has taken the stance that commercial lending by the China Development Bank and China Exim Bank (two of the largest Chinese creditors to Africa) should not be bound to this commitment.[23] The international community, especially Western creditors, has pressured China to accept a suspension of payments on bilateral lending at concessional rates. At the same time, Western creditors are still expecting developing countries to service their expensive commercial loans, which are outside the DSSI. China has decried this as an injustice, opining that traditional multilateral lending institutions—specifically the IMF and World Bank—are not operating fairly and in its favor. Beijing thus asserts that its commercial lenders "should not be forced to provide debt relief"; instead, the IMF and World Bank need to be open to changing their "strict terms and very complicated procedures," which make it challenging for African countries to secure development financing.[24]

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19 John Campbell, "As Africa Faces Covid-19, Chinese Debt Relief Is a Welcome Development," Council on Foreign Relations, Africa in Transition, June 30, 2021 ~ https://www.cfr.org/blog/africa-faces-covid-19-chinese-debt-relief-welcome-development.

20 Jevans Nyabiage, "Chinese Lenders 'Reluctant' to Offer African Countries Further Debt Relief," *South China Morning Post*, September 20, 2021 ~ https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3149314/chinese-lenders-reluctant-offer-african-countries-further-debt.

21 Xi Jinping, "Uphold the Tradition of Always Standing Together and Jointly Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era" (speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Dakar, November 29, 2021) ~ http://www.focac.org/eng/ttxxsy/202112/t20211202_10461079.htm.

22 Campbell, "As Africa Faces Covid-19, Chinese Debt Relief Is a Welcome Development."

23 Nyabiage, "Chinese Lenders 'Reluctant' to Offer African Countries Further Debt Relief."

24 Ibid.

### *FOCAC 2021: China Reducing Its Focus on Infrastructure Development in Africa*

The main takeaway from the Eighth FOCAC summit held in November 2021 was China's noticeable shift from prioritizing hard infrastructure development in Africa. Instead, trade finance was the only growth point of China's financial commitment to Africa, and China chose to focus on new areas of cooperation in the digital and medical sectors and to give greater prominence to agricultural development and climate change cooperation.[25] The shift in FOCAC priorities is very likely a result of China's reduced overseas lending in recent years, prompted mainly by domestic economic conditions and concern among Chinese creditors about their debt exposure in Africa. Between 2008 and 2018, China extended $148 billion of loans to African countries, mainly for infrastructure development.[26] However, given debt sustainability issues and to avoid controversial allegations of debt traps, Chinese lenders are likely to become more stringent and prudent when providing loans to African borrowers, especially those facing significant Covid-19-induced financial distress.[27]

Unlike at previous FOCAC summits, the word "infrastructure" did not appear in Xi Jinping's keynote address in 2021, nor was it included as a key cooperation heading.[28] In 2018, Xi's keynote speech made four direct references to infrastructure, and connectivity infrastructure was ranked second among eight action plans.[29] Infrastructure also did not feature prominently in FOCAC's concluding "Dakar Action Plan": it was only mentioned 25 times, much less frequently than trade, agriculture, or health.[30] However, this downplayed focus on infrastructure does not mean that China will quickly exit the sector; on the contrary, China is financing a "large number of ongoing infrastructure projects" with loan terms extending far into the future.[31] Going forward, China will likely shift

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25 Yun Sun, "FOCAC 2021: China's Retrenchment from Africa?" Brookings Institution, Africa in Focus, December 6, 2021 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/12/06/focac-2021-chinas-retrenchment-from-africa.

26 Olander, "China to Cut Back Lending to Africa in the Post-Covid-19-Era."

27 Ibid.

28 Sun, "FOCAC 2021: China's Retrenchment from Africa?"; and Beata Cichocka and Mikaela Gavas, "Europe, Take Note: A New Course for China-Africa Relations Set Out at FOCAC 2021," Center for Global Development, December 9, 2021 ~ https://www.cgdev.org/blog/europe-take-note-new-course-china-africa-relations-set-out-focac-2021.

29 Ibid.

30 Cichocka and Gavas, "Europe, Take Note."

31 Ibid.

away from expensive mega-BRI projects toward a more strategic approach that prioritizes regional connectivity, trade promotion, and industrial cooperation.[32] For example, Beijing pledged to undertake ten connectivity projects in cooperation with the secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area.[33] This commitment is crucial and could be of immense value as regional infrastructure projects will greatly help Africa return to pre-Covid-19 growth levels, the cost of which the African Development Bank estimates at between $68 billion and $108 billion per annum.[34] With China relying on African leaders to identify these connectivity projects, these leaders have the chance to exert their agency and negotiate for cross-border projects that can significantly drive trade facilitation and industrial development on the continent.

China will continue to provide concessional development finance to Africa, but "innovative ways of financing will be explored."[35] Future loans for infrastructure development are expected to be smaller, less risky, and motivated by more comprehensive feasibility studies.[36] Additionally, the "China-Africa swap" model could gain more prominence in commercial interactions. Ghana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe have already used this model.[37] Unlike the Angola model, which is a state-to-state setup, the China-Africa swap model is a state-to-corporate arrangement.[38] In this lending framework, the borrowing government grants a resource development license to a private Chinese investor in return for Chinese loans to build infrastructure.[39] China has

32 Yunnan Chen and Yue Cao, "Changing Tides for China-Africa Cooperation: Our Key Takeaways from the 8th FOCAC," ODI, December 8, 2021 ~ https://odi.org/en/insights/changing-tides-for-china-africa-cooperation-our-key-takeaways-from-the-8th-focac.

33 Xi, "Uphold the Tradition of Always Standing Together and Jointly Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era."

34 Jade Scarfe, "FOCAC8: A Success or Failure for Africa?" Africa Report, December 23, 2021 ~ https://www.theafricareport.com/160471/focac8-a-success-or-failure-for-africa.

35 Cichocka and Gavas, "Europe, Take Note."

36 Olander, "China to Cut Back Lending to Africa in the Post-Covid-19-Era."

37 Eric Olander, "China's Resources-for-Infrastructure Financing Mechanism Is Evolving into the 'Sino-Africa Swap,'" China Africa Project, December 10, 2019 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/analysis/chinas-resources-for-infrastructure-financing-mechanism-is-evolving-into-the-sino-africa-swap; and Peter Konijn, "Chinese Resources for Infrastructure (R4I) Swaps: An Escape from the Resource Curse?" South African Institute for International Affairs, Occasional Paper, no. 201, October 21, 2014 ~ https://saiia.org.za/research/chinese-resources-for-infrastructure-r4i-swaps-an-escape-from-the-resource-curse.

38 Olander, "China's Resources-for-Infrastructure Financing Mechanism Is Evolving into the 'Sino-Africa Swap.'"

39 Michael M.O. Ehizuelen, "Can China's Swap Formula Solve Africa's Loan Constraints?" CGTN, December 9, 2019 ~ https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-12-09/Can-China-s-swap-formula-solve-Africa-s-loan-constraints--MhEIWorAFq/index.html.

begun to use this model because it needs a sovereign guarantee, given many African states' low creditworthiness, and the swap formula essentially ensures that the Chinese lenders receive repayments, although in the form of resource exports. The China-Africa swap model allows African states to leverage their resource wealth as collateral to access Chinese credit, playing to most African countries' comparative advantage as natural resource suppliers.[40]

As Beijing reduces its focus on development finance for infrastructure projects, the pattern of Chinese financing will consequently change.[41] In 2021, China announced a significant reduction in credit lines to African countries from $20 billion in 2018 to $10 billion going forward. Moreover, Chinese credit lines will now only be provided to African financial institutions, including subregional development banks where China is a shareholder, such as the West African Development Bank.[42] This approach not only provides much-needed funds for regional banks, but by using African financial institutions as middlemen, it will also absolve China from most decision-making and dilute accusations of Beijing being the primary culprit of debt stress in Africa. Lower volumes of Chinese state-backed finance will likely constitute a "new normal," and China will increasingly rely on commercial sources to finance its global ventures.[43] A proposal to build more commercial investment–driven projects in Africa provides an avenue for Chinese state-owned companies to still access market opportunities on the continent without being a part of lending deals that contribute to debt stress. Ultimately, the next phase of BRI in Africa (and around the world) "may be underpinned by commercial funding for joint ventures and geared toward building industrial capacity for exports, rather than mega-infrastructure projects witnessed in the past decade."[44]

China's shift from its traditional infrastructure and construction investment model to a more local development approach may be a concern for African countries that are dependent on Chinese development finance.[45] Reduced investment in Africa's infrastructure will significantly hamper efforts to shrink the region's chronic deficits in the sector. Aware of how

40 Ehizuelen, "Can China's Swap Formula Solve Africa's Loan Constraints?"

41 Sun, "FOCAC 2021."

42 Chen and Cao, "Changing Tides for China-Africa Cooperation." Usually credit is provided on a bilateral basis to African governments to fund Chinese projects.

43 Cichocka and Gavas, "Europe, Take Note."

44 Ibid.

45 Fatima Racine Wane, "China Is Getting Worried about Africa's Indebtedness to It," Quartz, December 3, 2021 ~ https://qz.com/africa/2097985/chinas-focac-investment-pledges-to-africa-down-by-33-percent-to-40b.

integral Chinese investment has been in developing Africa's industrial and trade infrastructure, African leaders have urged "Chinese companies to adopt a more confident and optimistic view of investment in Africa."[46] However, given that many African states are typified by risky business environments and ballooning debt, it is understandable that China wants to scale back funding for mega-infrastructure projects—it cannot keep throwing good money after bad. As such, African countries must prepare for a new China-Africa economic reality, which might not favorably support their infrastructure development ambitions.[47]

China's prioritization of trade does appeal, however, to African countries' calls for a more holistic approach to development. Already China, as the continent's largest bilateral trading partner, plans to reach $300 billion in African imports between 2022 and 2024. To achieve this goal, Beijing will open green lanes for agricultural exports from Africa, speed up inspection and quarantine procedures, and expand the scope of products with zero-tariff treatment.[48] In 2019, China's trade surplus with Africa was $17.7 billion ($113.2 billion in Chinese exports and $95.5 billion in Chinese imports).[49] In 2020 the imbalance grew to a massive $41.5 billion ($114.2 billion in Chinese exports and $72.7 billion in Chinese imports).[50] The FOCAC action plan prioritized trade promotion due to concern over this imbalance and how it is perceived globally.[51] Although Beijing's focus on improving trade could narrow the trade deficit, it should be viewed with cautious optimism. African exports would have to expand by 27.3% to achieve this ambitious target, which requires the buy-in of both Chinese and African parties in the trade facilitation initiative to be successful.[52] Moreover, a level of $100 billion per year of African exports to China would only represent a return to levels previously seen in 2013, not a new trend or major difference in China-Africa trade relations.[53]

46 Wane, "China Is Getting Worried about Africa's Indebtedness to It."

47 Matthew Mingey and Agatha Kratz, "China's Belt and Road: Down but Not Out," Rhodium Group, January 4, 2021 ~ https://rhg.com/research/bri-down-out.

48 "China's Financial Pledge to Africa Falls after Criticisms of Debt Traps," Bloomberg, November 30, 2021 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-30/china-s-financial-pledge-to-africa-falls-amid-debt-criticism.

49 Sun, "FOCAC 2021."

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Cichocka and Gavas, "Europe, Take Note."

## *Conclusion*

In recent years, China provided gargantuan loans for mega-BRI infrastructure projects on the continent that, if implemented successfully, could boost Africa's economic development. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has created doubt about whether BRI projects can be completed and, more importantly, whether African states have the fiscal capacity to repay Chinese development loans. Against the backdrop of debt-trap accusations by Western countries, and possibly considering calls from the international community for debt cancellation and restructuring, China has demonstrated that it is willing to negotiate debt-relief measures with African states. Given the continent's debt crisis, Chinese lending banks are growing more concerned about their debt exposure in Africa. A new, more cautious lending approach to the region will make it more difficult for African countries to acquire Chinese development finance, but this situation also presents an opportunity for African governments to consider other lending options such as the China-Africa swap model. At the Eighth FOCAC, it was no surprise that China indicated that it is both tightening its purse strings and moving away from an infrastructure-centric and loan-heavy approach to development in Africa. Although there is no clear indication of where most of China's new development finance will be directed, improving trade promotion and facilitating African exports to China have become a key focus. It is unlikely, however, that trade will completely assume the weight and prominence that infrastructure development has occupied in China-Africa relations. ◈

# The Digital Silk Road: Connecting Africa with New Norms of Digital Development

*Ovigwe Eguegu*

With socioeconomic development as the aim of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an expected effect is a boost in science and technology across the participating regions. Collectively, the countries participating in BRI are home to 65% of the world's population, and digital technology is playing an increasingly crucial role in diplomacy, trade, and geopolitics. BRI's infrastructure-building campaign includes digital development through the Digital Silk Road (DSR), which aims to support BRI's streamlining of trade and industrial overcapacity with greater digital integration.[1] To date, 52 of 55 African Union members have signed a memorandum of understanding with China on BRI.[2]

Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has adopted the BRI and DSR as organizing concepts of its foreign policy. As such, the role of the internet and digital infrastructure must be critically examined, particularly with regard to China's foreign policy intentions toward Africa. In line with the rise of Chinese internet companies on the global stage, there has also been an increased foreign policy push to build an "information silk road," as China's policymakers articulated in 2015.[3] The DSR aims to facilitate the integration of networked technologies such as cloud computing and artificial intelligence further into BRI.[4]

Even though there is growing consensus on the importance of BRI, there has been little debate on the role of the internet in the progress and development of BRI, which in this context manifests as the DSR.

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1 Hong Shen, "Building a Digital Silk Road? Situating the Internet in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 2683–701 ~ https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/8405/2386.

2 Edith Mutethya, "BRI Projects Light Up Africa's Prospects," *China Daily*, January 6, 2022 ~ https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/254798.

3 Grzegorz Stec, "The Invisible Silk Road: Enter the Digital Dragon," European Institute for Asian Studies, May 2018 ~ https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EU_Asia_at_a_Glance_Stec_DSR_2018-1.pdf.

4 Shen, "Building a Digital Silk Road?"

In reality, alongside massive infrastructure projects, digital information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure is being built in parallel with transport and energy-based projects. Fiber-optic cables, data centers, and transcontinental information networks, among other ICT, have been integrated into policy programs such as the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization, which was published by China's State Council in 2016 and explicitly calls for the construction of an online Silk Road with participation from Chinese internet companies.[5]

Across Africa, the level of digital economic development is in part correlated to the level of industrialization, with infrastructure for ICT and the digital economy often concentrated in state capitals and major cities. Poor-quality submarine optical cable networks and limited broadband network coverage are key factors contributing to the low degree of digital economic development in Africa. While e-commerce platform use is ticking upward, especially in East Africa, research has shown that many countries do not have sufficiently developed digital infrastructure to efficiently engage China's DSR framework.[6]

This essay examines China-Africa cooperation on the DSR in Africa, focusing on the opportunities and engagements it has created as well as the challenges to implementing the DSR across the continent. It also analyzes implications for the United States and Western Europe, which have different norms for digital development, and emphasizes the importance of African agency in adopting digital infrastructure that best suits African countries' emerging needs.

## *China-Africa DSR Cooperation*

The DSR's promotion of cyber sovereignty contrasts with the open, "democratic" internet standards of the West. This is important because too often analysts have not considered African agency in the development of the continent's digital economy. However, studies have shown that African leaders that may have financial difficulties with larger BRI projects (such as

5 Hu Yongqi, "China to Build a System Integrating Data and Information Resources," *China Daily*, December 13, 2016, available at http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/policy_watch/2016/12/13/content_281475514791782.htm.

6 Huang Yupei, "China-Africa Joint Endeavor on the Digital Silk Road: Opportunities, Challenges and Approaches," *China International Studies Journal* (2019): 13–28 ∾ http://ciisjournal.com/Admin/UploadFile/Issue/jkfmffov.pdf.

transport and energy) generally consider digital projects more affordable, which ultimately influences their partnership preferences.[7]

Under the DSR, China has already entered cooperation and investment agreements with over twenty countries around the world. Global interest in the DSR has grown as countries in West Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia look for inexpensive, high-quality technology to expand ICT services.[8] Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, for example, aims to become the next major tech hub in Africa, aligning well with Beijing's plan to promote the DSR. As Ethiopia sees a chance for increased connectivity and participation in the digital economy, China seeks to remove bottleneck issues that hinder development in BRI partner countries. Other governments in Africa have also initiated high-level technology projects with China under BRI. Companies such as Huawei and ZTE have been the most active in this regard, constructing data centers, R&D labs, and telecom network equipment. Angola, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and Zambia have received DSR investments of $8.43 billion in total.[9]

Infrastructure and activities in support of the digital economy take several forms. China Mobile International, Facebook, MTN Global Connect, Orange, Telecom Egypt, STC, Vodafone, and the West Indian Ocean Cable Company have undertaken a project to install 2Africa, a 37,000-kilometer, 180-terabit-per-second, subsea cable connecting Europe and West Asia to 26 African countries. In addition, Djibouti has constructed seven submarine cables, improving domestic connectivity.[10] Huawei has also largely supported Africa's 4G infrastructure and is collaborating with the African Union on the digital transformation strategy of its Agenda 2063.[11] Other flagship Agenda 2063 projects include the pan-African e-network and cybersecurity. The DSR and Agenda 2063 have several common features that

7 Henry Tugendhat and Julia Voo, "China's Digital Silk Road in Africa and the Future of Internet Governance," China Africa Research Initiative, Working Paper, no. 2021/50 ~ http://hdl.handle.net/10419/248178.

8 Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Digital Silk Road Initiative: A Boon for Developing Countries or a Danger to Freedom?" *Diplomat*, December 17, 2020 ~ https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/chinas-digital-silk-road-initiative-a-boon-for-developing-countries-or-a-danger-to-freedom.

9 Steven Feldstein, "China's Strategic Aims in Africa: Goals of China's Africa Policy and Consequences of Beijing's Influence," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, virtual, May 8, 2020 ~ https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Feldstein_Testimony.pdf.

10 Ren Xiaojin, "Digital Silk Road Helping Developing Countries," *China Daily*, April 27, 2019 ~ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/27/WS5cc3a6e7a3104842260b8add.html.

11 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "China Reportedly Investing $8.43 Bn in Africa as Part of Digital Silk Road Initiative," *Economic Times*, October 15, 2021 ~ https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-reportedly-investing-8-43-bn-in-africa-as-part-of-digital-silk-road-initiative/articleshow/87039334.cms.

include supporting the use of secure and reliable ICT services by African governments and enterprises.[12]

As Africa's digital technological needs have grown, demand has increased for the services, technology, and investment that China possesses as part of the DSR. From education projects in Kenya to e-trading platforms in Rwanda, Chinese businesses in collaboration with their African partners are bolstering the continent's digital infrastructure—the core obstacle that Africa faces in the development of its digital economy. The focal points in China-Africa DSR relations are information security and bridging the digital divide.[13]

The DSR is capable of multiplying existing cooperation in technology between China and African states. Senegal commissioned the Huawei-built Diamniadio National Data Center with an $18.2 million loan. The Chinese fintech company OPay serves millions of Nigerian users and is valued at over $2 billion.[14] Chinese firm Transsion Holdings dominates the African smartphone market with a 48.2% share, ahead of Samsung at 16%.[15] Market-leading apps and services such as music streaming service BoomPlay, mobile payment service PalmPay, and video platform Vskit have also played a role in penetrating the African digital economy. Transsion Holdings additionally uses its African-focused venture capital arm Future Hub to invest roughly $100,000 in African innovators and innovative technology trends.[16]

As a part of China-Africa DSR cooperation, several "smart city" initiatives have been established in African countries, including in Mozambique, Angola, and Ghana. Smart cities are innovative cities that are designed with ICT as a core component to improve quality of life and streamline urban operations and services.[17] The China-Africa Internet Development and Cooperation Forum has also been established to build and place key digital infrastructure across African countries such as Nigeria

12 "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want," African Union ~ https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview.

13 Ge Tianren, "Between China and Africa, a 'Digital Silk Road,'" Sixth Tone, October 5, 2021 ~ https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008630/between-china-and-africa%2C-a-digital-silk-road.

14 Yinka Adegoke, "The Real Reason China Is Pushing 'Digital Sovereignty' on Africa," Rest of World, December 1, 2021 ~ https://restofworld.org/2021/the-real-reason-china-is-pushing-digital-sovereignty-in-africa.

15 Eric Olander, "China's Transsion Holds Firm to the Top Spot in Africa's Smartphone Market," China Africa Project, March 11, 2021 ~ https://chinaafricaproject.com/2021/03/11/chinas-transsion-holds-firm-to-the-top-spot-in-africas-smartphone-market.

16 Ibid.

17 "Smart City Initiatives in Africa," Smart Africa, November 8, 2017 ~ https://smartafrica.org/three-social-media-hacks-for-the-busy-entrepreneur.

and Zimbabwe.[18] E-commerce platforms have partnered with Alibaba and are assisting African markets in advertising agricultural products. As Chinese companies bring training centers and R&D programs to these states, countries in the DSR can also benefit from cooperation among scientists and engineers and the transfer of technical knowledge.[19]

China-Africa collaboration through the DSR has given African countries new opportunities to enter the global value and industrial chains and given Beijing new channels to share the gains of digital transformation. In the same vein, the Fourth Industrial Revolution—the key features of which are big-data management, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence—has cleared a new path for information-led socioeconomic development. While offering opportunities, the Fourth Industrial Revolution at the same time has the potential to pressure conventional economic sectors and exacerbate the imbalances in some African economic sectors because of the digital divide. Conversely, the revolution also creates chances to bridge the digital divide as various African leaders with interest in the DSR have recognized paths to promote inclusive growth and sustainable development.[20]

China can share the dividends of its leading position in ICT development with its African counterparts by aligning strategies in technological and business innovation. For instance, in collaboration with Zambia, China Electronics Technology Group Corporation introduced a digital education program that translates online educational content into eight local languages. According to Xiong Qunli, chairman of the company, the platform serves 241 residential areas, covers a full curriculum for primary schools, and has benefited over 5,000 teachers and 270,000 students.[21]

### *Challenges*

While the DSR benefits both African development and China-Africa cooperation, it also poses several risks and challenges. Lagging digital infrastructure, a lack of security assurance, and poor coordination with regional governance are among the obstacles the DSR faces on the continent. With the digital economy in Africa still in an early stage, high access cost and limited broadband services coverage can weaken logistics

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18 Chaudhury, "China Reportedly Investing $8.43 Bn in Africa as Part of Digital Silk Road Initiative."

19 Kurlantzick, "China's Digital Silk Road Initiative."

20 "Kenya Launches Digital Economy Blueprint," Communications Authority of Kenya, May 15, 2019 ~ https://www.ca.go.ke/kenya-launches-digital-economy-blueprint.

21 Ren, "Digital Silk Road Helping Developing Countries."

and supply chains. Uneven adoption of digital solutions can also exacerbate regional imbalances and fragment African digital economic development.[22]

Cybersecurity is another important concern. Some African countries have limited infrastructure to cope with the inherent risks associated with cyber communications, and the possible losses in the case of cyberattacks are enormous. Effectively managing security issues in digital communication projects and remote data transmission services are of prime concern to both China and Africa, especially given the sheer scale of the DSR.

Given Africa's many institutions and variation of economic development levels, its countries face challenges with regional coordination vis-à-vis foreign policy and governance. Issues in coordinating governance complicate the establishment of the DSR. If Chinese-African collaboration efforts do not address the governance challenges, cross-cultural differences, and geopolitical risks entailed by the rapid expansion of ICT, DSR-related disputes could arise in the areas of cross-border e-commerce, financial technology, big data, and customs supervision.

With great momentum behind the DSR between China and participating African countries, it is imperative to further align development needs. Under an effective cooperation agenda, Africa will see coordinated development between its ICT networks and conventional infrastructure, such as railways, bridges, and electricity grids. Within this context, the main facets of activity revolve around expanding ICT infrastructure, promoting complementary advantages, building capacity for digital economy talent through education programs and knowledge transfer projects, and strengthening governance and consultation mechanisms to create fair and just environments for the development of a vibrant digital economy.[23]

## *The Political and Socioeconomic Implications of the DSR*

Given the potential for massive economic development through the DSR and other forms of China-Africa cooperation, it is critical to consider the political and socioeconomic implications for the continent while also assessing their impact on the interests of Europe and the United States. On the one hand, Beijing aims to cement its global technological influence by narrowing the digital divide between underdeveloped and developed countries through capacity building. On the other hand, Europe and the

22 Huang, "China-Africa Joint Endeavor on the Digital Silk Road."
23 Ibid.

United States seek to convince African leaders to adopt their existing digital standards, while also criticizing Chinese DSR-related investments for providing unethical support to authoritarian leaders in Africa and elsewhere.[24] Organizations such as Freedom House and Human Rights Watch similarly depict China's collaborations in many cases as support for authoritarian governments. For instance, Freedom House has portrayed Beijing's cooperation with Addis Ababa as support for a more independent Ethiopian government but a less independent citizenry.[25] Nevertheless, Ethiopia is an underestimated source for digital talent and development potential. Digital development within Ethiopia includes iCog Labs, an R&D company that collaborates with global artificial intelligence research groups. The firm was involved in the development of the social humanoid robot Sophia, alongside Hong Kong–based Hanson Robotics. Western entities, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, also seek to contribute to the development of Ethiopia as the premier IT hub in Africa. The French company ArianeGroup, for example, is constructing a major satellite manufacturing, assembly, integration, and testing facility in Addis Ababa with funding from the European Investment Bank, along with similar facilities in Algeria and South Africa. With global attention on Ethiopia as a new area for ICT technology implementation, to analyze China-Ethiopia collaboration through a lens of supporting authoritarianism is biased when similar initiatives launched by Western actors are lauded.[26]

Governance in Africa has been a persistent problem, however, and the issue bleeds into the digital economy. Several African governments have taken measures to protect their own interests at the expense of citizens' access to the internet.[27] Election periods, in particular, typically lead to a frenzy of government action to exert control over mass information. Increasingly, state actors rely on methods such as surveillance and restricted

24 Sanne van der Lugt, "Exploring the Political, Economic, and Social Implications of the Digital Silk Road into East Africa: The Case of Ethiopia," in *Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Asserting Agency through Regional Connectivity*, ed. Florian Schneider (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 315–46.

25 Ibid.

26 "Assessing China's Digital Silk Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations ~ https://www.cfr.org/china-digital-silk-road; and Adrian Kreutz, "Globalized Authoritarianism: The Expansion of the Chinese Surveillance Apparatus," E-International Relations, April 3, 2020 ~ https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/03/globalized-authoritarianism-the-expansion-of-the-chinese-surveillance-apparatus.

27 Sharon Anyango Odhiambo, "Internet Shutdowns during Elections," Wilson Center, Africa Up Close, May 18, 2017 ~ https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/internet-shutdowns-during-elections.

access to websites and digital platforms. Governments also find ways to control media narratives as a means to defend internal sovereignty.[28]

African governments have also faced debates about whether to adopt China's digital sovereignty standards or the United States' and Europe's more free and open internet norms.[29] Ultimately, as technology fits into complex social contexts, its impact can only be evaluated as positive or negative based on how African states use it, making African agency central to any assessment.

From the perspective of the United States and Europe, Africa's digital economy is another realm in a great-power competition and China is their primary rival. Digital infrastructure competition between China and the West has arisen through undersea cable and satellite construction, the provision of telecom and internet service, and markets for mobile handsets, data networks, operating systems, and applications.[30] The United States stands to lose the opportunity to align itself with Africa's youth-driven culture, innovation, and technology unless it makes a concerted effort to support Africa's digital infrastructure. To date, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has invested $300 million into the expansion of African Data Centers, the data storage section of Liquid Telecom, a South Africa-based company.[31] Additionally, the DFC, which was established under the Trump administration in 2018, has moved away from its previous strategy of grants and aid to one of making equity investments, a move that analysts argue is intended to more directly counter Beijing's influence on the continent.[32]

Conversely, Europe has prioritized the Global Gateway Investment Package, which is focused on accelerating digital transformation and recovery through investments valued at 150 billion euros. The package seeks to facilitate projects in fiber-optic cables, cloud computing, and data infrastructure. It also seeks to support regulatory frameworks and

28 Hilary Matfess, "More African Countries Are Blocking Internet Access during Elections," Quartz, June 1, 2016 ~ https://qz.com/africa/696552/more-african-countries-are-blocking-internet-access-during-elections.

29 Aubrey Hruby, "Africa's Digital Infrastructure Is the Next Playing Field for Great-Power Competition," Atlantic Council, AfricaSource, November 29, 2021 ~ https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/africas-digital-infrastructure-is-the-next-playing-field-for-great-power-competition.

30 Ibid.

31 Tawanda Karombo, "The U.S. Development Corp Is Betting $300 Million on Africa's Rising Demand for Data Storage," Quartz, December 11, 2020 ~ https://qz.com/africa/1945156/us-dfc-bets-300m-on-africas-demand-for-data-storage-centers/amp.

32 Yinka Adegoke, "A New $60 Billion Agency Is the Clearest Sign the U.S. Is Worried about China's Africa Influence," Quartz, October 14, 2018 ~ https://qz.com/africa/1423506/china-africa-debt-us-will-invest-60-billion-overseas-to-beat-chin-at-development.

capacity-building programs with the aim of accelerating universal access in Africa to dependable, safe, and secure internet networks by 2030.[33] Additionally, Actis, a London-based private equity firm, is investing $250 million in African data centers and taking a controlling stake in Rack Center, a Nigerian company serving West Africa.[34]

As Beijing establishes a stronger foothold in Africa through the ICT development and simultaneously creates economic opportunities for Chinese firms, the dividends it gains are a serious worry for its economic rivals, especially the United States. African governments are aware of Beijing's aims. For the African states involved in the DSR, it will be important to maintain that significant knowledge transfer occurs, African firms retain corporate control, and intellectual property is shared.[35]

## *Conclusion: Digital Sovereignty or Digital Colonialism?*

Major foreign corporations currently provide the submarine cables, terrestrial fiber-optic networks, and data centers that form the critical infrastructure for Africa's connectivity. When it comes to data traffic in African countries, nearly 90% of all international traffic goes to servers based in the United States (56%) or Europe (32%).[36] By allowing data to be hosted outside their borders, African countries cede some political, economic, and digital sovereignty. While the dependence on Western digital infrastructure was driven by market forces and a lack of non-Western competitors in the early days of Africa's digitization, Africans states have increasingly recognized this dependency as a risk to their autonomy.

Thus, China's emphasis on digital sovereignty makes the DSR initiative attractive to Africa. From an African perspective, the United States promotes a "democratic" and "open" internet, but it is one that is built by and relies on U.S. infrastructure. With the availability and advancement of Chinese technology, and Beijing's accompanying messaging about digital sovereignty, Africa's concerns over Western dominance in digital infrastructure have arguably grown. For African countries, access to the

33 "EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package," European Commission ~ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway/eu-africa-global-gateway-investment-package_en.

34 Neil Munshi, "The Next Data Gold Rush Is in Africa," Ozy, March 8, 2020 ~ https://www.ozy.com/news-and-politics/the-next-data-gold-rush-is-in-africa/286577.

35 Adegoke, "The Real Reason China Is Pushing 'Digital Sovereignty' on Africa."

36 Juan Ortiz Freuler, "The Shape of the Internet: A Tale of Power and Money," Medium, October 1, 2019 ~ https://juanof.medium.com/the-shape-of-the-internet-a-tale-of-power-money-a08d01065bc0.

alternatives offered by China means greater control over their own data at a more affordable price.

To frame China's growing role in Africa's digitization as an authoritarian power expanding its influence through cheap loans and digital infrastructure development is overly simplistic. China has been forthright about its aim to realize a vision of cyber sovereignty in the international community—a vision that Africa in large part shares. As China's largest collective trading partner, Africa has demonstrated the political will for partnership in various aspects of BRI, particularly in the DSR. The development models promoted by Europe and the United States have recently become less attractive options for African leaders. When considering issues of sovereignty, countries such as Ethiopia, Senegal, Gambia, and Zimbabwe have charted courses of cooperation with China that more closely support their own idea of development, much to the chagrin of critics.

The lack of infrastructure to support a digital economy is a major obstacle to Africa's realization of a broader development vision and growth of its markets. Furthermore, U.S.-China competition also tends to usurp African agency in matters that include the digital economy. African states' ability and capacity to choose their own development paths and technology acquisitions should not be ignored. Ethiopia, for instance, has cooperated with China and Europe alike in building its space technology, strengthening its independence and its negotiation capabilities. With governance as a challenge in Africa, the growing digital wants of the average African citizen should take precedence over the concerns of external powers. African leaders must prioritize their decisions based on the material conditions of their society.[37]

Most countries in Africa have signed onto BRI, and in 2015 the African Union and China issued a joint declaration regarding issues including the promotion of mutually beneficial cooperation in technology transfer.[38] Individual states in Africa aim to meet their own goals, such as Ethiopia's aim to become Africa's next tech hub and South Africa's and Kenya's DSR goals to develop their digital infrastructure. As such, momentum behind the DSR between China and African states is unlikely to subside in the near future. ◈

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37 Huang, "China-Africa Joint Endeavor on the Digital Silk Road," 15; and Van der Lugt, "Exploring the Political, Economic, and Social Implications of the Digital Silk Road into East Africa," 327.

38 Tugendhat and Voo, "China's Digital Silk Road in Africa and the Future of Internet Governance."

# Chinese ICT and Smart City Initiatives in Kenya

*Bulelani Jili*

There are many threads of discourse in Africa-China relations, inspired by growing flows of investment, trade, and aid. One important consideration in the budding relationships between African states and China is the adoption of digital infrastructure and surveillance technologies.[1] Many experts have argued that China's intentions are to garner access to African developing markets while also allowing Beijing a "backdoor" through which to secure access to data. Thus, research and media coverage have focused disproportionately on Chinese reasons and incentives in the proliferation of information and communications technology (ICT) and surveillance technology, but little systematic attention has focused on the multiple uses, properties, and applications of these digital tools in local environments. For this reason, this essay seeks to critically examine some of the more familiar preoccupations about the exportation of Chinese governance and surveillance technologies to Africa in the process of developing countries' ICT infrastructure and smart cities.

The essay chiefly brings to the fore the local factors that contribute to the growing use of Chinese digital infrastructure in Kenya. There is limited analytical research on the spread of Chinese digital infrastructure and its consequences for African local environments and actors. Accordingly, the essay seeks to examine the growing use of Chinese-produced digital infrastructure in Kenya and its consequences. It focuses attention on the often-neglected details of Chinese operations and local smart city initiatives.

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1 See, for example, Elias Biryabarema, "Uganda's Cash-Strapped Cops Spend $126 Million on CCTV from Huawei," Reuters, August 15, 2019 ~ https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-crime/ugandas-cash-strapped-cops-spend-126-million-on-cctv-from-huawei-idUSKCN1V50RF; Steven Feldstein, "The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance," Carnegie Endowment International Peace, September 17, 2019 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/17/global-expansion-of-ai-surveillance-pub-79847; and Joe Parkinson, Nichols Bariyo, and Josh Chin, "Huawei Technicians Helped African Governments Spy on Political Opponents," *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2019 ~ https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-technicians-helped-african-governments-spy-on-political-opponents-11565793017.

Precisely, the aim is to expand understanding of how local factors and conditions mediate China's growing geopolitical footprint.

This essay is divided into four parts. The first section discusses the Kenyan case as an example of the establishment of Chinese ICT infrastructure in an African context. It explores the corporate and public nexuses that buttress the vision of a digitalized Kenyan society and demonstrates that Chinese engagements are in part a consequence of local factors, which challenges notions of a Chinese strategy to export normative values and surveillance practices. At the same time, this position does not necessarily imply the absence of Chinese state strategy in Africa and threats to civil liberties. Rather, it simply illustrates how local and global factors play into each other and how they determine practical outcomes. The second section looks at the adoption of smart cities in Kenya and the so-called safe city model, which includes digital surveillance technologies. The third section addresses Beijing's "no strings attached" policy and contends that China's proclivity to financially support state actors regardless of their regime type or human rights record renders citizens in these states more vulnerable to government transgressions. The essay concludes by noting that even in the context of a democratic government like Kenya's, bolstering state surveillance capacity without robust checks and balances renders citizens more vulnerable to the misuse of digital tools.

## *Building ICT Infrastructure in Kenya*

In 1998, the Kenya Communication Act ended the state-run monopoly held by Kenya Posts and Telecommunication Corporation.[2] In 2006, the Ministry of Information and Communications ushered in the National ICT Policy, which fully liberalized the telecommunications sector and created a framework for private actors to enter the ICT market.[3] By introducing this liberalization strategy, the Kenyan government took a principal role in shaping the country's ICT sector as one focused on privatizing state-owned enterprises and attracting private investment in undersea fiber-optic cables, internet service providers, and mobile network operators. The vision, set in

2 Mwololo T. Waema, "A Brief History of the Development of an ICT Policy in Kenya," in *At the Crossroads: ICT Policy Making in East Africa*, ed. Florence Etta and Laurent Elder (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2005); and John Cotterill, "Cabling Africa: The Great Data Race to Serve The 'Last Billion,'" *Financial Times*, January 21, 2021 ~ https://www.ft.com/content/adb1130e-2844-4051-b1df-a691fc8a19b8.

3 Ministry of Information, Communications and Technology (Kenya), *National Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) Policy* (Nairobi, January 2006) ~ https://www.researchictafrica.net/countries/kenya/National_ICT_Policy_2006.pdf.

the 2006 National ICT Policy and again later in the 2020 Policy Gazette, promoted the notion of ICT as a development tool for improving health, employment, and education outcomes. Digital infrastructure is thus a means by which politicians build and plan the future of Kenya's development.

Despite these ICT policy changes, the government in 2006 did not have the infrastructure capacity to palpably realize its development ambitions. Kenya relied on satellite technology for international connectivity, which was both limited and prohibitively expensive for most citizens.[4] To transition from narrowband, which operates on satellite technology, to fiber-optic-powered broadband, Chinese firms Huawei and ZTE were contracted to build the required infrastructure to close this gap. China's chief entrance into the Kenyan ICT market thus came through laying fiber-optic cables. The installation of four fiber-optic submarine cables between 2009 and 2011 enabled the government to create a relatively competitive telecommunication sector with improved internet connectivity and affordability.[5] Competition among firms began driving down the cost of phone calls and made internet services affordable for a larger portion of the population.[6]

The Ministry of ICT was proactive in establishing policy frameworks to generate development. Accordingly, the sector's regulator reduced interconnection tariffs and instituted a range of regulations aimed at stimulating competition. In this newly competitive ICT marketplace, Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE and the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank), a bank chartered to promote Chinese state policy on foreign aid and trade, were instrumental in making this infrastructure available and within the financial means of Nairobi, as was also the case in other African countries such as Ethiopia.[7] In 2007, Huawei and ZTE won the contract to work with the French corporation Sagem Communications to create Kenya's first installment in the National Optic Fibre Backbone

4 Iginio Gagliardone, *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet* (New York: Zed Books, 2019).

5 "Telecommunication Ecosystem Evolution in Kenya, 2009–2019: Setting the Pace and, Unbundling the Turbulent Journey to a Digital Economy in a 4IR Era," Institute of Economic Affairs, 2021 ~ https://ieakenya.or.ke/download/telecommunication-ecosystem-evolution-in-kenya-2009-2019-setting-the-pace-and-unbundling-the-turbulent-journey-to-a-digital-economy-in-a-4ir-era.

6 Bitange Ndemo and Tim Weiss, *Digital Kenya: An Entrepreneurial Revolution in the Making* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

7 See, for example, William Kirby, Billy Chan, and John P. McHugh, "Huawei: A Global Tech Giant in the Crossfire of a Digital Cold War," Harvard Business School, January 2020; Ying Wang and Yao Xinyu, "Huawei yu Kenniya shenhua ICT lingyu hezuo tuidong ICT chanye fazhan" [Huawei and Kenya Deepen Cooperation in the ICT Field to Promote the Development of the ICT Industry], *People's Daily*, May, 2017 ~ http://kpzg.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0516/c404389-29279112.html; and State Council Information Office (People's Republic of China), *Zhongguo de duiwai yuanzhu baipíshu* [China's Foreign Aid White Paper] (Beijing, July 2014) ~ http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-07/10/content_2715467.htm.

Infrastructure project, which brought high-speed connectivity to Nairobi, the country's largest city and capital. The project was then expanded to include other cities across the country. Each company managed a different region: Sagem laid the cables for the coastal and northeastern region, ZTE worked on the west, and Huawei handled Nairobi and the central parts of the country.[8] This novel capacity allowed for e-government projects across Kenya.[9] Some key e-government initiatives include Kenya Revenue Authority's online services, the Transport Integrated Management System, the Integrated Election Management System, and the National Integrated Identity Management System.

The second phase of extending connectivity was directly funded by the China Exim Bank, which in 2012 offered a loan of $71 million to cover high-speed internet in 36 administrative districts, including rural parts of the country.[10] A condition to this loan was that Huawei must be the company to build the digital infrastructure. Similarly, in 2009 the Kenyan government set up the Universal Service Fund to support extension services and complement the internet and connectivity push to rural areas, aiming to improve both internet connection and state reach in rural areas through community centers, schools, and public institutions. The ICT market now includes basic and advanced networks that reach about 96% of the population.[11]

The Chinese government and Chinese companies operating in Kenya have been receptive to the wishes of Nairobi.[12] This strategy is similar to China's works across the continent, where Beijing supported states' ambitions to introduce smart city technology and digital infrastructure. Unlike traditional Western donors who demand compliance with particular democratic procedures, Chinese financial support is offered without any political conditions in a no-strings-attached approach and in accordance

8 M. Okuttah,"M-Pesa Drives Safaricom as Profit Declines to Sh12.8bn," *Business Daily Africa*, May 10, 2012; and Margaret Wahito, "Kenya: China to Fund Kenya's Fibre Optic Project," Capital FM, June 18, 2012.

9 "National Optic Fibre Backbone (NOFBI)," ICT Authority (Kenya), 2021 ~ https://previous.icta.go.ke/national-optic-fibre-backbone-nofbi.

10 See, for example, Gagliardone, *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet*; and Chrisanthi Avgerou, Niall Hayes, and Renata Lèbre La Rovere, "Growth in ICT Uptake in Developing Countries: New Users, New Uses, New Challenges," *Journal of Information Technology* 31 (2016): 329–33.

11 "Telecommunication Ecosystem Evolution in Kenya."

12 See, for example, Bulelani Jili "Chinese Surveillance Tools in Africa," China, Law, and Development Project, no. 8, June 2019 ~ https://cld.web.ox.ac.uk/files/finaljilipdf; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Dealing with Demand for China's Global Surveillance Exports," Brookings Institution, April 2020 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FP_20200428_china_surveillance_greitens_v3.pdf; and Matthew Dalton, "Telecom Deal by China's ZTE, Huawei in Ethiopia Faces Criticism," *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2014 ~ https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303653004579212092223818288.

with China's emphasis on noninterference in sovereignty matters. Such an approach empowers African partners, like Kenya, to utilize Beijing's finance to pursue domestically led smart city initiatives and development. The absence of political conditions attached to loans engenders creditability to Beijing's benevolent image and ostensibly absolves China of responsibility for consequences on the ground. However, it is clear that Chinese state-led financial help tends to bolster state capacity without careful consideration for the broader impact on that society and its law.

### *Building Smart and Safe Cities*

The smart city is a computational model of urban planning that promises to optimize operational efficacy and promote economic growth by leveraging ICT systems.[13] These initiatives consolidate ICT to advance the delivery of services and public welfare. In 2018, the Kenyan government announced the launch of the National Broadband Strategy, which was designed not only to advance access to broadband but also to build a foundational policy framework for realizing smart city initiatives. Again, Chinese ICT companies are supporting the establishment and application of artificial intelligence and auxiliary technologies such as cloud computing and data analytics, which mostly operate on Huawei-built infrastructure.

The Kenyan government began to launch smart city initiatives as early as 2008, notably with Konza City, Africa's first planned smart city, which has been subject to significant delays. With the same promise of integrating foreign investment and ICT to optimize development and efficiency, Konza City is a state-led initiative that aims to utilize technology for economic growth. In 2019, Kenya and China signed a cooperation agreement totaling $665.4 million for the construction of the Konza Data Center.[14] The project will cost Huawei about $172.7 million and supposedly will host the Kenyan National Cloud Data Center, Smart ICT Network, public safety projects, and intelligent transportation solutions.[15] Yet with all the work and funding

13 See, for example, Shannon Mattern, *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); and Vanessa Watson, "The Allure of 'Smart City' Rhetoric: India and Africa," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5, no. 1 (2015): 36–39.

14 See, for example, Carey Baraka, "The Failed Promise of Kenya's Smart City," Rest of World, June 1, 2021 ~ https://restofworld.org/2021/the-failed-promise-of-kenyas-smart-city; and "Kenníya tong Zhongguo qiandìng jìn 7 yì meiyuan IDC xieyì" [Kenya and China Signed a Nearly 700 Million Dollar IDC Agreement], Xueqiu, June 13, 2019 ~ https://xueqiu.com/4850661141/128162872.

15 Sebastian Moss, "Huawei to Build Konza Data Center and Smart City in Kenya, with Chinese Concessional Loan," Data Center Dynamics, April 30, 2019 ~ https://www.datacenterdynamics.com/en/news/huawei-build-konza-data-center-and-smart-city-kenya-chinese-concessional-loan.

put into Konza so far, there is still no publicly available data that illustrates how this venture is catalyzing development.

As a supposedly functional and exchangeable model across political contexts, the Safe City is a smart city product offered by Huawei and promoted as an ideal future city that can catalyze African economic development. In Kenya, the initiative has particular government appeal for its focus on lowering crime and dispatching first responders.[16] The Safe City initiative specifically consists of surveillance and governance technologies—including closed-circuit television cameras with wireless connectivity, interconnected tracking devices, software, and cloud storage systems—to enhance public safety, manage traffic, improve policing, expand the scope of government services, digitize public utilities, and buttress law and order. As stated by Huawei:

> In the fully connected cities of the near future, broadband is fast and ubiquitous, allowing public spaces to be covered by surveillance equipment, with unified platforms incorporating information from a range of sources, including environmental monitoring equipment, road surveillance cameras, neighborhood and home security systems, and network information security surveillance. Control and dispatch centers will use this information to help carry out unified surveillance, safety management, and dispatch of public safety resources.[17]

Nairobi's adoption of governance and surveillance products is closely linked with Huawei's Safe City projects. Employment of these tools is made possible through sales of Chinese equipment and soft loans from the China Exim bank, which is instrumental in making digital infrastructure financially in reach for Nairobi as well as for other African governments. These state loans are offered without political conditions, in juxtaposition with Western aid and donors who explicitly enforce specific compliance with democratic reforms and procedures.[18] This ideological commitment concurs with Beijing's staunch position on sovereignty, where China's posture places emphasis on the political equality between itself and African nations while

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16 "Huawei's Surveillance Tech in Kenya: A Safe Bet?" *Africa Times*, December 18, 2019 ~ https://africatimes.com/2019/12/18/huaweis-surveillance-tech-in-kenya-a-safe-bet.

17 Cao Zhihui, "Nowhere to Hide: Building Safe Cities with Technology Enablers and AI," Huawei ~ https://www.huawei.com/ie/technology-insights/publications/winwin/ai/nowhere-to-hide.

18 See, for example, Zainab Usman, "What Do We Know about Chinese Lending in Africa?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2, 2021 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/02/what-do-we-know-about-chinese-lending-in-africa-pub-84648; Lucy Corkin, "Redefining Foreign Policy Impulses toward Africa: The Roles of the MFA, the MOFCOM and China Exim Bank," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40, no. 4 (2011): 61–90; Deborah Brautigam, "Aid 'with Chinese Characteristics': Chinese Foreign Aid and Development Finance Meet the OECD-DAC Aid Regime," *Journal of International Development* 23, no. 5 (2011): 752–64; and Chris Alden and Daniel Large, "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Delivering Difference in Africa," *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 68 (2011): 21–38.

ignoring the economic asymmetries that structure relations.[19] The lack of political conditions attached to loans aims at engendering legitimacy to Beijing's distinct development role and benevolent image in Africa.

### *ICT Adoption and Digital Surveillance: The Gap between Supporting Conditions for Development and Infringing on Citizens' Rights*

Although the technologies that are embedded in smart cities are used for a variety of public administration purposes, including greater access to education, healthcare, and documentation, a compelling reason for the development of digital surveillance is national security, especially after the 2013 terrorist assault by al-Shabab on the Westgate shopping complex in Nairobi. Huawei has installed 1,800 high-definition cameras and 200 high-definition traffic surveillance structures across Nairobi.[20] Furthermore, it has helped establish a national police command center to provide support to over 9,000 police officers and 195 police stations.[21] These technologies are thought to support law enforcement, mass surveillance operations, crime prevention, accelerated first responses, and recovery. But due to the scarcity of data, the benefits of the Safe City project are difficult to verify and appear exaggerated.[22] For example, according to Huawei, the crime rate from 2014 to 2015 in Kenya decreased by 46% in areas supported by its technologies.[23] But Kenya's National Police Service reports indicate smaller reductions in crime during those years in Nairobi. Mombasa and Nairobi, the two cities with these surveillance technologies implemented, also saw increases in reported crimes in 2017 and 2018.[24]

No less important, Nairobi's central business district relies on both closed-circuit television cameras procured from Huawei and equipment from Hikvision, a Chinese state-owned provider of video surveillance tools.

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19 "China's 'Five-No' Approach Demonstrates Real Friendship toward Africa: Kenyan Analyst," Xinhua, September 5, 2018 ~ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceke/eng/zfgx/t1595899.htm.

20 Huawei "Video Surveillance as the Foundation of 'Safe City' in Kenya," Huawei, 2019 ~ https://www.huawei.com/en/industry-insights/technology/digital-transformation/video/videosurveillance-as-thefoundation-of-safe-city-in-kenya; and Huawei and Rodland Berger, "Yunyíng shang: ICT jichu sheshi de touzi, chuangxin yu jìingzheng" [Operators: ICT Infrastructure, Investment, Innovation, and Competition], September 2018 ~ https://www-file.huawei.com/-/media/corporate/pdf/public-policy/huawei_ict_position_paper_cn.pdf.

21 Ibid.

22 Huawei, "Huawei Smart City White Paper," 2016.

23 "Huawei Hosts Safe City Summit in Africa to Showcase Industry Best Practice," Huawei, Press Release, June 17, 2016 ~ https://www.huawei.com/us/news/2016/10/safe-city-summit-africa.

24 National Police Service (Kenya), *2018 Annual Crime Report* (Nairobi, September 2019) ~ http://www.nationalpolice.go.ke/crime-statistics.html.

Since 2013, researchers have discovered cybersecurity vulnerabilities in Hikvision surveillance cameras.[25] These vulnerabilities—errors in the code—allow hackers to remotely control the cameras, infect them with malware, or garner access to data. Such constant product vulnerabilities have led researchers to describe these vulnerabilities as a "backdoor" that can intentionally allow Chinese state actors access to data. While there is no clear empirical evidence to illustrate coordination between the Chinese state and Hikvision or an intention to steal data, this is a critical and escalating issue. It is important to ensure supply chain integrity given the ubiquitous potential for inserting trapdoors, backdoors, and surveillance mechanisms in hardware and software. However, such warnings do not appear to be persuading decision-makers in Kenya and across Africa about the risks of installing Chinese ICT equipment.

Moreover, facial recognition technology used at Kenya's national borders is powered by Sensetime, a Hong Kong–based company. Similar systems are also found at Moi International Airport in Mombasa, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, and Muhuru Bay in Migori County.[26] The systems were supplied by Japanese company NEC and installed with support from the Japan-funded project Comprehensive Community Stabilization in the Kenya Coast and Key Border Points.[27] This kind of mixed-service adoption illustrates the growing hybridization of surveillance systems in Kenya, typical of many countries in Africa, that are diversely sourced to advance state development and security prerogatives.

Facial recognition technology does not operate perfectly, however. In fact, it is plagued by inaccuracies and biases that result in false matches and undermine civil liberties. The substantial disparities in the accuracy of being able to identify dark-skinned people have attracted attention from commercial companies, as recent studies have shown that algorithms trained with biased data have resulted in algorithmic discrimination.[28] Buolamwini and Gebru, for example, have demonstrated in their work the bias present in automated facial analysis algorithms and datasets with

25 Valentin Weber and Vasilis Ververis, "China's Surveillance State: A Global Project," Top10VPN, August 3, 2021 ~ https://www.top10vpn.com/research/huawei-china-surveillance-state.

26 "Facial Recognition System Installed at Moi International Airport," International Organization for Migration, October 7, 2019 ~ https://www.iom.int/news/facial-recognition-system-installed-moi-international-airport.

27 Chris Burt, "NEC Facial Recognition Border Tech for Kenya as Airport Biometrics Rollouts Continue," Biometric Update, October 7, 2019 ~ https://www.biometricupdate.com/201910/nec-facial-recognition-border-tech-for-kenya-as-airport-biometrics-rollouts-continue.

28 Jon Kleinberg, Jens Ludwig, Sendhil Mullainathan, and Cass R. Sunstein, "Discrimination in the Age of Algorithms," *Journal of Legal Analysis* 10 (2019): 113–74.

regard to race and gender.[29] Purportedly in an attempt to improve accuracy in these areas, Chinese companies such as CloudWalk, a Guangzhou-based start-up, have entered African markets such as Zimbabwe to improve their facial recognition technology.[30] With access to a Black population, their algorithm will supposedly become better trained at identifying darker-skinned people. Computer vision systems with better performance in identifying dark-skinned people give Chinese companies a comparative advantage over their Western competition. More pressingly, Africa operates as a laboratory to improve Chinese surveillance technologies.

Given the variety of digital infrastructure initiatives and supplies and the plethora of policy frameworks produced by the Kenyan government, another challenge is that state documents are not well-aligned and lack clear, synchronized time horizons for implementation. As a result, not only is it difficult to measure and evaluate progress within the ICT sector, there are consequences for development. This is evident, for example, with the state's Digital Economy Blueprint plan, which embodies the government's strategy toward expanding connectivity to foster the growth of the digital economy.[31] While the strategy looks promising, it is not clear how and which state organs will execute its broad ambitions. Better coordination at the level of policy production and policy implementation may improve digital infrastructure rollouts. Additionally, better coordination may facilitate a more careful evaluation of cybersecurity risks in the procurement of digital infrastructure or surveillance technologies.

Standards for ICT goods and services, including mandatory inspections and safeguards, are necessary to address cybersecurity risks. For supply chain integrity, there is a real threat of backdoor access being added to hardware and software. The Kenya Bureau of Standards Information Technology Security Techniques Guidelines for Cybersecurity is a notable effort to secure the nation's cyberspace.[32] Yet since there is no requirement to comply with the standards, there is no incentive for domestic and international companies to be aware of or compliant with the policy.

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29 Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification," *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research* 81 (2018): 1–15.

30 Amy Hawkins, "Beijing's Big Brother Tech Needs African Faces," *Foreign Policy*, July 24, 2018 ~ https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/24/beijings-big-brother-tech-needs-african-faces.

31 Republic of Kenya, *The National Broadband Strategy: 2018–2023* (Nairobi, 2019) ~ https://www.ict.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/National-Broadband-Strategy-2023-FINAL.pdf.

32 See, for example, Kenya Bureau of Standards, "Information Technology–Security Techniques—Guidelines for Cybersecurity," 2012 ~ https://webstore.kebs.org/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=10503; and Grace Githaiga and Victor Kapiyo, "Kenya's Cybersecurity Framework: Time to Up the Game!" KICTAnet, December 2019.

Importantly, as smart city initiatives begin to come online, there is no industry-wide regulation on the use of biometric databases and facial recognition technologies in Kenya. Kenya's Data Protection Act supposedly empowers the data commissioner to, *inter alia*, set regulations and establish the thresholds for mandatory registrations by data processors.[33] It is not clear yet what authority and tools the data commissioner has to mitigate privacy abuses. Likewise, there are not yet means to audit the algorithms that empower facial recognition technology or to halt the harvesting of biometric data from the population without an adequate system of checks and balances. Thus far the commissioner has issued two guidance notes: one that provides guidance on the processing of personal data while aiming to preserve consent, and a second that offers guidance to data processors on when and how to make assessments. While these are useful efforts, Kenya continues to struggle with limited cybersecurity capacities, including the coordination of state and nonstate actors in resolving cybersecurity matters. Kenya has yet to develop a stand-alone cybersecurity policy.

## *Conclusion*

While Beijing's ICT involvement in and assistance to Kenya does not necessarily demonstrate a desire to promote China's surveillance practices abroad, it does engender the conditions for doing so. Indeed, how long Beijing chooses to maintain its no-strings-attached posture is a salient matter that has real consequences for local actors and their digital environment.

In this light, the local and global implications accompanying the thickening of relations between Africa and China ought to be carefully studied. China's engagements do not necessarily result in neutral local outcomes; rather, its no-strings-attached approach to policy is an obfuscating posture that presents Beijing as a benevolent development partner while also de-emphasizing its tendency to benefit government partners. This privileging of state actors and their sovereignty regardless of political regime type or any presence of institutional checks and balances inspires concern. Without robust checks and balances in government, the ostensibly neutral introduction of technologies renders local citizens more vulnerable to political surveillance and suppression, particularly in African countries that lack strong data protection measures.

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33 Republic of Kenya, "The Data Protection Act 2019," Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 181 (Acts 24), November 11, 2019, available at the National Council for Law Reporting ~ http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/Acts/2019/TheDataProtectionAct__No24of2019.pdf.

Chinese and Kenyan authorities, at least currently, have limited access to state documents and data. Documents of potential consequence are limited to internal circulation, and the few publicly available state documents about ICT investments on either side of the relationship remain vague about the details of digital infrastructure projects. While this murkiness might serve the interests of the negotiating parties, it undercuts effective accountability measures that could mitigate the misuse of digital infrastructure and enforce positive legal obligations.

Most importantly, the lacuna between the adoption of novel digital tools and regulatory frameworks can exacerbate established social problems. The absence of clear, robust privacy and data protection measures leaves ordinary citizens vulnerable to unwarranted surveillance practices. This issue is a particularly salient matter in Africa, where these technologies have the capacity to exacerbate established problems at the intersection of inequality, race, and policing. Half the countries in Africa do not have laws on data protection, and even countries with such laws lack clear enforcement mechanisms and strategies for them.

Without question, ICT systems in Kenya are enlisted to ameliorate social and political challenges. In addition to making ICT more accessible to ordinary Kenyans, there is a demand for safety that is both a response to trepidation surrounding terrorism and crime and an important consideration in fostering greater levels of development. Nevertheless, there is no strong evidence linking the adoption of surveillance technologies with the reduction of crime and terrorism. This circumstance thrusts the Kenyan government into a series of critical decisions, torn between the increased capability to surveil citizens and the challenge to protect and promote their rights. Acquiring these technologies as part of smart cities and national ICT upgrades indicates the state's desire to produce a more stable social order that would support security and economic development. Yet the gap between the adoption of these novel digital governance tools and robust legal measures to protect citizens' rights to privacy remains worrisome. ◈

# The China Effect: Democracy and Development in the 21st Century

*Obert Hodzi*

The basic tenets of democracy are under threat worldwide as governance and human rights re-emerge as sources of ideological contention between China and the United States. Freedom House reported that between 2005 and 2020, "the number of Free countries in the world reached its lowest level…while the number of Not Free countries reached its highest level."[1] African countries are prominent in this ideological contention due to their political and economic proximity to both powers. The majority of countries that Freedom House found to have regressed are in Africa and, in particular, sub-Saharan Africa, where since 2010 there have been fourteen successful military coups, most recently in Chad, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan. In all these countries, militaries re-emerged as political players in the countries' governance, shrinking the space for civil society and civilian politics. Africa is not alone, however; democracy faced major setbacks from ultra-nationalism, populist regimes, threats to minority rights, and attacks on the freedom of the press even in European Union countries such as Hungary and Poland.

At the core of these challenges to democracy and political freedom is the shifting balance of power from the West to China, suggesting a showdown between authoritarianism and democracy. Undoubtedly, the emergence of nondemocratic powers such as China that contest the assumption "democracy leads to development" adds new complexities to democracy's global crisis. In short, China's extraordinary economic growth illustrated the efficacy of a strong developmental state without political pluralism. Accordingly, as China increases its influence abroad—particularly in Africa—concern is rising in the West that "the share of international power held by highly industrialized democracies is dwindling as the clout of China, India, and other newly industrialized economies increases."[2] As such, an

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1 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule," February 2022.

2 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2019: Democracy in Retreat," February 2019, 2.

understanding of what and how exactly China's rise impacts democracy and development is necessary.

The "China effect" on democracy and development is complex, in part because China does not seem to actively promote its governance and development model abroad. This approach is different from the United States and the EU, which promote democracy and human rights as part of their foreign policy, including as conditions for foreign aid and bilateral development assistance. Instead, China professes a policy of noninterference and makes no demands for states to align themselves with its norms or governance model, except to acknowledge the "one China" policy. This noninterference policy seemingly offers less to understand how China is challenging the global democratic hegemony and restructuring international development.

This essay highlights China's strategies to expand its influence and how they are playing out in Africa. It examines the linkages between the rise of China, internal contradictions in the West, and the resolve in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and Rwanda to implement alternative development and governance models. China is at the intersection of these factors. Although the essay focuses on China, it cautions against an exaggerated focus on China and the overestimation of Beijing's capacity to mold the world into China's own image; instead, it urges an agency-focused perspective to emphasize the strategic localization of nondemocratic political norms and practices by political elites in the three African countries—Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. These three states are examples of countries that strategically adopt a major power's policies and attractive example to extract benefits from that power. The essay concludes that China constitutes both a threat to democracy and sustainable economic development and at the same time an opportunity for refining redundant liberal norms and ideas.

## *China's Influence Expansion Strategies*

Despite its extraordinary economic growth, China acknowledges that its military and economic power are insufficient to directly challenge the liberal international order, which underwrites the West's promotion of liberal democracy and the basic principles of international development. China also lacks the historical political connections to developing regions—and African countries in particular—possessed by the United States and European states such as France, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. However, China is pragmatic: it is using its economic capabilities to create "parallel infrastructures of influence" to the Western-created global institutions, such as the grand infrastructure development projects of the Belt and Road Initiative and alternative multilateral financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In creating these new structures, Beijing is expanding its global influence, locking in future benefits, and acting to constrain other states' actions and policies, particularly those of states that are dependent on Chinese trade, investment, and assistance and are also seeking to benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative.

As the main architect of these new institutions and initiatives, China reserves power to delimit its own political and economic community of states, thus enabling it to determine which states are included and excluded from its distribution of assistance, projects, and public goods. In its community of states, democratic credentials do not matter. The effect is that both democratic and nondemocratic countries in the West and the global South acquiesce to China's interests and overlook its faults in exchange for inclusion in the economic and political community China is creating. With China seemingly exempted from demands to democratize and respect human rights, some African leaders are now dismissing the campaign for democracy as only targeted by the West at weaker and less strategic states, hence lacking legitimacy and sincerity. This apparent lack of sincerity among Western countries for promulgating democratization is reflected in the case of Rwanda, which is following a similar model to China's of economic development minus political freedoms, yet it "still receives high levels of aid [from the United States and the European Union] and faces no serious pressure from external actors to democratize."[3] Thus, China is unsurprisingly now widely regarded among African states as a model to be emulated not only in economic terms but also in political and diplomatic terms. Through China's example, there is an increased impression among some African leaders that extraordinary economic growth is the panacea to Western demands for democracy and human rights.

For China, "underlying its pragmatic strategies of global influence is an agenda to delegitimize the liberal international order and attempt to reverse Western socialization in some parts of the Global South."[4] The effect is immense for African countries that have long had to grudgingly

3 Alexander Dukalski, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 140.

4 Obert Hodzi, "Delegitimization and 'Re-socialization': China and the Diffusion of Alternative Norms in Africa," *International Studies* 55, no. 4 (2018): 298.

oblige demands by the West to democratize and institute economic and political reforms in return for development assistance. The failure of the infamous structural adjustment programs to end poverty and bring sustainable development make China's extraordinary economic growth without political or full economic liberalization a model to emulate. In addition, China has pointed at cases such as NATO's operation against Muammar Gaddafi to show that externally driven political reform can lead to chaos. China argues that regime stability and security is necessary for a state to be effective and provide a conducive environment for economic development. As Francis Fukuyama has observed, "Many people currently admire the Chinese system not just for its economic record but also because it can make large, complex decisions quickly, compared with the agonizing policy paralysis that has struck both the United States and Europe in the past few years."[5] Thus, as noted by Wibowo, "the attraction to the China model is unconscious—a silent admiration of the spectacular rise of China," which gnaws at the appeal of democracy as the basis for sustained economic development.[6]

This "silent admiration of the spectacular rise of China" is the main strength China has over the West. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban, for example, has been at odds with other EU leaders for arguing that "it's doable, possible, and rational to place the thesis of illiberal democracy against that of liberal democracy, not just intellectually but as a political program."[7] Without China, Orban's suggestion would have been unimaginable, and he is not alone in citing China as a model to emulate. In Ethiopia, former prime minister Meles Zenawi asserted that China's extraordinary economic growth exploded the illusion that good governance and democracy are the bedrock of successful development and, in his words, proved that "it would be wrong for people in the West to assume that they can buy good governance in Africa. Good governance can only come from the inside; it cannot be imposed from outside. That was always an illusion."[8] Such arguments also find resonance among leaders in Rwanda and Zimbabwe

5 Francis Fukuyama, "The Future of History: Can Liberal Democracy Survive the Decline of the Middle Class," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2012.

6 Ignatius Wibowo, "China's Soft Power and Neoliberal Agenda in Southeast Asia," in *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics*, ed. Mingjiang Li (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), 217.

7 Simon Zoltan, "Orban Vows to Fight Liberal Democracy in Challenge to EU Values," BloombergQuint, July 27, 2019 ~ https://www.bloombergquint.com/politics/orban-vows-to-fight-liberal-democracy-in-challenge-to-eu-values.

8 Meles Zenawi, "FT Interview: Meles Zenawi, Ethiopian Prime Minister," *Financial Times*, February 6, 2007 ~ https://www.ft.com/content/4db917b4-b5bd-11db-9eea-0000779e2340.

because "given a choice between market democracy and its freedoms and market authoritarianism and its growth, stability, improved living standards, and limits on expression—a majority in the developing world and in many middle-sized, non-Western powers prefer the authoritarian model."[9] A survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2020 showed that the Chinese model of development is the second most preferred model in Africa, behind that of the United States.[10] According to Kaplan, the effect is that "states as disparate as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Kazakhstan, and Bolivia seek to replicate China's economic transformation."[11]

Similar surveys on perceptions of China in Southeast Asia have led to the same conclusion, as Joshua Kurlantzick writes:

> People in many Southeast Asian countries share a willingness to abandon some of their democratic values for higher growth, and the kind of increasingly state-directed economic system that many of these countries had, in their authoritarian days, and that China still has today.[12]

As countries such as Cambodia, Brunei, Laos, and Vietnam become more dependent on China, they also gravitate more toward authoritarianism. The shift has also arisen because as citizens demand faster economic growth, for some governments "authoritarian state capitalism promises a sure path to success…democracy is de-emphasized, at least in the short term, as economic rights supersede political rights."[13] Thus, by merely "minding its business of economic growth," developing countries view China "as having demonstrated a viable path of growing out of a planned economy and as showing how sequencing political and economic change makes possible a transition from communism to post-communist authoritarianism."[14] And with the West's inward turn, as marked by the rise of Donald Trump, Brexit, and nationalism alongside slowing economies

9 He Li, "The Chinese Model of Development and Its Implications," *World Journal of Social Science Research* 2, no. 2 (2015): 129.

10 Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans Regard China's Influence as Significant and Positive, but Slipping," Afrobarometer, Dispatch, no. 407, November 2020 ~ https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ad407-chinas_perceived_influence_in_africa_decreases-afrobarometer_dispatch-14nov20.pdf.

11 Seth D. Kaplan, "Development with Chinese Characteristics," *American Interest*, January 3, 2018 ~ https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/01/03/development-chinese-characteristics.

12 Joshua Kurlantzick, "Why the 'China Model' Isn't Going Away," *Atlantic*, March 21, 2013 ~ https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/why-the-china-model-isnt-going-away/274237.

13 Dambiso Moyo, *Edge of Chaos: Why Democracy Is Failing to Deliver Economic Growth—and How to Fix It* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 110, 112–13.

14 Yun-Han Chiu et al., "Introduction: Comparative Perspectives on Democratic Legitimacy," in *How East Asians View Democracy*, ed. Yun-Han Chiu et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 9–10.

and reductions in foreign aid, the West is not well capable of defending the once-dominant—almost hegemonic—assumption that democracy and good governance are prerequisites for development.

China seems to less actively promote its governance model abroad, in part because China regards itself as a noninterventionist power without hegemonic ambitions. Nonetheless, China has directly supported autocratic regimes such as the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) regime in Zimbabwe and cushioned them from the effects of sanctions aimed at motivating political reforms. Increasingly, Beijing is also using its position in the United Nations Security Council to strong-arm the West to deal with global challenges in accordance with its preferred norms and principles. China has used its veto power to quash resolutions seeking to impose sanctions on Myanmar, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia for gross human rights violations and on Sudan for genocide in Darfur, when doing so suited its own geoeconomic and geopolitical interests. Together with Russia, Beijing has enabled Bashar al-Assad to hold onto power in Syria and resist demands to democratize. G. John Ikenberry has noted the result is that China is using "the rules and institutions of liberal internationalism as platforms to project its influence and acquire legitimacy at home and abroad…[and] acquire great-power authority and exercise global leadership."[15] As China's tentacles expand more deeply into international institutions, authoritarian regimes may continue to have a lifeline as long as their diplomatic relations with China are solid.

### *Strategic Localization*

The impression often created in media reports is that China is promoting its authoritarian model of governance abroad. However, recent studies suggest it is the political elites in some countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, who are using relations with and support from China to enhance their own authoritarian regimes.[16] For example, the Ethiopian government imports surveillance technology from China and engages Huawei to suppress political dissent and limit access to the internet. Zimbabwe has

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15 G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism after America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

16 Yuen Yuen Ang, "The Real China Model: It's Not What You Think It Is," *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2018 ~ https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2018-06-29/real-china-model; and Mandira Bagwandeen, "Don't Blame China for the Rise of Digital Authoritarianism in Africa," London School of Economics and Political Science, Firoz-Lalji Institute for Africa, China-Africa Initiative, September 9, 2021 ~ https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/09/09/dont-blame-china-for-rise-of-digital-authoritarianism-africa-surveillance-capitalism.

also used Chinese technology to block internet access, replicating China's infamous "great firewall." By permitting the export of such technology and providing the equipment and training needed for internet surveillance and censorship, China is enabling authoritarian regimes to gain social control and repress opposition politics. Yet, it should be noted that more than China being the one to promote authoritarianism abroad, it is political elites in African countries who are taking advantage of China's nondiscriminatory approach to trade to achieve their local political objectives—most notably, regime survival, rent-seeking, and the protection of military, political, and economic interests.

The ruling parties of Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and South Africa have used their ties with China to gain material support and import governance strategies that ensure their regimes' survival. In Zimbabwe, faced with waning political support, the ZANU-PF regime has co-opted Chinese firms operating in the country to support its politicians' campaign strategies. A number of Chinese firms have supported the party's strategy to drill boreholes to provide greater potable water access in both rural and urban areas where ZANU-PF members of parliament were up for re-election in 2022. In addition, the Chinese embassy in Zimbabwe donated personal protective equipment for Covid-19 to ZANU-PF for distribution to its supporters—such donations have been used by ZANU-PF to demonstrate to local people that it has the political support of major powers, hence shoring up its legitimacy. Rwanda under President Paul Kagame has adopted China's political model of one dominant ruling party and pseudo-opposition parties. The Rwanda Patriotic Front dominates parliament, and to ensure that it remains the single ruling party, the National Consultative Forum of Political Organizations vets political candidates and has the power to veto parliamentary candidates of the eleven political parties that constitute its membership. In democracies such as South Africa, alignment with China occurs in party-to-party relations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The ANC has sought to align its political mobilization and ideological training strategies with the CCP's, and the CCP has provided support to the ANC to construct its ANC Political School and Policy Institute based on the model of the CCP's party leadership and governance school in Shanghai, the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong.

Leaders in Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia find China's policy of noninterference in their internal affairs more appealing than Western demands for democratic reforms and respect for human rights.

As President Kagame stated, "China relates to Africa as an equal."[17] Following Beijing's strategy for closely managing its reputation, the Kagame government "through obstructive tactics, [limits] the information available to outsiders," making it possible "to paint its preferred image."[18] More recently, in a joint statement with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, Ethiopian deputy prime minister Demeke Mekonnenh expressed appreciation of China's support for defending Ethiopia against interference in its internal affairs. This statement followed the United States' suspension of Ethiopia from the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act because of human rights violations. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, President Emmerson Mnangagwa lauded China for its continued support of the country "at all international forums where the subject of Zimbabwe is discussed…we are grateful for that brotherly solidarity and support which you have given us and we shall also continue to support the thrust and non-interference policy of the People's Republic of China whether it be on our continent or internationally."[19]

China's non-imposing approach compared to the West means that African leaders looking for alternative sources of financial, political, and military support find China to be more receptive to their needs. In most cases, because China does not attach considerations for civil, political, or human rights to its foreign relations and economic programs, its support entrenches authoritarian regimes by aligning their diplomatic perspectives and domestic and foreign interests with those of China. For instance, Mnangagwa declared that "the Zimbabwean side firmly supports the One China principle and will continue to support the Chinese side on all issues concerning China's core interests."[20] When the United States hosted its Summit for Democracy in 2021, China published its white paper on democracy, arguing that "there is no fixed model of democracy; it manifests itself in many forms."[21] This statement resonated with many African governments seen as politically unfree in the West. In Rwanda, Kagame had previously made similar statements, arguing that no country has the right

17 Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, "'China Relates to Africa as an Equal'—Paul Kagame," Africanews, July 23, 2018 ~ https://www.africanews.com/2018/07/23/china-relates-to-africa-as-an-equal-paul-kagame.

18 Dukalski, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*, 140.

19 "Zimbabwean President Lauds China for Constant Solidarity," Xinhua, October 16, 2020 ~ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/16/c_139444541.htm.

20 "Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa Meets with Wang Yi," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (People's Republic of China, PRC), January 13, 2020 ~ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceus//eng/zgyw/t1732347.htm.

21 State Council Information Office (PRC), *China: Democracy That Works* (Beijing, December 2021) ~ http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/202112/t20211204_10462468.htm.

to judge Rwanda's political system and human rights record.[22] Likewise, in Zimbabwe, the government successfully mobilized support from regional organizations such as the African Union to call for an end on U.S. and EU sanctions as a form of interference in its political affairs. It is therefore unsurprising that Zimbabwe has consistently supported Beijing against criticism of China's human rights record, including defending China's treatment of Uighur Muslims at the United Nations Human Rights Council. For both China and authoritarian leaders worldwide, their partnership is often win-win: China gains access to strategic resources and markets, while authoritarian leaders obtain the support they need to ensure the survival of their regimes.

## *Moving Forward*

The rise of China presents significant challenges for the spread of democracy, particularly in Africa. To address these challenges, the United States must evaluate local conditions in countries where political elites are using relations with China and emulating the Chinese model to entrench their undemocratic regimes. This strategy entails identifying both the underlying threats and enablers of democracy within each country and how external factors and actors feed into local conditions. Democracy promotion must therefore be customized to suit local contexts rather than through a one-size-fits-all approach. This implies rewarding authoritarian regimes for good behavior, not just punishing and ostracizing them for poor behavior. For instance, when Zimbabwe was excluded from the Summit for Democracy in 2021 and U.S. sanctions were renewed, the ZANU-PF regime increased its crackdown on political opposition parties, which it argued had lobbied for the renewal of the sanctions, and hence benefited from them. The more the United States applied the stick, the more the government of Zimbabwe cracked down on democracy activists and political opposition to maintain its legitimacy and grasp on power.

The United States should also expand its democracy promotion to include reformists in authoritarian regimes, capitalizing on China's adherence to noninterference. This approach would benefit political pluralism because in cases where demands for democracy are locally

22 François Soudan and Nicholas Norbrook, "Kagame: 'On Judgement Day, I Will Get Better Marks Than Those Who Criticise Us over Human Rights,'" Africa Report, July 11, 2020 ~ https://www.theafricareport.com/33192/kagame-on-judgement-day-i-will-get-better-marks-than-those-who-criticise-us-over-human-rights.

driven—even against Beijing's allies—China has maintained a hands-off approach. For instance, China stood aside during the military coup against Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. None of the deposed African leaders in the past decade have requested Chinese protection from internal political threats, suggesting that even for its partners, China does not intervene.

Both China and the West are pragmatic and self-interested in their foreign relations. In the West, self-doubt of democracy and challenges arising from ultra-nationalism mean that democracy promotion is largely being overtaken by pragmatism. As Tanja Börzel has observed, Western democracies "have a tendency to prioritize stability and security over democratic change" in cases where they have geostrategic interests.[23] Notable examples of the West's pragmatism over democracy promotion include its relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while in some countries such as Syria interest in democratic change overrides stability and security. As a result, democracy promotion is seen as serving the interests and whims of its external promoters, which has in turn delegitimized the West's democracy and human rights agenda and undermined its credibility with accusations of double standards and hypocrisy.

As China rises, the CCP is not directly promoting its model of governance abroad, but even still it is "inevitably changing the nature of the global debate between democracy and autocracy. As more countries go this path, this creates a de facto 'reference group' which further makes authoritarianism appear appropriate."[24] China is thus both a threat and an enabler of democracy promotion and development abroad because it casts into relief the challenges to democracy and misgivings that people have toward this model of governance. Beijing's alternative model can prompt a re-examination of democracy and international development, providing clues to the crisis of confidence in democracy. As Börzel has identified, one major factor of that crisis is that "if democratization threatens the survival of the regime or external incentives are limited, Western democracy promotion is unlikely to be effective, irrespective of whether the target state has alternative funding and trade options."[25] Thus, to counter China, democracy must be de-Westernized and instead underwritten by local actors and sustained by local demand. ◈

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23 Tanja A. Börzel, "The Noble West and the Dirty Rest? Western Democracy Promoters and Illiberal Regional Powers," *Democratization* 22, no. 3 (2015): 520.

24 Thomas Ambrosio, "Authoritarian Norms in a Changing International System," *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 2 (2018): 120–23.

25 Börzel, "The Noble West and the Dirty Rest?" 520.

# Status Complicated: In Zambia, China-Africa Is a Partnership Washington Should Not Necessarily Envy

*Chiponda Chimbelu*

To better understand how Africans feel about China's growing presence and influence on the continent, it is important to look both at the headlines and beyond them to explain how ordinary people may be interpreting events and forming opinions. This essay homes in on one country, Zambia, to try to better understand public perceptions about Chinese engagement. Measured in per capita terms, this southern African country is one of the leading destinations for Chinese investment. The growing presence of Chinese citizens in Zambia, along with their money and involvement in different areas of the economy, has caused controversy and even tragedy, including the loss of both Chinese and Zambian lives.

In May 2020, three Chinese nationals were murdered by locals in the Zambian capital Lusaka. The attack followed repeated media reports of Chinese employers allegedly making workers stay on business premises for weeks to maintain production during the country's first Covid-19 lockdown. The then mayor of Lusaka, Miles Sampa, was accused of stoking anti-China sentiment prior to the attack by blaming China for the Covid-19 pandemic and participating in raids on Chinese-owned businesses. He claimed he had uncovered labor abuses and discrimination against Zambians, describing their working conditions as "slavery." Sampa also used racist language in videos of the raids that were posted on Facebook.

Sampa later apologized for his actions and language in a statement to the media and assured foreign investors that his office would "support their businesses 100%."[1] But it is highly unlikely his apology ameliorated any damage he may have caused. Chinese involvement in Zambia was fraught long before he became mayor, mostly over issues regarding the treatment of Zambian workers by Chinese employers, which have been covered by both local and international media. In 2011, Human Rights Watch released a damning report that detailed abuse at Chinese-owned copper mines in

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1 "Lusaka Mayor Miles Sampa Unreservedly Apologises to the Chinese Community and Government Leaders," *Lusaka Times*, May 27, 2020 ~ https://www.lusakatimes.com/2020/05/27/milesmiles-unreservedly-apologises-to-the-chinese-community-and-government-leaders.

Zambia, referencing two major events in particular.[2] One was the injury of about a dozen Zambian miners in 2010 after two Chinese managers opened fire on a protest of poor working conditions at Collum Coal Mine in Southern Province. The other was an explosion at the Chinese-owned Chambishi Mine in Copperbelt Province in 2005 that led to the death of at least 46 people, with the blame laid on poor safety conditions. In the eyes of many, including Human Rights Watch, the mines' Chinese owners were responsible for these tragic incidents.

This essay analyzes how Zambians perceive China's engagement with the country based on Chinese economic activities there as well as other complicating factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation, and politics. It first looks at Chinese job creation and the contrary roles it plays in citizens' perceptions of China. It then turns to examine the China debt-trap narrative and the involvement of both media and Zambian politics in narratives about economic dependence on China. The essay concludes by considering how the United States can take greater steps to play a positive counterpart to African engagement with China.

## *Chinese Job Creation and Responses in Zambia*

Traumatic events such as the ones noted above have played a role in informing Zambian perspectives on Chinese engagement in the country. But for ordinary people, views are also influenced by tangible considerations, such as the infrastructure and jobs that have arrived with Chinese investment. Between 2000 and 2012, Chinese employers created more than 75,000 jobs in the country, a quarter of which were in the manufacturing and construction sectors.[3] Given Zambia's high unemployment rate, opportunities to earn a livelihood can highly influence opinions. In early 2013, seven out of ten Zambian survey respondents ranked China as the top foreign investor for job creation in a poll conducted by researchers Weiyi Shi and Brigitte Seim, who surveyed

2 Human Rights Watch, "'You'll Be Fired if You Refuse': Labor Abuses in Zambia's Chinese State-Owned Copper Mines," November 4, 2011 ~ https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/11/04/youll-be-fired-if-you-refuse/labor-abuses-zambias-chinese-state-owned-copper.

3 Muchemwa Sinkala and Weidi Zhou, "Chinese FDI and Employment Creation in Zambia," *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development* 5, no. 23 (2014): 39–43 ~ https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEDS/article/viewFile/16755/17107.

800 households in Zambia's two most populous provinces, Lusaka and the Copperbelt.[4]

In this survey, respondents were less likely, however, to give Chinese employers a good ranking for working conditions. The survey found that Chinese employers are less likely to offer employment conditions that Zambians expect, and that managers do not always speak local languages. The latter could potentially play a role in exacerbating cultural differences and misunderstandings, making it harder for employers and workers to communicate their expectations. "They do not understand us. When we try to explain to them [there is a] lack of communication…because they don't care about us," mine workers stated in the France24 documentary *Zambia: Under Chinese Influence*. "When [we] complain, they don't hear us."[5]

So while China is the country's leading foreign investor, Chinese businesses and employers do not generally enjoy a good reputation in Zambia, and the sentiment that "they don't care about us" is commonly held among the populace. However, it is worth noting that incidents at Chinese-owned mines have received more attention than those at other foreign-owned mines.[6] Researcher Deborah Brautigam has pointed to serious worker complaints at other foreign-owned mines in the country: Konkola Copper Mines, a subsidiary of Indian-owned Vedanta Resources was ordered by a United Kingdom court in 2020 to pay compensation to 1,826 people in Chingola for environmental damage,[7] and incidents have occurred at other mines, including the Mopani mines owned by the Anglo-Swiss multinational Glencore. Nevertheless, these events hardly ever tarnish the national reputations of these investors the way incidents at Chinese operations do; "the Zambian public is overall less favorable toward investment from China than toward foreign investment in general and that from other countries."[8]

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4 Weiyi Shi and Brigitte Seim, "A Reputation Deficit? The Myths and Reality of Chinese Investment in Zambia," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): 259–82 ~ https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-east-asian-studies/article/reputation-deficit-the-myths-and-reality-of-chinese-investment-in-zambia/4D317CDC8A2AE2B55BA5C0A211B12542#.

5 "Zambia: Under Chinese Influence," France 24 English, YouTube, March 21, 2021, 27:20 ~ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co0RGa99W0M&t=2120s.

6 Deborah Brautigam, "Human Rights Watch Report on Chinese-Owned Mines in Zambia," China Africa Research Initiative, China in Africa: The Real Story, November 11, 2011 ~ http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2011/11/human-rights-watch-report-on-chinese.html.

7 Ibid.

8 Shi and Seim, "A Reputation Deficit?"

Although Zambians recognize China's contribution to their country's economy, they are critical about the quality of the jobs created and less likely to want to work for a Chinese employer.[9] But they do value China as an external contributor: according to the 2021 Afrobarometer Survey, three out of five Zambians believe that China has a "very positive" or "somewhat positive influence on the country, economically and politically."[10] The majority of Zambians thus support Chinese engagement. And even more interestingly, they rank Beijing's economic and political influence as a positive at the same level they do Washington's—both at 60%.[11] Therefore, while the U.S.-China rivalry has intensified with ongoing trade disputes in recent years, the perceived influence of the world's two largest economies is about the same in this southern African nation.

### *The Role of the "Debt Trap" Narrative*

Between 2016 and 2021, public perception of Chinese engagement in Zambia dropped 12 percentage points, according to the most recent Afrobarometer survey. An overwhelming majority of Zambians (87%) are aware their country is in debt to China, and most of them (77%) are concerned about the level of indebtedness.[12] Thus, while the majority of Zambians remain in favor of China's economic and political influence, fewer support it today than five years ago. This is also the case in other African countries, including Kenya and Angola. The rising concern about indebtedness to China across the continent suggests that the "debt trap" narrative may be working. The 2021 Afrobarometer survey concludes: "The U.S. government and other development partners may be meeting with some success in their efforts to remind Africans that even if money from China and other non-traditional development partners comes with fewer strings, they are in danger of being lured into a deepening debt trap."

It is hard to say whether it is the debt or the level of economic dependence on China that may have contributed to decreased Zambian support for engagement with China. In recent years, local media has linked

9 Shi and Seim, "A Reputation Deficit?"

10 Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," Afrobarometer, Afrobarometer Dispatch, no. 489, November 15, 2021, 9 ~ https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ad489-pap3-africans_welcome_chinas_influence_maintain_democratic_aspirations-afrobarometer_dispatch-15nov21.pdf.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

colonization and Chinese engagement.[13] For instance, a 2018 article in the *Lusaka Times* attached the heading "How China [Is] Slowly Colonizing [the] Zambian Economy" to an image of then president Edgar Lungu flanked by seven Chinese nationals and three Zambians prior to the opening of a Chinese-owned plant in Chongwe District. The Lungu administration was keen to show it was attracting FDI and creating jobs, but such images may have served as evidence of the government's close ties with China. In the same year, the Lungu administration asked the International Monetary Fund country representative to leave. Zambia has also slipped in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index since 2016.[14] So at a time when Western partners were being sidelined and Lungu was increasingly seen as authoritarian both at home and abroad, such images only confirmed the partnership between the ruling elite and Chinese investors. The decline in trust and confidence may also extend to Chinese actors in the country.[15]

Given the close relations between African governments and Beijing, engagement with China is much more politicized than other foreign investment, which is why opposition parties in Zambia have acted as a watchdog to publicize the presence of the Chinese employers and point out what they are doing wrong.[16] In the 2011 presidential and general elections, the Patriotic Front (PF), Lungu's party, was elected after its founder, Michael Sata, won on an anti-Chinese campaign and ousted the then ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy. Once elected president, however, Sata softened his rhetoric on Chinese investment and investors. Politicians know the value of China in their politics and tread carefully.[17] During the next decade, the PF in fact intensified economic relations with China, borrowing heavily from Beijing to fund ambitious infrastructure projects, including a second terminal at Lusaka International Airport and the newly built Simon Kapwepwe International Airport in Ndola. By 2021, Zambia owed more

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13 See, for example, Kalima Nkonde, "How China Slowly Colonizing Zambian Economy," *Lusaka Times*, July 27, 2018 ~ https://www.lusakatimes.com/2018/07/27/how-china-slowly-colonizing-zambian-economy; and "Zambia's Journey to Chinese Slavery and Colonization," Zambia Watchdog ~ https://www.zambiawatchdog.com/zambias-journey-to-chinese-slavery-and-colonization.

14 Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index, "Zambia," 2021 ~ https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/zmb.

15 Kaiser Kuo and Jeremy Goldkorn, "Misinformation about China-Africa Relations in the Wake of the Dakar Forum," SupChina, December 16, 2001 ~ https://supchina.com/2021/12/16/misinformation-about-china-africa-relations-in-the-wake-of-the-dakar-forum.

16 Author's phone call with Legobang Tiego Legodi, China-Africa researcher, University of Cape Town, December 14, 2021.

17 Ibid.

than a third of its $13.4 billion foreign debt to China.[18] And it became the first African country to default on its sovereign debt in November 2020 after failing to make a payment on a eurobond. Zambia's debt had spiraled out of control even before the pandemic, and by 2021 inflation had exploded to record levels, with food prices increasing nearly 25% on the previous year.

After a decade of rule, the PF was increasingly seen as in cahoots with its Chinese partners. So in 2020 when former Lusaka mayor Sampa, who is also a PF member, went on an anti-Chinese campaign during the first Covid-19-prompted lockdown, the government was concerned—one of its own was challenging Chinese engagement in the country. As noted at the beginning of this essay, the Lungu administration forced Sampa to apologize to the Chinese community and the Zambian government for his actions in May 2020.[19] It was important for the Lungu administration to show that it did not endorse such anti-Chinese rhetoric or campaigns. The PF was walking a careful line between not upsetting Beijing and ensuring that Sampa's actions did not affect the party image ahead of the 2021 general election.

Over the last two decades, China has gone from being an invisible partner to the most important external player in Zambia. But criticism of Chinese actors and employment policies in Zambia has coincided with an economic downturn that gathered pace during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was obvious to many locals that, despite the rising levels of borrowing by the Lungu administration and an increased Chinese presence, ordinary Zambians were not enjoying most of the economic benefits. By June 2021, two months before the August general election, inflation had soared to a two-decade high and unemployment was rising amid the pandemic.[20] In August 2021, the PF was voted out.

## *What Washington Can Do (Better)*

Chinese investment has become very visible across Zambia over the last two decades, but major private-sector U.S. investment is

18 Matthew Hill, "Zambia's Biggest Creditors Range from China to a Local Furniture Seller," Bloomberg, October 21, 2021 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-21/china-to-a-furniture-seller-are-among-zambia-s-biggest-creditors?sref=ODkQnsiJ.

19 "Lusaka Mayor Miles Sampa Unreservedly Apologises to the Chinese Community and Government Leaders."

20 Taonga Clifford Mitimingi, "Zambian Inflation Nears Two-Decade High on Food Prices," Bloomberg, June 24, 2021 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-24/zambian-inflation-nears-two-decade-high-on-food-prices?sref=ODkQnsiJ; and "Zambia President-Elect Faces Massive Economic Hurdles," Voice of America, August 18, 2021 ~ https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_zambia-president-elect-faces-massive-economic-hurdles/6209711.html.

largely absent. The most successful U.S. program remains the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Since 2004, Zambia has received more than $4 billion in aid, and more than 900,000 Zambians rely on the program for antiretroviral treatment therapy.[21] PEPFAR has a tremendous positive impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of Zambians and as a result had benefited the Zambian economy. But despite its success, the program underscores the fact that the relationship between the United States and Zambia has not changed. The U.S. focus remains on aid, and major U.S. investment is lacking, creating an opening for China to enter the Zambian market.[22]

The 2021 presidential and general elections came down to the economy. Hakainde Hichilema's United Party for National Development won because Hichilema promised better economic management and job creation.[23] After experiencing the worst inflation in decades and economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, Zambians were ready for something different, but the election result itself reveals very little about China's future role. Nor does it directly address concerns about the level of borrowing or how local perspectives will evolve on the presence of Chinese enterprises in the country.[24] If anything, there are already indications China will continue to play a significant economic role in Zambia. In March, Zambian foreign minister Stanley Kasongo Kakubo became the first sub-Saharan foreign minister to be hosted by his Chinese counterpart since the pandemic began.[25] Kakubo's visit to China occurred just days after President Hichilema announced his government had signed a memorandum of understanding with Huawei—a signal the Chinese tech giant will continue to stay involved in Zambia's digital infrastructure, despite warnings from the United States and its allies who fear Chinese systems could provide a backdoor for Beijing to spy.[26]

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21 "U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)," U.S. Embassy in Zambia ~ https://zm.usembassy.gov/pepfar.

22 Gyude Moore, "China in Africa: An African Perspective" (speech at the Paulson Institute, Washington, D.C., March 25, 2019), available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5uzxV8ub9k.

23 Ringisai Chikohomero, "Zambians Vote for Economic Reform," Institute for Security Studies, August 19, 2021 ~ https://issafrica.org/iss-today/zambians-vote-for-economic-reform.

24 Chiponda Chimbelu, "Investing in Africa's Tech Infrastructure. Has China Won Already?" DW, March 15, 2019 ~ https://www.dw.com/en/investing-in-africas-tech-infrastructure-has-china-won-already/a-48540426.

25 "Wang Yi Holds Talks with Zambian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Stanley Kasongo Kakubo," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, March 19, 2022 ~ http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653587.htm.

26 Hakainde Hichilema, "Today Min. of Technology & Science and Min. of Education Signed an MOU with Huawei," Twitter, March 16, 2022 ~ https://twitter.com/hhichilema/status/1504195004851437577?s=21.

Most African governments are not heeding Washington's concerns about Chinese involvement in Africa. As early as 2011, then U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton warned of "new colonialism" on the continent on a visit to Lusaka.[27] The debt-trap narrative, which took hold more strongly during the Trump administration, coincided with Zambia's economic downturn. Zambians may therefore have been more receptive to the narrative given the economic pain they were experiencing. Otherwise, when the economy is growing adequately, Washington's warnings about Beijing's involvement in Africa may be less effective, as was the case during Clinton's 2011 visit. These messages are also patronizing. It is condescending for the West to say Africans are being disempowered by China when there is a long history of African disempowerment by the West both during and after colonialism.[28] Such messages give the impression the United States is more concerned about what China is doing on the continent rather than how to better support African partners with what it can offer.[29]

African governments are looking for solutions, so the U.S.-China rivalry is not an either/or choice to them. Africans recognize that the world's two largest economies both have useful roles to play on the continent.[30] The most recent Afrobarometer survey for Zambia, for example, indicates that Zambians value both partners equally, and that African views on whether China or the United States is preferable as a development model do "not appear to have any significant effect on Africans' support for democracy or democratic norms."[31] Zambia's 2021 general election result can be seen an example. The ruling PF lost mainly due to the country's poor economic performance, and while there were concerns about potential election rigging, Lungu's government conceded after losing. Democracy won.

The Zambia election outcome can be also seen as an endorsement of U.S. and Western democratic values. Despite China's growing economic (and perhaps even political) influence in the country, democratic values persist—even with the efforts Lungu made to hold onto power, such as clamping down on press freedom and the opposition. However, for

27 "Clinton Warns Against 'New Colonialism' in Africa," Reuters, June 11, 2011 ~ https://www.reuters.com/article/us-clinton-africa-idUSTRE75A0RI20110611.

28 "Interview: Maria Repnikova on Chinese Soft Power," China Digital Times, December 16, 2021 ~ https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/12/interview-maria-repnikova-on-chinese-soft-power; and Alec Russell, "Zuma Warns West's 'Colonial' Corporates," *Financial Times*, March 3, 2013.

29 Moore, "China in Africa."

30 Yew Lun Tian, "China Willing to Work with U.S. on Build Back Better World Initiative," Reuters, February 28, 2022 ~ https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-willing-work-with-us-build-back-better-world-initiative-2022-02-28.

31 Sanny and Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations."

Africans there is not simply a choice between authoritarianism and democracy—development, economic freedom, and even a quicker path to achieve that progress are all important considerations. China has disrupted the narrative that liberal democracies are the quickest path to development and economic freedom. Beijing tells African governments that they can achieve what China has achieved in recent decades, and it is backing this up with action by helping create much-needed jobs and infrastructure. Though the quality and terms may be up for debate, Beijing often offers the only affordable solution, at least in the short term.

Washington needs to update its proposition and lure African partners with an offer that delivers tangible results, especially economic, in the short to medium term. The rise of non-Western actors on the continent means African countries no longer face the task alone of reducing barriers to doing business. U.S. stakeholders in Washington, and even on Wall Street, may need to change their approach to the continent. For instance, rating agencies often penalize African countries, which means they are unable to raise money in international capital markets.[32] Thus, more often than not, borrowing from Beijing becomes the only option to fund major infrastructure projects.[33] More pragmatism may be required to come up with country-specific approaches to prevent China from being the dominant external actor in Africa.

Washington will also need to address its consistency. Changes in administration (between Democrats and Republicans) should not lead to drastic changes for the strategy toward Africa, as, for example, was seen during the Trump administration. The shift clearly damaged the U.S.-Africa relationship. Current Zambian president Hichilema even attributes the recent rise of autocratic regimes in Africa to the lack of U.S. leadership on the continent during the Trump years.[34] Washington needs a bipartisan approach toward development and economic involvement on the continent that can be executed over the long term to maintain consistency and generate sustainable results. ◈

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32 Richard Ndem, "Credit Rating Agencies' Harsh Stance Is Hurting Africa," African Business, October 8, 2020 ~ https://african.business/2020/10/economy/credit-rating-agencies-inflexible-stance-is-hurting-africa.

33 Chiponda Chimbelu, "Building Africa: Can Europe's Construction Firms Compete with China's?" DW, February 21, 2020 ~ https://www.dw.com/en/building-africa-can-europes-construction-firms-compete-with-chinas/a-52435595.

34 Nicholas Norbrook, "Zambia's Hakainde Hichilema: 'We've Never Seen Such Levels of Corruption,'" Africa Report, June 14, 2021 ~ https://www.theafricareport.com/94754/zambias-hakainde-hichilema-weve-never-seen-such-levels-of-corruption.

# China in Mauritius: The Telling of the Chinese Story

*Roukaya Kasenally*

Mauritius is a small island state situated strategically in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Home to 1.3 million people, its population claims ancestry from three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa. France, and then Britain, ruled the island as a colony from 1715 to 1968, bringing enslaved Africans to tend the sugar plantations and attracting indentured laborers from India and merchants from China. France established a plantocracy economy and made French the island's official language. Britain's legacy is mainly administrative, having founded the island's modern electoral, legal, and parliamentary systems. Notably, Britain allowed French to remain the island's official language.[1] In Mauritius today, many "ancestral" languages are taught in schools and used daily, primarily from India, China, Madagascar, and Mozambique.

This essay assesses the impact that China has had on Mauritius and how the "China story" is represented through the country's local media. Despite its small size, several actors compete for influence on the island: France and Britain, given their historic colonial ties; the United States, as an important trade and diplomatic partner; India, from where roughly 70% of the population claims ancestry; and, of course, China.

## *China in Mauritius: A Timeline of Engagement*

The historic presence of a Chinese population sets Mauritius apart from the rest of the African continent. The earliest record of Chinese settlement in Mauritius was in 1745, and since then the island has received successive waves of Chinese immigration.[2] While only 3% of the country's population is "Sino-Mauritian," this population has gained significant influence in the business sector.[3] In the 1970s, Sino-Mauritian Edward Lim Fat

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1 Peter Stein, "The English Language in Mauritius: Past and Present," *English World Wide* 18, no. 1 (1997): 65–69.

2 Pascale Siew, *Chinatown in the Heart of Mauritius: A Trip Down Memory Lane* (Port Louis: Editions Vizavi, 2016).

3 James Wan, "Meet Africa's Most Integrated Chinese Community," *New African*, June 6, 2015 ~ https://newafricanmagazine.com/10980.

established the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in the country, attracting Hong Kong–based investors to set up textile and manufacturing factories. The EPZ became one of the island's key pillars of development, accounting for up to 10% of GDP. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Mauritius also benefited from Chinese technical assistance in agriculture, infrastructure, and scholarships, and the two countries signed a double tax treaty.[4] Sino-Mauritians have maintained cultural and economic ties with China, including founding the Mauritius Chinese Business Chamber, several local Chinese-language newspapers, and the first Chinese cultural center outside China. Mandarin instruction in public schools has also proliferated. The Mauritian government has acknowledged the strong ties between China and the island and the important role of Sino-Mauritians in its society: Chinese New Year is a public holiday in Mauritius, while a person of Chinese origin is featured on one of the country's banknotes.

Beijing's decision to establish a special economic zone (SEZ) in Mauritius in 2006 expanded China's presence on the island. Since 2006, two Chinese presidents have conducted state visits to Mauritius: Hu Jintao in 2009 and Xi Jinping in 2018.[5] The past two decades have also seen the growth of China's soft- and sharp-power efforts, culminating in Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Officially launched in 2013, BRI has become the center stage for China's global influence. Today, 139 countries—39 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa—have joined BRI. Notably, however, Mauritius has not yet signed onto BRI.

Since the creation of the SEZ, China's relationship with Mauritius has increased and evolved. In 2016, China began negotiations with Mauritius for its first free trade agreement in Africa, which was signed in 2019 and entered into force in 2021. The agreement offers preferential trade terms on 8,547 goods—significantly, 96% of Chinese tariff lines. In 2016, China also established the Confucius Institute at the University of Mauritius and opened a branch of the Bank of China. More recently, in 2019, the Mauritius Safe City Project was launched using a loan provided by the Export-Import Bank of China, and Chinese real estate and smart city investments on

4 Vinaye Dey Ancharaz, "David v. Goliath: Mauritius Facing Up to China," *European Journal of Development Research* 21, no. 4 (2009): 622–43.

5 Roukaya Kasenally, "China in Mauritius: Gateway to Africa or Forgotten Friend?" African Arguments, August 30, 2018 ~ https://africanarguments.org/2018/08/china-in-mauritius-gateway-to-africa-or-forgotten-friend.

the island are worth $2 billion.[6] In addition to these projects, China has financed a number of key infrastructure projects such as road construction, the country's newest airport, a state-of-the-art stadium, and a dam. These different projects have been financed through a mix of grants and preferential loans that approximately amount to $800 million.

In large part, China's interest in Mauritius is due to the country's strategic location. The Indian Ocean today is a chess board for the geopolitical and economic influence of major global actors. Could Mauritius be a linchpin for China in the Indian Ocean? The United States at Diego Garcia, France at Reunion, and India at Agalega Island each have a military presence in the Indian Ocean. Notably, Diego Garcia and Agalega both belong to Mauritius. As the most recent Afrobarometer survey recorded, China's presence in Mauritius is visible. Of the survey respondents, 70% were aware "that China provides loans to Mauritius," and an equal number of respondents believed that "China's economic activities has a lot/some influence on the Mauritian economy."[7] It is important, however, to identify what China's intentions are in Mauritius.

### *The Deployment of China's Soft Power*

China's soft power—manifested in relational networks, capacity-building programs, knowledge production, and diffusion and transfer of technology—has expanded in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.[8] China's growing prominence as an alternative to the West is strongest in the fields of knowledge production and diffusion and technology transfer. The establishment of over five hundred Confucius Institutes worldwide, the expansion of Chinese media, and roll outs of technology have successfully captured local and global attention and generated investment.

The growth of China's activity abroad has been matched by the unprecedented global expansion of Chinese media following Xi's call in 2013 to "tell China's story well" through the "willingness" of Chinese media. Narratives have emerged focusing on China's "constructive" and

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6 Honita Cowaloosur, *Chinese Presence in Real Estate in South Africa and Mauritius* (Stellenbosch: Centre for Chinese Studies, 2016) ~ http://www0.sun.ac.za/ccs/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CCS_Research-Report_Chinese_Presence_South-Africa_Mauritius_Honita_Cowaloosur_2016.pdf.

7 "Afrobarometer Round 8 Survey in Mauritius," StraConsult, 2020 ~ https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Summary%20of%20results/summary_of_results-mauritius_r8-afrobarometer-25feb21.pdf.

8 Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge, Production and Network Building in China-Africa Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

"positive energy."[9] Since then, Xinhua News Agency has opened 200 offices around the world. Meanwhile, the renaming of the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) into China Global Television Network (CGTN) demonstrates China's pivot to a global information and communication strategy. BRI also has its own Belt and Road News Network as of 2017, which counts "208 media organizations from 98 countries worldwide as its members, among which 40 media groups are council members."[10] While it is unclear whether being a signatory to BRI automatically makes a country a member of the news network, in this case, Mauritius is neither a signatory of BRI nor a member of the Belt and Road News Network.

Nevertheless, given Africa's legacy of being stereotyped as "the dark, diseased, and poor" continent, China has found Africa an ideal place to promote an alternative development model making it an important target for its information and communication strategy. Emeka Umejei, a media expert, described Chinese media's strategic expansion on the continent:

> In April 2021 China Media Group which owns CCTV, CGTN and China Radio International, opened a new headquarters in Nairobi, where CGTN had previously established its own African headquarters. *China Daily* has run its weekly Africa edition *ChinAfrica*, for almost a decade. Chinese media company StarTimes has cultivated over ten million subscribers in over 30 African countries.[11]

China has additionally incorporated a media component for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Since the forum's inception in 2006, media has been given greater prominence with each successive iteration, which was most recently held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2021. The manner in which Chinese media reports on events in Africa is also unique. At a gathering of African media leaders in 2015, the deputy head of the then CCTV was unequivocal about the way the channel reports on Africa: "Our aim is to produce programs and news stories that show the positive side rather than the old view of poverty, diseases, amongst other challenges."[12]

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9 Glenn Tiffert and Oliver McPherson-Smith, *China's Sharp Power in Africa: A Handbook for Building National Resilience* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2021) ~ https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/tiffert-mcpherson_chinasharppower_webreadypdf.pdf.

10 "A Brief Introduction to the Belt and Road News Network," *People's Daily Online*, April 11, 2019, available at http://en.brnn.com/n3/2019/0411/c414872-9565686.html.

11 Oliver Young, "Interview: Emeka Umejei on the 'Unequal Equal' Relationship between Chinese and African Media," China Digital Times, November 23, 2021 ~ https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/11/interview-emeka-umejei-on-the-unequal-equal-relationship-between-chinese-and-african-media.

12 Quoted in African Media Leaders Forum, "Shaping Development Conversations in Africa: The Role of Media in the Digital Environment," African Media Initiative, 2015, 49.

A number of scholars have questioned the concept of the constructive journalism promoted by Chinese media about Africa:[13]

> CCTV's overall preference for the solution-oriented responsibility frame indicates that, consciously or not, it is adopting some elements of constructive journalism. Such a framing of African events does indeed diverge from the norms of Western coverage, but it is also marked by a lack of critical focus on China and a reluctance to hold African leaders and officials to account.[14]

Does the Mauritian media follow a similar pattern to what is happening in other African countries? When examining Mauritius's relationship with Chinese media, the island's long journalistic history must be considered. Mauritius is home to some of the oldest journalistic practices in the Southern Hemisphere, dating back to 1773 during French colonial rule. As a result, large sections of the local media continue to have strong links with France, as well as retain French journalistic culture and practices. In fact, Mauritian media is conducted primarily in French despite Mauritius being a multicultural, multilingual island.

### *Understanding and Reporting about China in Mauritius*

For the purpose of this essay, semi-structured interviews were conducted with media professionals, media trainers, and journalism students to understand China's presence in the Mauritian media. From the onset, one feature that has differentiated Mauritius from countries on the African continent is the many competing foreign players—in addition to the historical presence of France and Britain, the United States and India are also actors there. Therefore, it is interesting to assess how China carves (or attempts to carve) its own presence in Mauritius.

As mentioned above, China is familiar to Mauritian media houses, given its historical links and ancestral ties to a segment of the population. Interviewees were unanimous in acknowledging China's superpower status, describing the country as "innovative," "rich," "powerful," and "strategic." While China's media presence was equally acknowledged, those interviewed showed little to no interest in its television activities (through various television packages carried by both the national broadcaster

13 See, for example, James Wan, "Perception of Chinese Media's Africa Coverage," in *Africa's Media Image in the 21st Century*, ed. Mel Bunce, Suzanne Franks, and Chris Paterson (London: Routledge, 2016); and Vivien Marsh, "Africa through Chinese Eyes: New Frames or the Same Old Lens? African News in English from China Central Television, Compared with the BBC," in ibid.

14 Marsh, "Africa through Chinese Eyes," 185.

and cable providers). Certain respondents went as far as to say that some "Chinese channels are less credible than their Western counterparts." In fact, a significant bias toward the West was observed, especially among students training to be journalists. For them, it was clear that Europe and the United States remained their main source of reference, be it in terms of accessing international news or the opportunity to pursue further studies. This trend prompts questions as to whether this pro-Western bias could be a direct outcome of the island's colonial legacy.[15]

This issue was highlighted in some of the responses from the media professionals who spoke about the "pro-Western complex" in the treatment of news. As noted above, in recent years, China has stepped up its presence in the knowledge production and dissemination domain in Mauritius. For example, the establishment of a Confucius Institute on the campus of the University of Mauritius has opened its usual gamut of cultural and linguistic activities as well as postgraduate scholarships to designated Chinese universities.[16] In 2017, the University of Mauritius and Huawei Technologies signed a memorandum of understanding to found the Huawei Authorized Information and Network Academy and Seeds for the Future Programs. China is obviously a visible media actor in Mauritius through the Confucius Institute and this partnership with Huawei Technologies, but these programs' exposure may be hindered by a Western bias. Between the West and China (or even other countries from the East such as India), students suggested they would opt for a Western education or training.

Can this pro-Western bias be addressed by providing more media space to China-related stories? Most journalists interviewed emphasized the need for balanced reporting and were aware that China pushes the "propaganda card." In recent times, full-page color advertisements have appeared in major newspapers to promote key Chinese projects or events, such as major real estate development or the hundredth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. This marketing of China is further supported by a number of locally based Sino-Mauritian platforms, including the Mauritius Chinese Business Chamber and the Mauritius Chinese Friendship and Cultural Association, which showcase China in local media through interviews, featured articles, and opinion pieces.

15 Author's interviews, Port Louis, February 23, 2022.

16 "About Us," University of Mauritius, Confucius Institute ~ https://www.uom.ac.mu/confucius/index.php/about-us/ci-uom.

All the media professionals interviewed confirmed that they have covered the China beat for their media houses. However, their assignments vary between journalists and publications. Most of the time, coverage includes rather generic events organized by the Chinese embassy in Mauritius to which the media houses are invited. These pieces can be viewed as controlled content that most of the time give a positive spin on the activities organized by the embassy. Most private media houses seemingly do not have an official policy on covering China as a news item. State broadcaster Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, however, systematically covers all events,

> from political/sociocultural activities/programs organized by Chinese Embassy and other Chinese governmental organizations in Mauritius to official meetings with government representatives, visits of officials/political leaders from China, and other diplomatic/bilateral events as well projects financed or co-financed or benefiting Chinese support/technical assistance.[17]

There seems to be a marked difference in the coverage of Chinese news items between the state broadcaster and private media. The state broadcaster covers government-to-government news items at great length, often emphasizes China as a friendly country, and devotes extended coverage to the key development projects China finances. Notably, several journalists working at the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation have trained at Chinese universities. In addition, the broadcaster's building was constructed using an interest-free loan from China. On the other hand, private media is more cautious in balancing coverage between China and other foreign entities. Journalists from private media have been more willing to write critical pieces pertaining to China's real estate development, infrastructure campaigns, and Safe City project, among other activities.

Several interviewed subjects stressed the need to understand, investigate, and critically assess Chinese activities in Mauritius beyond the "pre-fabricated" discourses fed to the media. For this to happen, journalists need time and support from their media houses to investigate and report stories that might shed light on more problematic aspects of Chinese activities in Mauritius and beyond. For instance, a recurrent issue mentioned throughout the interviews was the "commercial dealings" between some media houses and the Chinese embassy in Mauritius

17 "Ambassador Sun Gongyi Meets the Director General of the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Mauritius, October 25, 2017 ~ http://mu.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/201710/t20171025_6488868.htm.

that were leading to a "toning down" of negative reporting about China. While the story's veracity is difficult to ascertain, several media houses in Mauritius do have content agreements with Chinese companies. The details of these content agreements are unknown, but they would certainly be an attractive source of finance for some media houses that are struggling with their revenue model. In fact, this agreement scheme is a common feature among a number of media houses across Africa.

### *Networks, Links, and Relationships*

The idea of *guanxi*, or building connections, lies at the heart of China's soft-power initiatives. Many of China's investment strategies rely on developing people-to-people relationships and networks. While use of this strategy in Africa dates back to African countries' independence, recently it has become more targeted in line with China's expansionist approach.

In 1994, Mauritius's Media Trust was established to provide training for Mauritian journalists, among other aims. The Media Trust receives most of its funding from the government but also engages with other entities such as international organizations and foreign embassies. Nevertheless, the Media Trust does not have the unanimous support of the media industry; in fact, several media houses have decided to boycott the trust's activities. The Media Trust also was dormant for many years and only restarted operations in 2015. Since then, the organization's main focus has been on building journalists' capacity and holding an annual awards ceremony for journalistic content. Board members of the trust have reiterated their autonomy from foreign entities. However, the Media Trust has what it refers to as "verbal agreements" with several diplomatic missions that have lent their support by "acting as facilitators or identifying trainers or providing funds."[18] In particular, France's strong influence in the country has led to partnerships between the Media Trust and the Institut Francais de Maurice and the Centre de Formation et de Perfectionnement des Journalistes.

Since 2019, the Media Trust has also had a verbal agreement with the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA), which established an exchange program. Due to Covid-19, however, this program has only existed in conception. In September 2019, two board members of the Media Trust, who are also journalists, attended the Belt and Road Journalists Forum held in Beijing. That same year, the Chinese embassy in Mauritius

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18 Author interview conducted with the Media Trust Board, Port Louis, January 26, 2022.

donated three laptops and a mobile phone to the Media Trust. Without any projects executed yet between the Media Trust and the ACJA, the type of exchanges both sides will promote can only be speculated on. The fact that the ACJA acts as the compulsory union for professional journalists in China chaperoned by the Chinese Communist Party might restrict the issues or themes its journalists can cover. Past journalism training opportunities that the Media Trust has organized with the support of diplomatic missions have included investigative reporting, fact-checking, and treatment of subjects ranging from fake news to climate change and LGBTQ rights. Although the partnership between the Mauritian media and the ACJA may differ from those with the West or India, it is important to watch this space as China becomes more visible and aggressive in building connections in the country.

### *Conclusion: Dealing with the Competing Foreign Forces*

Despite Mauritius's small size, several foreign forces are competing for its attention. The island's colonial past has created important cultural, diplomatic, economic, and linguistic ties, especially with France, the United Kingdom, and India.

China's growing presence in Mauritius and discussions reported here with local media personnel offer several important takeaways. Firstly, China is investing massively in the country's information landscape at a time when Western media agencies are either withdrawing or significantly downsizing. Chinese tech giants such as Huawei have also entered Mauritius's communication and digital landscape. Secondly, recognition of Chinese news as a credible source has not yet been achieved, with Western media remaining dominant. Lastly, reciprocity in media coverage among partners will be key for the success of China's influence in Mauritius (and in other African countries). China has previously berated the West for its biased portrayal of Africa. However, will Chinese media be willing not only to "tell China's story well" but also to tell Africa's? ◈