China's Sharp Power in Africa

A Handbook for Building National Resilience

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Introduction

In January 2021, in partnership with the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, the Hoover Institution launched a program of study on China's sharp power in Africa. Over several months, a vibrant learning community of nearly thirty civil society leaders from twenty-four sub-Saharan countries and a roster of subject matter experts from around the globe met weekly to discuss the political, economic, technological, and human rights dimensions of China's engagements with Africa. The African participants then developed local knowledge about these topics through field research in their respective countries. In January 2022, the Hoover Institution published a selection of their research in a series of four reports.

This handbook shares our program's broader findings with the public. It aims to raise awareness of how China is exercising sharp power in sub-Saharan Africa and to encourage governments and civil society across the region to unite in a posture of vigilance. Sharp power differs from both the "hard" military power or economic coercion associated with war and conquest and the soft power that wins friends and influences societies transparently through the diffusion of ideas, symbols, values, and cultural achievements.[1] It involves norms and practices that burrow deeply and deceptively into the soft tissues of democracies to subvert and sway them through methods that are, in the now paradigmatic words of former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, "covert, coercive, or corrupting." Sharp power can take many forms, from interference in local media and elections to the cultivation of surrogates who, from foreign patrons, import censorship, unsustainable debt, and surveillance technologies without public accountability. The core concern is that sharp power interferes in, compromises, and degrades the integrity of democratic institutions, economies, and information flows and facilitates their exploitation or capture by illiberal actors.

In sections on debt, natural resources, infrastructure, trade, technology, media freedom, elite capture, and corporate responsibility, this handbook documents the unequal and asymmetric character of China's relationship with Africa and how it is empowering illiberal forces on the continent, mortgaging Africa's future and making the world more congenial for autocracy. The handbook closes with a set of recommendations to assist Africans not just to face down assertions of sharp power locally but also to join with democratic societies everywhere to enhance governance, equity, and freedom.

Background

The development of security, the rule of law, and economic prosperity in sub-Saharan Africa has come under renewed pressure in recent years. In addition to the continent's well-documented infrastructure and employment gaps, the effects of climate change, democratic backsliding, and the erosion of civil liberties pose unique challenges for communities and civil society. At the same time, the promise of greater infrastructural investment, market opportunities, fiscal revenues through natural resource royalties, and employment of local workers by foreign parties is undeniably attractive.

Industrialization remains an elusive route to ending poverty across sub-Saharan Africa. The African Development Bank estimates that an annual $68–108 billion financing gap underpins the absence and poor quality of infrastructure in the region.[2] This gap is matched by a lack of salaried employment opportunities for a booming population. By 2050, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double from its current size of 1.2 billion.[3] By that time, a quarter of the global population will be in sub-Saharan Africa. This growing population requires a greater number of employment opportunities, and at a better quality. But economic growth, particularly through natural resource extraction, has not kept pace with the demand for work. As the International Labour Organization notes, every $1 million of foreign direct investment (FDI) results in 0.6 jobs in the extractive sector, 2.75 jobs in the manufacturing sector, or 61 jobs for greenfield FDI in the customer contact sector.[4] Following a significant improvement in access to education in recent decades, there is a need for a greater number of high-quality jobs, such as industrialized agriculture over subsistence farming.[5]

In addition to these existing and enduring challenges, security, governance, and development have each been disrupted by the more recent challenges of climate change and the erosion of the rule of law and civil liberties. According to the World Meteorological Organization, climate change is driving a noticeable trend of rising sea levels, retreating glaciers, and shifting rain patterns across the African continent.[6] In East Africa, for example, Haile et al. predict that changing rain patterns will intensify droughts in drought-prone areas, while intensifying rainfall in rain-prone regions.[7] Additionally, McGuirk and Nunn attribute a sizeable portion of conflict events in Africa to shifting drought patterns and the resulting competition over agricultural territory.[8] Collectively, these patterns result in increasing population displacement and food insecurity, imposing a cost of $30–50 billion per annum over the next decade to mitigate the effects of climate change.[9]

Representative governance and accountability have also suffered recent setbacks on the continent. In the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the so-called "third wave" of democracy reached sub-Saharan Africa. While the adoption of liberal democracy was not ubiquitous, closed autocracies were gradually replaced with decidedly more democratic regimes.[10] Despite this shift, over the past year military coups have toppled governments in Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, Mali, and Guinea.[11] Meanwhile, failed coups occurred in Guinea-Bissau and the Central African Republic.

Even without the installation of military juntas, civil society and the exercise of civil liberties have come under pressure from the manipulation, censorship, and shutdown of social media and online communication. For instance, beginning in March 2018, the government of Chad banned social media for over a year, and in Eswatini the government imposed an internet blackout due to civilian protests.[12] The erosion of civil liberties and the entrenchment of unelected governments bodes poorly for both the rule of law and civil society's ability to effect policy change in pursuit of economic development, physical safety, and environmental protection.

In light of these challenges, and their individual and collective detriment to security and prosperity, African governments and communities have welcomed renewed international interest in bi- and multilateral economic and political engagement. This engagement has most prominently taken the form of international summits, where topics of infrastructure investment, trade facilitation, aid, and physical security are often on the agenda. Since 2000, the European Union has held six summits with the African Union, India has held three with select African leaders, Turkey has held three with select African leaders, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has held eight with wide participation from across the continent.

Indicative of its commitment to regular summitry, the PRC has significantly developed its political and economic ties with the countries of sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades. In 2009, the PRC became Africa's single largest trading partner and, in January 2021, the PRC's first free trade agreement (FTA) with an African country—Mauritius—came into effect. The PRC's economic influence is also concentrated in key sectors. Approximately 70 percent of the world's cobalt supply, a necessary input for renewable energy batteries and electric cars, is mined in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).[13] Fifteen of the country's nineteen cobalt mines are owned or financed by entities based in the PRC.[14]

The PRC's approach to bilateral relations with African counterparts contrasts starkly against that of the countries of North America and Europe. While the latter have traditionally given nontrivial concern to the integrity of the rule of law and the protection of human rights, the PRC professes a policy of noninterference or nonintervention in the domestic affairs of partner countries. A prominent exception to this is the campaign for international recognition of Beijing's "One China" policy. As a testament to the success of this campaign, Eswatini is now the sole African country to retain diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan).[15] Another exception is the assistance that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gives directly to African ruling parties with strong ties to China at election time, which distorts the fairness of local democratic processes.[16] While the PRC's claim to ostensible noninterference differentiates it from Africa's other major trading partners, its expansion of military facilities follows the pattern established by the United States, France, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. In 2017, the first People's Liberation Army (PLA) facility in Africa was opened in Djibouti. US intelligence reports suggest that the PLA is seeking to establish a similar base on the west coast of Africa in Equatorial Guinea.[17]

Debt

Among Africa's development partners, China is unique. Its overseas development finance is built on the pursuit of profit and upon a mountain of debt. During the first four years of its Belt and Road Initiative (2013–2017), China issued thirty-one times more loans than grants.[18] While Western nations devote more than half of their assistance to Africa to social welfare and humanitarian needs, China prefers infrastructure. From 2007 to 2020, China's development finance institutions provided 2.5 times more finance for infrastructure than did the development finance institutions of all other nations combined.[19] Of the approximately $153 billion China officially lent to African governments and state-owned enterprises from 2000 to 2019, two-thirds went to just three sectors: transport, power, and mining.[20] A parade of large, expensive projects designed, managed, and often executed by conglomerates and workers from China followed.

China's lending practices differ significantly from those of other major economies. First, while Western nations channel much of their development finance through multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, China treats lending as an instrument of national power and prestige. Its loans buy influence, secure access to strategic commodities and port facilities, develop new markets for goods and services from China, and win political support for China's policy priorities, especially around human rights, internet governance, and media freedom and censorship. Studies of voting patterns in the United Nations indicate that between 2001 and 2018, political alignment between China and Africa increased by 78 percent. Between 2008 and 2012, every $1 billion invested by China in Africa was correlated with an approximately 17 percent increase in average political alignment.[21] China's state media amplifies this convergence and the praise that African heads of state lavish on the country, its accomplishments, and the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Second, because China's loans put the logic of geopolitics ahead of economics, the money flows easily and quickly, which makes lending from China attractive to African governments. Unencumbered by the rigorous studies of economic feasibility and environmental and social impact that Western lenders typically require, China funds ventures that are more likely to cause harm to local communities, prove unsustainable, and never generate sufficient revenue to offset their costs, ultimately destroying more wealth than they create. Third, mutual secrecy cloaks many of the loans in darkness.

China has not joined the Paris Club of international lenders and does not follow Paris Club conventions on data sharing, disclosure, and transparency. It prefers bilateral deals and reveals very little about them. China's lending contracts bind debtor governments to this secrecy with confidentiality clauses that hamper oversight by local parliaments, civil society, and other accountability mechanisms, and breed extraordinary corruption, cronyism, and institutional decay. In Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and Nigeria, this secrecy has fueled controversies about contempt for constitutional process and the potential surrender of sovereign rights and assets to China, such as the port at Mombasa or the Entebbe International Airport.[22]

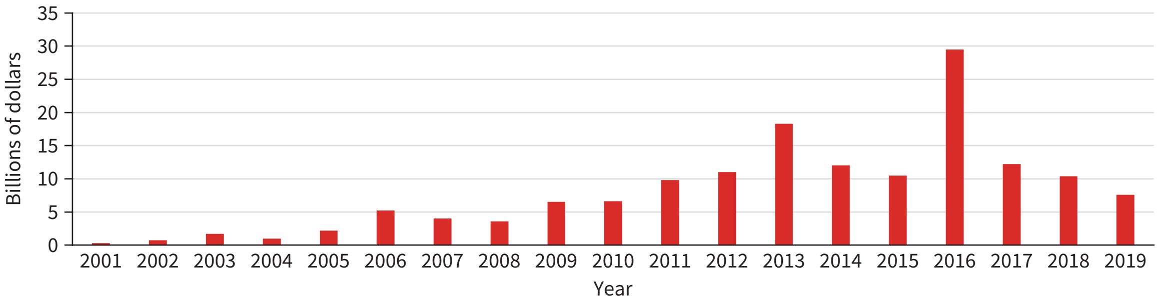
By one estimate, $200 billion in loans, or around half of the public debt owed to China, is hidden. Taking these loans into account catapults the value of China's loan book ahead of all other official lenders combined.[23] If one adds in nonsovereign borrowers, such as state-owned banks, enterprises, joint ventures, and the private sector, the value of underreported debt surges to around $385 billion.[24] The damage to African countries is substantial. For instance, in 2020, Zambia's failure to keep up with its debt payments to China precipitated a sovereign default crisis. The following year, President Hichilema revealed that Zambia owed lenders from China twice as much as the preceding Lungu administration had acknowledged.

Fourth, unlike other official lenders, China's loans are often collateralized. Two methods dominate: borrowers deposit in Chinese financial institutions large surety sums that are subject to forfeiture, or they secure the loans by promising to deposit into escrow accounts the future proceeds from commodity exports or projects such as airports and railways.[25] Angola, for example, has borrowed heavily from China against its future oil revenue, and Ghana and Guinea have each pledged to pay for billions of dollars in infrastructure loans with long-term concessions of the strategic mineral bauxite. Volatility in commodity prices can make these arrangements difficult to manage.

Fifth, China's loans typically have shorter repayment periods than those from other official lenders, and they bear significantly higher interest, sometimes at rates comparable to the private bond or loan markets.[26] From 2000 to 2017, 81 percent of China's overseas development financing consisted of semiconcessional or nonconcessional loans, triple the share of the United States, and seven to eight times that of France and the United Kingdom, respectively.[27]

Sixth, China's lending agreements cause complications when borrowers experience debt distress because they often require that the contracted loans be excluded from Paris Club restructuring arrangements. The recent experience of Zambia proves that Paris Club members may hesitate to grant debt relief out of concern that creditors from China would simply move to the front of the line and get paid first. Finally, China seeks to establish its court system as a global center of commercial dispute resolution, and loan contracts are

Figure 1. China's loans to African governments and state-owned enterprises, 2001–2019



Source: *Chinese Loans to Africa Database*, China Africa Research Initiative and Boston University Global Development Policy Center, March 19, 2021, https://chinaafricaloandata.bu.edu.

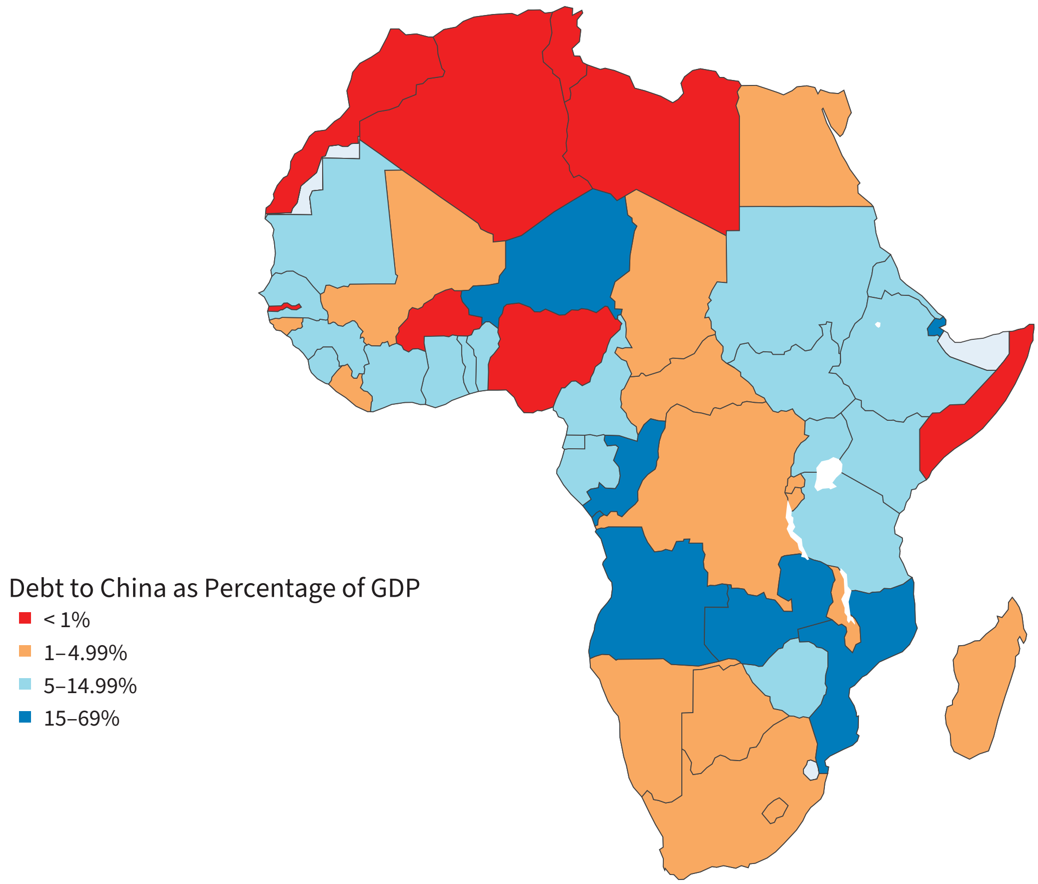
beginning to reflect that in their choice of law and venue provisions. While China's judicial system is capable of meeting high standards, documented shortcomings raise concerns about judicial independence, local protectionism, and due process, and borrowers may be at a disadvantage operating in an unfamiliar language and jurisdiction.

The scale of China's lending invites misperceptions. Although China boasts gleaming modern cities and more billionaires than any other country, the vast size of its population and extreme income inequality mean that its per capita GDP is actually comparable to that of Botswana and Equatorial Guinea.[28] Despite progress in reducing poverty, more than six hundred million predominantly rural Chinese live on less than $140 per month in disposable income.[29] From a certain point of view, China's loans to Africa circulate assets among elites in both places while their general populations shoulder the costs.

China's lending to Africa peaked in 2016 at $29.5 billion for the year and has fallen sharply since (figure 1). While this lending has underwritten a burst of economic activity, it has also left many nations in financial straits. According to the International Monetary Fund, more than twenty African countries are currently in or at risk of debt distress. Four of them stand out for the extent of their indebtedness to China expressed as a share of GDP: Djibouti (68.5 percent), the Republic of the Congo (48.7 percent), Niger (25.9 percent), and Zambia (24.7 percent).[30]

The secrecy around lending from China may be masking much higher levels of debt distress than is generally known. One study documents 102 cancellations or reschedulings of Chinese debt across Africa between 2001 and 2019, a figure that far exceeds the bellwether number recorded by international credit agencies for private foreign bondholders and banks. The countries with the highest incidence of such distress include those with the highest shares of GDP owed to China: Angola, Cameroon, Mozambique, Sudan, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (figure 2).[31] China's lenders favor quiet restructuring over cancellation, which merely defers a reckoning with the underlying difficulties.

Figure 2. Debt to China as percentage of GDP in African nations



Source: Data from Sebastian Horn, Carmen M. Reinhart, and Christoph Trebesch, "China's Overseas Lending—Loan-Level Dataset and Country Debt Stock Estimates," Mendeley Data, version 1, September 10, 2021, http://doi.org/10.17632/4mm6kdj4xg.1.

The era of easy money from China is over.[32] Stung by underperforming investments, implementation challenges, and the scale of debt distress, anecdotal evidence indicates that lenders from China are now driving harder bargains and conducting stricter due diligence on prospective projects. At the 2021 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Xi Jinping announced investment pledges to Africa of just $40 billion, down from the $60 billion promised in 2018. Notably, Xi's speech avoided the word "infrastructure" altogether.[33] Instead, he emphasized aid to small and medium enterprises, trade financing, and equity-based investment. This tracks with China's efforts to rebalance its domestic economy from an infrastructure-led growth model, which has saddled the country with a glut of unproductive assets, toward "high quality" growth in advanced industries, consumption, and services. With the cost of production rising in China, the hope is that financing industrialization in Africa and, in turn, importing from it light manufactured and agricultural products, will generate African employment and wealth, which will create new markets for goods and services from China higher up the value chain.

However, for some debtor countries, the hangover from the borrowing of the past decade and its legacy projects will constrain these opportunities and complicate relations with China for years to come. Their debts, typically denominated in dollars, will grow only more burdensome as global interest rates recover from historic lows.

Natural Resources

In theory, natural resource wealth constitutes a lucrative opportunity for African nations to further their economic development. A high demand for raw inputs in China, coupled with an abundance of resources in Africa—such as minerals, fossil fuels, or livestock—should allow African entrepreneurs, communities, and governments to strike mutually beneficial agreements with counterparts from China. In turn, the profits and fiscal revenues of these endeavors could be domestically reinvested by local actors to advance their own developmental objectives. In practice, however, companies from China capitalize on gaps in administrative capacity and fault lines in local oversight to implicitly renegotiate these agreements through regulatory noncompliance, disregard for contractual terms, or repeated criminal violations. These irregularities impose tangible costs on host communities across Africa.

A lamentable example of weak oversight is evident within the South Sudanese oil industry.[34] With the legacy of decades-old contracts signed before South Sudan's independence in 2011, state-owned oil companies from China have long enjoyed privileged access to the nation's oil resources. While the fiscal revenues from the oil industry have provided a crucial source of income for the South Sudanese government, poor waste management and oil spills have produced industrial pollution in host communities. Consequently, adverse health effects, such as birth deformities, are apparent.[35]

Despite efforts to enforce environmental protections, companies from China have shown little willingness to engage with South Sudanese authorities on this issue. The South Sudan Petroleum Act of 2012 mandates both social and environmental impact assessments prior to exploration drilling. Despite not having met these requirements, international oil companies continue to operate within the country.

Moreover, efforts to hold international oil companies to account have been met with political retaliation. South Sudan has long sought to meet the internationally recognized best practice standards of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). To reach that goal, the government of South Sudan pursued transparency and accountability efforts, particularly around human resource policies and environmental audits of the oil industry. Shortly thereafter, when a United Nations arms embargo on South Sudan was set to expire in 2021, China broke with its precedent of abstaining and voted in favor of renewing the embargo. The move sent a clear message to the government of South Sudan that increased transparency and accountability in the oil industry would come at a political cost.

Another concerning example can be seen in the distant-water fishing industry in the Gulf of Guinea. Much like the oil deposits of South Sudan, the abundance of natural resources within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo constitute a valuable economic asset in global high demand. On paper, each of these countries possesses a regulatory regime that balances the profitable exploitation of marine resources, the interests of local artisanal fishing communities, and the state's need for fiscal revenues. Yet, local law enforcement is no match for China's distant-water fishing fleet, which is by far the largest on earth.[36] This fleet facilitates the interconnection of global markets and provides global access to West African resources. However, its sheer scale allows unscrupulous practitioners of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing to act with impunity.

With the benefit of generous fuel subsidies and the financial resources to repeatedly violate local regulations and safeguards, Chinese-owned or -operated distant-water fishing vessels devastate local fishing communities and their livelihoods. The poor quality of local vessels compared to rivals from China and high trade barriers have hindered local fishing enterprises. Additionally, demands by law enforcement for side payments or confiscation of engines disproportionately impact African vessels.

Despite the prevalence of predatory practices, other African countries have drawn strength from the rule of law in the natural resource industry. As Africa's second largest gold producer, Ghana has long sought to control and regulate galamsey, small-scale artisanal mining that has resulted in unregulated and pervasive environmental degradation. In 2013, President John Mahama established an inter-agency task force to curb the practice.[37] Since then, dozens of PRC nationals have been arrested for their participation in the illicit industry.[38] After civil society leaders publicly questioned whether convicted PRC nationals might evade punishment through deportation, in 2021 Ghana's attorney general Godfred Dame vowed that convicted PRC nationals would face local prison time like their citizen peers.[39]

A similar situation has unfolded in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In August 2021, six mining firms from China were ordered to cease operations in the province after they reportedly failed to register with the appropriate local authorities. In a parliamentary report leaked to the press in the subsequent months, it was alleged that foreign-owned illegal gold mines had heavily polluted local waterways and agricultural land.[40] Additionally, few of these firms had contracted with local host communities and when contracts were made, they were subsequently disregarded. In response, the report called for reparations.

In contrast to the political retaliation that the government of South Sudan endured, the Democratic Republic of the Congo gained the support of the PRC government in its push to cease illegal Chinese mining.[41] This could be attributed to the greater risks to China's interests embodied in Congolese president Felix Tshisekedi's vow to reassess existing so-called "infrastructure-for-minerals" agreements with foreign companies. At stake in the review is a $6 billion agreement with investors from China that was signed by Tshisekedi's predecessor.[42] A draft report by the EITI that was leaked to the press in October 2021 labelled the existing deal as "unconscionable" after a 2017 reform slowed the payment of infrastructure finance to the Congolese government.[43] By demonstrating decreasing tolerance for illegal mining by foreign actors, the government of the DRC has increasingly reflected the concerns of civil society and host communities.

The natural resource industry has a long history of misconduct, abuse, and exploitation on the African continent. The recent experience of various African countries, such as South Sudan and the littoral states of the Gulf of Guinea, paints a foreboding picture for the intersection of the rule of law and Chinese natural resource extraction. African nations and their public agencies have entered into agreements with firms from China, enacted regulations for tax and royalty collections, and often afforded host communities formal protection and benefits from nearby developments. Yet, weak administrative capacity and enforcement can frustrate these measures, while stronger implementation can provoke political retribution from China. The experiences of countries such as Ghana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo suggest a path forward: vigilance from civil society and local officials, supported by local institutions and global partners, can advance the interests of host communities and the integrity of existing regulatory frameworks.

Infrastructure

In recent decades, China's government, state-owned banks and enterprises, and companies have played a large and increasing role in the development of infrastructure on the African continent. The range of projects has been vast, including gifting public buildings to African governments and multilateral organizations. In addition to the headquarters of the African Union and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the PRC has built or renovated 186 government buildings in 40 African countries, including 24 presidential or prime ministerial residences, 26 parliaments, 32 military and police installations, and 19 ministries of foreign affairs.[44]

Greater and improved physical infrastructure could potentially offer many African communities vast, tangible benefits. Improving access to transport, energy, and water can facilitate economic and social development, particularly as thirty countries in sub-Saharan Africa remain challenged by low levels of development.[45]

In recent years, foreign sources of infrastructure finance have outpaced local sources in Africa, and China's infrastructure lending, project management, and construction could assist African communities and countries seeking to develop their economies.[46] Aschauer, for example, argues that public infrastructure facilitates private investment by increasing the rate of return of private capital.[47] Similarly, Limão and Venables attribute the high cost of conducting trade in Africa to poor infrastructure.[48] By facilitating the creation of "anchor" projects, such as roads and railways, an economic multiplier effect could follow as greater trade and commercial activity become feasible at a lower cost.

However, the promise of infrastructure-supported economic growth and development is tempered by corruption, diminishing opportunities for domestic firms, and prohibitively expensive projects. As with natural resource industries, robust regulation to protect host communities, workers, fiscal viability, and economic competition are rendered ineffective by predatory and unscrupulous practices. The recent histories of various infrastructural projects affiliated with actors from China across the continent illustrate these pitfalls.

The Zambian construction industry, and its challenges with corruption, provide a well-documented example of the destructive practices of select construction firms from China. Chinese-owned construction firms have made significant inroads in the Zambian market with the benefit of easy access to creditors from China.[49] While these companies are initially contracted for specific infrastructural projects, they remain in the country after project completion and retain their access to preferential credit, which, in some cases, has allowed them to undercut local firms by 50 percent.

This advantage, coupled with questionable practices and opaque relationships with local politicians, has given rise to a culture of noncompetitive contracts and predatory and domineering practices that rob local industries of the immediate benefits and opportunities that infrastructural development is intended to provide. Moreover, by exacerbating corruption and nontransparency, which hinders economic growth, these practices introduce unforeseen costs that redefine and diminish the benefits of infrastructure development.

Whether through legitimate or illegitimate means, the foreign domination of domestic industries constitutes a lost opportunity for private African firms to benefit from better infrastructure. While this issue is evident within Zambia, the spread of PRC construction firms across the continent begs the question of whether similar issues are also at play in other contexts; in 2017, half of engineering, procurement, and construction contracts on the continent were won by firms from China.[50]

An additional challenge of foreign-supported infrastructure is the need to match the scale of the project with a realistic future utility and revenue stream. Expensive projects, which subsequently demand commensurably large revenue, provide lucrative opportunities for developers, but risk saddling local communities with "white elephants" and increased debt. The experience of the Nigerian federal government's railway projects in recent years illustrates both beneficial and questionable examples. In July 2016, President Muhammadu Buhari inaugurated the Abuja-Kaduna standard gauge railway line, which provides an alternative to the historically bandit-ridden highway linking the two cities. At a cost of

$876 million, the project was constructed by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. Despite periodic breakdowns, and a postpandemic fare hike, the line remains supremely popular for its security and efficiency.

The success of the Abuja-Kaduna railway has not been replicated in the rail project linking Lagos to Ibadan in Nigeria's south. Inaugurated in late 2020, the project sought to alleviate the heavy road congestion between the two cities and was similarly constructed by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation.[51] However, upon the commencement of passenger services, the cheapest rail fare was approximately double the cost of the fare by road. With a lone passenger taking the inaugural voyage despite a capacity of several hundred, the project and its addition to Nigeria's debt burden were panned by unions and civil society leaders.[52] While the Lagos-Ibadan rail link has gradually attracted a greater number of passengers, it remains prohibitively expensive for many commuters and suboptimal for the needs of the local community.

Despite these pitfalls, civil society and government officials in various African countries have made robust efforts to scrutinize both the costs and benefits of China-led infrastructure projects. In June 2020, for example, Kenya's court of appeals ruled that the contract for the construction of the standard gauge railway between Mombasa and Nairobi was awarded illegally.[53] The $3.2 billion project received around 85 percent of its financing from the Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank), and a condition of the loan was that only firms from China could construct or operate the railway. Civil society activists, supported by the Law Society of Kenya, successfully argued before the court that the Eximbank's terms violated Kenya's competitive procurement laws.[54] While the ruling came after the completion of the railway, it nonetheless constitutes an achievement for the rule of law and a forewarning of the need for competitive contracting in future infrastructure projects in Kenya.

Another example is evident in the Bagamoyo port and special economic zone project in Tanzania. In 2013, then president Jakaya Kikwete approved the $10 billion project with China Merchants Holdings (International) and the Omani State General Reserve Fund.[55] However, in 2019, Tanzania's subsequent president John Magufuli decried the existing agreement with China Merchants as exploitative. Contention was raised over the ninety-nine-year lease, generous tax holidays, the company's ability to operate other businesses in the port without Tanzanian approval, discounted access to electricity and water, and an agreement to refrain from establishing a rival port along the Tanzanian coast.[56] In mid-2021, Magufuli's successor, President Samia Suluhu Hassan, vowed to revive the project, and official statements from PRC leader Xi Jinping struck a more conciliatory tone on the concerns raised by Magufuli.[57]

Greater and better-quality infrastructure provides a potential route to further economic and social development. To end poverty on the continent, the African Development Bank estimates that an annual $68–108 billion infrastructure investment gap needs to be filled.[58] Foreign lending, including from Chinese or Chinese-affiliated organizations, can help to fill the gap. However, predatory and unscrupulous practices impose additional costs on recipient economies and societies, thereby diminishing the benefit of infrastructural development. While the Zambian construction industry and select Nigerian railway projects illustrate some of these costs and shortcomings, recent examples in Kenya and Tanzania demonstrate that civil society, the judiciary, and recipient governments have the power to question how infrastructure is developed, under what terms, at what cost, and for whom it ultimately benefits. Moreover, at a time when foreign-supported infrastructure projects are already at a variety of stages of development, these examples show that these questions can be asked before, during, and after project completion.

Trade

As the globe's second largest economy and home to over a billion people, the PRC is a valuable trading partner for most countries. The nations of sub-Saharan Africa are no exception; in recent years, trade between China and Africa has grown significantly. However, this relationship is increasingly entrenched in a pattern where African natural resources are exported, while China's manufactured goods are imported. This dynamic bars African communities from following China's own model of export-oriented industrialization and growth. Nonetheless, recent trade innovations, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), demonstrate that civil society and African governments can lead efforts to alter the status quo. This increasing dynamism, coupled with the PRC's renewed commitment to trade with Africa, presents the opportunity for civil society to question how this relationship can be made more equitable and appropriate for Africa's varying levels of economic development.

China's economic growth in recent years has been coupled with increasing trade relations with African counterparts. The PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs periodically reiterates that, since 2009, China has been the continent's single largest trade partner.[59] However, this trade has neither been equal in direction nor substance. Prepandemic, in 2019, the continent's collective trade deficit with the PRC stood at $17.7 billion.[60] In 2020, this deficit ballooned to $41.5 billion.[61] Moreover, African exports to China are predominantly raw materials, petroleum, or agricultural produce, while exports from China are dominated by manufactured consumer and industrial products.[62]

A robust trade in natural resources provides African economies with welcome capital; however, it begs the question of whether heavy reliance on basic exports is precluding opportunities to trade in higher-value, manufactured products. While the export of manufactured goods has been integral to China's own development strategy, successful poverty reduction in the PRC, resulting in higher wages in manufacturing industries, has allowed other low-wage manufacturers to capture higher-value segments of the global production chain. Lower-wage producers such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, for example, have managed to secure an increasing share of global textile manufacturing.[63]

Authors such as Altenburg et al. estimate that, despite advances in manufacturing automation, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa have a ten- to fifteen-year window within which to capture a share of the global light manufacturing industry through lower domestic wages.[64] Moreover, export-oriented African growth is not limited to trade relations with East Asia. African late industrializers have a geographic advantage in select global markets. For example, the continent's closer proximity to high-income countries in Europe and the Persian Gulf than that of potential Asian rivals provides the benefit of shorter transportation times.

Efforts to shift Africa's trade relations toward a more equitable balance that offers greater developmental benefits may find opportunity in recent, African-led trade innovations. After decades of planning, in January 2021 AfCFTA came into force. With at least forty-one ratifying parties, the agreement seeks to cut tariffs on 90 percent of goods.[65] While many African countries have historically maintained stronger trade relations with countries outside the continent, AfCFTA provides the opportunity to deepen trade with neighboring states—including the trade of manufactured and nonresource goods.

Similarly, recent developments in the PRC's approach to trade with African partners suggest that historic trade barriers hindering the export of African manufactured goods are not impenetrable. For example, in January 2021, the first free trade agreement (FTA) between an African nation—Mauritius—and the PRC came into effect.[66] Similarly, observers noted that the most recent FOCAC summit in Dakar resulted in fewer and smaller Chinese commitments to African infrastructure, development, and disease prevention.[67] However, trade promotion was a notable exception, with China's financial commitment to trade finance increased from \$5 billion in 2018 to \$10 billion. Moreover, within his virtual remarks at the summit, China's leader Xi Jinping set a target to increase total imports from Africa to \$300 billion in the subsequent three years.[68] It was also announced that China would grant tariff-free treatment to 98 percent of goods originating from the thirty-three African nations that are formally classed as least-developed countries (LDCs).[69]

While recent PRC tariff exemptions provide increased opportunities to Africa's least-developed economies, this does little to support the continent's existing manufacturing hubs in Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana. Despite efforts to further integrate the continent's trade, more than half of Africa's economy remains under heavy tariffs for manufactured goods exported to the PRC.[70] An alternative model, which provides greater tariff-free treatment for manufactured goods across the African continent, is the United States' African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) scheme.[71] While the scheme is conditional on progression toward the rule of law and a market-based economy by recipient countries, AGOA removes tariffs on the majority of manufactured goods, agricultural products, and natural resources for eligible developing, sub-Saharan African countries. For example, both LDCs as well as countries that do not enjoy tariff-free treatment under the PRC scheme have significantly increased their export of manufactured apparel to the United States through AGOA, such as Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.[72] Congruent with this assessment is recent research by Sun and Omoruyi, who find that zero-tariff treatment supports export diversification and manufacturing exports.[73] Building upon the recent reforms to Africa's trade relationships—both among African countries and with the PRC—a more equitable balance may allow for further tariff-free treatment for a greater number of manufactured products from a greater number of African countries.

Trade relations with China provide African countries with access to the world's second largest economy and over a billion potential consumers. Despite an overall growing value, this trade has been increasingly dominated by the import of finished, manufactured consumer and industrial goods, and the export of African food, mineral, and energy resources. While this trade provides a source of capital for African economies, it foregoes the opportunity for manufacturing-led development along the trajectory the PRC charted in earlier decades. Consequently, African civil society organizations and onlookers have noted how lower PRC tariffs on African manufactured goods would support local development.[74] Recent academic research has similarly drawn attention to this potential, and the history of preferential trade programs such as AGOA illustrate this in practice. Monumental African-led trade innovations and reforms, such as AfCFTA, point to the current, dynamic moment in which African civil society can successfully seek to strike a more equitable trade relationship with external partners, including, but not limited to, China.

Technology

China offers Africa leading-edge technologies, in many instances paid for by loans or at price points that competitors cannot beat. A 2021 survey by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute cataloged 480 engagements across 51 African countries in areas such as manufacturing, fiber optics networks, research labs, smart city projects, mobile payments, distance learning, and e-commerce.[75] In Africa, China supplies hardware, software, and services to consumers, back-end providers, and every point in between. Its vendors dominate the market for mobile handsets and wireless 5G infrastructure. Its investors are plowing venture capital into local start-ups, and its universities and firms are training professionals to work in them. Under the banner of the Digital Silk Road, China is also promoting data centers, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and public health.

But along with its wares, China exports a model of techno-authoritarianism that is finding willing partners across Africa.[76] Safe city projects are a prime example. Huawei is installing vast networks of remote cameras in public spaces, and marketing to local authorities cloud storage, big data analysis, facial and license-plate recognition, social media monitoring, and other surveillance capabilities.[77] Adopted in the name of public safety, these technologies pose serious risks to free expression, free association, privacy, and human rights, especially in nations where due process and independent oversight from legislatures, courts, and civil society are weak.

Uganda offers a cautionary example. In 2018, President Yoweri Museveni launched the first phase of a national network of more than five thousand remote cameras supplied by Huawei. Financed mostly by a loan from Standard Chartered Bank, the project cost at least $126 million, more than the budgets of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology and National Guidance combined.[78] Observers raised concerns about the absence of a clear legal framework governing usage of the cameras. These concerns were soon realized when the government used the cameras to monitor political rallies and to identify and detain hundreds protesting the arrest of opposition presidential candidate Bobi Wine, whose communications had reportedly been surveilled with the assistance of Huawei engineers.[79] To this day, Ugandan authorities tout the camera network as a crime fighting measure. But rigorous international studies indicate that such camera schemes are not broadly effective, and any benefits must be weighed against the burden of ongoing staffing and maintenance expenses, the costs to civil liberties, and the impact that comparable levels of investment in alternative crime intervention strategies might have achieved.[80]

Even the region's democracies are finding China's offers difficult to resist. In 2015, Huawei approached the government of Mauritius with an unsolicited bid for a safe city project. The project grew to four thousand cameras at an estimated cost of $455 million financed by a loan from China Eximbank. The construction of this network comes at a time when the V-Dem Institute's annual report on democracy lists Mauritius among the fastest autocratizing nations in the world, and the faith of Mauritian citizens in the health of their democracy is faltering.[81] The prime minister invoked national security powers to select Mauritius Telecom as the local operator of the project without competitive bidding, and the Mauritius police cited contractual confidentiality clauses to rebuff parliamentary scrutiny of the terms of the loan and the project's provisions for privacy and data governance.[82] Serious unanswered questions persist about transparency, corruption, value for money, who stands to benefit, and how the cameras will be used. Was this project the right choice for the people of Mauritius? Or did Huawei's proposal and the $455 million loan from China Eximbank distort the government's priorities and short-circuit regular mechanisms for democratic deliberation and accountability? Similar questions could be asked of Huawei's safe city agreements in Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia.

China is having a corrosive impact on internet freedom in Africa. While vendors from a variety of countries sell censorship and surveillance tools, China occupies a privileged position because African telecommunications networks rely heavily on hardware from

Table 1. African internet shutdowns in 2021

Country	*Type*	*Duration (hrs.)*	*Users affected*	*Peaceful protest*	*Free and fair elections*	*Press freedom*
Nigeria	Social media	5,040	104.4M	—	—	—
Ethiopia	Internet	8,864	21.3M	X	—	X
Sudan	Internet	777	13.2M	X	—	X
Uganda	Internet	692	10.6M	X	X	—
Burkina Faso	Internet	192	10.9M	X	—	—
Eswatini	Internet	218	0.5M	X	—	—
Congo (Rep.)	Internet	72	1.5M	—	X	—
Zambia	Social media	48	2.6M	—	X	—
Chad	Internet	29	1.1M	X	X	—
Senegal	Social media	7	4.9M	X	X	—
South Sudan	Internet	24	0.9M	X	—	—

Source: *Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns 2021 Report*, Top10VPN, January 3, 2022, https://www.top10vpn.com/research/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/2021/?slug=2021.

China, and personnel from China are embedded in African providers, regulators, and enforcement agencies, where they offer support services and training. This presents rich opportunities for espionage, evident in reports that servers configured by engineers from China allegedly sent vast quantities of data from the African Union headquarters to Shanghai every night for five years.[83] But the problems also directly touch individual users and affect the climate for democratic practice.

Having normalized an illiberal model of cyberspace that uses information control to manufacture consensus, silence dissent, and enforce political and social stability, China is now helping others to emulate that model. Dozens of officials from across Africa have traveled to China for multiweek seminars on monitoring and shaping public opinion in cyberspace.[84] Following this knowledge transfer, nations such as Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe have introduced or amended legislation that mimics provisions in Chinese law regarding censorship and content control.

For the time being, no African nation can match the technical sophistication of China's censorship apparatus, and the evidence of that lies in the resort to blunt internet shutdowns. African nations claimed more than half of the top twenty-one spots in the 2021 *Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns* report (table 1). These shutdowns were justified as measures for combatting misinformation, hate, and incitements to violence, but in most instances their timing coincided with popular protest movements or national elections.

However, technical capabilities are improving, and social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, are being singled out for targeted bans because of their capacity to mobilize people and spread information quickly. Speaking at a China-Tanzania New Media Roundtable in Dar es Salaam in 2017, Deputy Minister for Works, Transport and Communication Edwin Ngonyani noted that "our Chinese friends have managed to block such media in their country and replaced them with their homegrown sites that are safe, constructive and popular. We aren't there yet, but while we are still using these platforms we should guard against their misuse. . . . If a person sends an offensive SMS or an e-mail to anyone we should be capable of following them, make arrests and bring them to justice."[85]

Evidently, Zambia had already reached this milestone. In 2015, it signed a deal with Huawei worth $440 million financed mostly by China Eximbank. Huawei built mobile telecommunications towers around the country and a data center within Zicta, the national telecom regulator, where Huawei employees helped Zambian cybercrime investigators access the Facebook pages of opposition bloggers, track their cellphones, and make arrests.[86] Nigeria has also targeted social media. In 2019, while commenting on a bill that would have criminalized insulting the government online, First Lady Aisha Buhari reportedly said: "If China can control over 1.3 billion people on social media, I see no reason why Nigeria cannot attempt controlling only 180 million people."[87] Two years later, the Nigerian government singled out Twitter for a ban that lasted 222 days after the platform removed a controversial tweet by her husband, the president.

In 2021, Beijing adopted stiff regulations on data security and privacy. In response, technology firms from China may intensify their data collection activities in jurisdictions where regulations and enforcement are weaker. Their ventures in Africa generate immense quantities of data on the identities, associations, behaviors, financial condition, beliefs, health, and whereabouts of countless individuals, and this data becomes only more valuable as it becomes harder to collect elsewhere. Biometrics, such as facial recognition and genetic data, and the rise of digital currencies, are opening new fronts in the larger struggle over privacy and consent that must be settled transparently and democratically. Africa should seize this moment to break the curse of its abundant resources. Data is one of Africa's greatest endowments, and governments must assert sovereignty over it and ensure that they use it not to dominate or exploit their peoples but rather in partnership with and for the benefit of them.

Media Freedom

Media freedom in China has declined steadily in the decade since General Secretary Xi Jinping came to power.[88] China's media ecosystem is dominated by state-owned outlets that compete fiercely for audience but are always required to "maintain a high degree of consistency in aligning with the Party center in thought, politics, and action."[89] The goal is to create an abundance of rich, diverting content that is "constructive," promotes "positive energy," and "guides public opinion," euphemisms for supporting state interests, portraying China in a flattering light and inculcating "correct" ways of thinking about events. The Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department actively enforces these ground rules in part through its oversight of the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA), the compulsory union for professional journalists in the country. Generally speaking, journalists and editors self-police, assisted by a catalog of censored topics, opinions, and names that responds to the news cycle almost in real time, implemented through keyword filters, artificial intelligence tools, and an army of human reviewers. Nevertheless, 102 journalists were imprisoned in China in 2021, the highest number of any country in the world.[90]

China adapts these strategies abroad to shape the master narratives that determine how the world sees it.[91] In the name of "discourse power" and "telling China's story well," it has poured billions of dollars into foreign news markets at a time when Western news agencies have pulled back. This money supports reporting in dozens of languages, active social media presences, acquisitions of foreign outlets, and a rapid expansion of overseas bureaus.[92] Africa has been a special focus of that growth. For instance, Xinhua, China's state news agency, moved its Africa headquarters from Paris to Nairobi in 2006, and soon after China Radio International, *China Daily*, and China Global Television Network (CGTN) established regional hubs in the city, too. They employ Chinese and African journalists across the continent not only to produce content for markets in China and Africa but equally importantly to cultivate a web of quasi-official relationships with African news agencies, media unions, and media outlets.

The intersections between China's overseas information strategy and its foreign policy are evident in how China's media officials describe themselves in relation to their African counterparts. These officials use the same framing as China's diplomats, presenting themselves as sincere and equal partners with shared grievances about injustice at the hands of the West. They speak of raising Chinese and African voices together on the global stage, spreading one another's stories, and practicing journalism impartially and responsibly.[93] These talking points resonate in a region vexed by the persistent negativity of Western coverage about it, where popular commitment to media freedom is faltering, and where many governments disfavor critical or investigative styles of reporting.[94]

Professional journalists in Africa welcome China's courtship because it brings donations of equipment, opportunities to learn new skills, technical assistance in modernizing production and broadcast infrastructure, and coveted opportunities to travel for conferences and training programs. China also supports a network of African entrepreneurs who have built businesses propagating Chinese content through local platforms. For example, the Afri-China Media Centre (ACMC) in Lagos explains that its content partnership with Xinhua is motivated by a desire "to make sure that Nigeria through information, using the media, knows those examples China followed in its journey to the top of the world economy and technology advancement."[95] The ACMC's website showcases stories sourced directly from media in China that celebrate China's achievements and carry pro-CCP political messages.[96]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's government mobilized these disparate resources into a common messaging front. China's media outlets in Africa faithfully reflected the positions taken by their Foreign Ministry, with voluminous coverage devoted to China's delivery of medical supplies and vaccines. They juxtaposed China's domestic success at controlling the virus against the experiences of wealthier nations. China's diplomats blitzed African media with opinion articles and interviews, while social media bots traced to China amplified conspiracy theories and other disinformation.[97] The ACJA organized forums at which African media professionals appeared as grateful supplicants, such as a July 2020 session on "Solidarity against COVID-19 and China-Africa Community with a Shared Future" that included representatives from national media organizations in Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Tanzania. The Belt and Road News Network, an organization of 208 media organizations in 98 countries headquartered at the flagship news organ of the Chinese Communist Party, the *People's Daily*, also posted stories to its content pool for members to propagate, including "Members of Belt and Road News Network Hail China's Efficient Efforts in Fighting Epidemic."[98] By comparison, content flows from indigenous African news organizations into China were negligible, which exemplifies the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of China's relationship with Africa.

African journalists who work for China's state media describe attractive compensation and material working conditions and are proud of the high production value they can achieve. But they complain of lower status than their Chinese colleagues and of newsrooms divided by language, culture, and race. They also identify censorship as the biggest challenge to their performance.[99] Stories are filtered in Beijing, investigative reporting is discouraged, and African reporters have little autonomy to report on anticorruption issues, human rights, religion, ethnicity, and elections.[100] They must "tell the 'story of China,' the 'story of Africa' and the 'story of China-Africa friendship' to the global audience" on China's terms.[101] The compromises to journalistic integrity can be extreme. For instance, a young journalist from South Africa hosts a series of English-language video and radio travelogues for China Radio International on the delights of Xinjiang's culture, tourist destinations, and economy. Her upbeat program cuts a sharp contrast against Western reporting on the bleak human rights and political conditions in the region, which some governments have termed a genocide.[102]

China pursues these engagements because they affirm and legitimate its power, and African governments, media organizations, and journalists stand to benefit if they play their parts. But this also helps to explain why the soft power returns on China investments have been weak. China's news offerings in African markets are not connecting with audiences. Viewership numbers and authentic online engagement remain low considering the enormous sums and organizational efforts expended.

Preliminary data suggests that, while Africans admire China's economic and technological achievements, they see its news organs as less credible and appealing than alternatives such as CNN, and the COVID-19 pandemic deepened those assessments.[103]

However, the story does not end there. The political conditions for media freedom in some African countries are trending negative, and China may throw its weight onto the scales by lending support to illiberal forces, partnering with those in power who stand to benefit from curbing independent journalism, and modeling a polished alternative to it. If China cannot win the competition for hearts and minds fairly, it may exercise raw economic muscle to force rivals from the field. It is capturing audiences and curbing their access to alternative viewpoints through exclusive licensing deals on satellite and cable broadcast networks, such as StarTimes, and by offering its content streams and wire services to African media at prices that no private competitor can beat. Regulators and civil society stakeholders must be alert to the hidden costs of these offers and strive for fair competition and diversity in their media marketplaces. China is not a free society, and a diet heavy on its stories is not healthy for one.

Cultivation of African Elites

China's rapid ascent as a partner of choice for many African nations has been fueled not just by the scale of its investment and appetite for natural resources, but also by its generous cultivation of African elites and its appeal to values that they find meaningful, particularly equality, noninterference, sovereignty, and antihegemonism. In this outreach, PRC government and party bodies address different functions and constituencies but coordinate tightly to execute policy across a full spectrum of domains. They sponsor heavily choreographed trips that deliver a myopic view of life in the PRC by combining tours of prosperous and industrialized regions with training on facets of governance in China. They seek to sell China's achievements and a curated narrative of how these were attained.[104]

FOCAC has stimulated a wealth of this activity. For example, the PRC government has tasked universities and think tanks with developing close ties and ongoing dialogues with counterparts in Africa. Thousands of scholars and policy practitioners have participated in annual Africa-China Think Tank Forums on urgent issues such as vaccine cooperation, tourism development, digital cooperation, and improving health services and governance.[105] In 2019, China's government announced fifty thousand scholarships for African university students to study in China, and it developed special English-language programs in public administration and national development at schools such as Peking University for those with aspirations for advanced degrees.[106] Participants in such initiatives commonly express admiration for China and a desire to cooperate further with it, and their numbers are considerable. From Uganda alone, as many as five hundred people participated in short-term training courses annually.[107] Meanwhile, a complementary stream of personnel from China has flowed in the opposite direction to meet with African political and business elites, conduct fact-finding, explore investment opportunities, deliver cultural programs, and conclude deals.

Party-to-party exchanges are a critical tool of China's foreign policy. The International Liaison Department of the CCP manages them and claims to have established connections with more than 600 political parties and organizations in over 160 countries.[108] These relationships permit the CCP to cultivate close ties with the political elites of other nations while denying that China's *government* is interfering in their internal affairs. But for most purposes this distinction is simply wordplay since China's state constitution codifies leadership by the Communist Party and Xi Jinping has greatly elevated its hand in direct governance.

On a party-to-party basis, the CCP has supported academies modeled on its own cadre schools in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe to train local civilian, police, and military officials.[109] Before COVID, it offered short-term seminars at universities and party schools in China to thousands of African officials and professionals on topics such as poverty alleviation, political propaganda, tax collection, civil-military relations, party organization, media regulation, and monitoring of social media. Even during the pandemic, seminars with the Republic of the Congo's ruling Party of Labor continued virtually.[110] Prior to assuming the presidency of their nations, presidents Zuma and Ramaphosa of South Africa, Pohamba of Namibia, and Guebuza of Mozambique all led party delegations to China.[111] A Sino-African Political Party Leaders program, projected to grow to over one thousand participants, has financed trips to China by a great many other African political figures. A notable element in many of these exchanges is the promotion of the PRC's model of a politicized military, whereby the armed forces are an instrument of the ruling party not the state.[112]

Increasingly, the master narrative behind these exchanges is that China modernized on its own terms in defiance of Western prescriptions that have repeatedly failed others, and that what has worked for China might work for Africa. China puts itself forward as proof that economic modernization, effective governance, and social stability are in fact possible, and perhaps more easily attained, without liberal democracy and liberal rule of law.[113] It advocates that "countries around the world should and can choose the development path of human rights that suits their own national conditions."[114]

While reasonable on its face, there is a deeper motivation to this ostensible pragmatism. The CCP cannot afford to dwell on how its partners get or stay in power because it fears answering these questions about itself, and it therefore conspires with them in a pact of silence. To avoid awkward conversations, it insists that "only the Chinese people can decide whether China's political system is good or not."[115] And because the CCP reserves the exclusive right to speak on behalf of those people, the case is prejudged. This, too, is the model that China promotes, and it encourages in Africa the same naked substitution of parochial for democratic and national interests that it generates at home.

On February 23, 2022, Xi Jinping issued a congratulatory letter marking the inauguration of the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania.[116] A gift of the CCP, the school was built at a cost of Sh100 billion (approximately $45 million) by the China Railway Jianchang Engineering Company, the same company that built the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA) in 1976. President Hassan of Tanzania attended the ceremony, as did leading members of the six regional ruling parties that co-founded the school and are served by it: Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Tanzania), the African National Congress (South Africa), FRELIMO (Mozambique), MPLA (Angola), SWAPO (Namibia), and ZANU PF (Zimbabwe).

The school could have been open to all political parties, but its status as a cadre school for only some of them and not for national governments is fundamental to its identity and lays bare the hidden cost of the CCP's gift. In her remarks at the inauguration ceremony, President Hassan spoke of using the school to revive the fortunes of southern Africa's aging liberation parties by inculcating young people with patriotism, leadership, and ideology so that they would participate in politics "within their liberation parties" rather than support upstart challengers.[117] Coupled with the attendance of China's ambassador to Tanzania at the ceremony, it is impossible to see this school as anything other than direct intrusion by China's government in the domestic partisan politics of six African nations in a way calculated to affect electoral outcomes. That may suit the ruling parties who benefit, but it belies the authenticity of China's claims about noninterference and is corrosive to democracy.[118]

The PRC government's reasons for investing in networks of African elites are varied. Disseminating its political values and governance model builds domestic and international legitimacy for them. Not unlike the 1960s, when it vied against the Soviet Union in Africa as the leader of world socialism, China today portrays itself as the ascendant power of the twenty-first century. Its capacity to cultivate a following among other nations supports that self-image, as does its willingness to bully and punish those who do not submit. African leaders seem to understand this and perform accordingly by lavishing public praise upon China. The cautionary examples of Australia and Lithuania, which have suffered costly economic boycotts for antagonizing China, are plain to see. And quite apart from geopolitical considerations, China's people are justly proud of their country's achievements and are eager to share their experience with others.

But China also cultivates African elites with tactical considerations in mind. China's government draws liberally on its network of foreign supporters when it wishes to demonstrate that it is on the right side of an issue. No voice is too peripheral to be left out. Hence in 2019, as China's intensifying pressure on Hong Kong and Taiwan sparked international concern, a chorus of African elites spoke up, including Namibia's Minister of Land Reform, who reaffirmed "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China which includes Hong Kong and Taiwan as recognised by the international community."[119] At the United Nations and other international forums, China also draws on the goodwill it has built with African elites and its economic leverage over them to mobilize voting coalitions.[120] These coalitions protect China from censure for its human rights record and weaken the protections available to all by helping it to rebalance global norms away from individual rights protection toward collective rights and the rights of sovereign states.[121] They also find common cause with China in arguing for curbs on the flow of information across borders, and marginalizing independent civil society actors such as academics and NGOs who share in internet governance.[122] With such "all-weather friends," China threatens to become an engine for mobilizing and reproducing illiberalism globally.

Corporate Responsibility

Initiatives that seek to influence elite perceptions of the PRC's governance also conveniently gloss over the abusive practices of state and state-sponsored businesses from China across Africa. From Sierra Leone to Zimbabwe, cases of maltreatment of local workers have been increasingly caught on camera and brought to public attention, and a steady stream of exposés has shed light on the serial, cruel mistreatment of African workers. These abuses take a variety of forms. For example, a landmark Human Rights Watch report in 2011 revealed that Zambian employees were forced by China's state-owned mining companies to work eighteen-hour shifts in extreme conditions, or risk losing their jobs.[123] More recently, an analysis of China's joint ventures with local counterparts in twelve African countries details a litany of strategies used to control and withhold the flow of knowledge transfer to local partners.[124]

The mining industry across the continent has been a magnet for unscrupulous foreign actors, and financial links with the government of the PRC have not inhibited these practices. An investigative report in November 2021 revealed a litany of alleged abuses perpetrated against local workers in the DRC's Lualaba province by state-affiliated actors from China. Due to low wages and capricious pay reductions, one worker at the Tenke Fungurume mine, of which the partially state-owned China Molybdenum enjoys a majority share, described the working conditions as akin to slavery.[125] These abuses are not unique to the DRC. In June 2021, a subsidiary of the partially state-owned China Railway was forced to issue a public apology after an employee from China was caught on video assaulting a local worker in Sierra Leone.[126] Other beatings and shootings of local workers by PRC nationals have been caught on camera in Rwanda and Zimbabwe.[127]

Most recently, these abusive practices have taken on new forms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Opened in 2009, the Ogun-Guangdong Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in Ogun State, Nigeria, was developed by the local state government in partnership with a consortium of companies from China, including the state-owned Guangdong Xinguang International Group.[128] In April 2020, after a public lockdown was ordered due to the pandemic, a firm from China operating in the FTZ reportedly locked its workers within its premises without pay. The workers destroyed two of the company's vehicles and set another ablaze before police intervened.[129] Following the incident, further accusations were leveled against firms from China—operating both within the state-sponsored FTZ and across Ogun—by local workers over child labor, insufficient protective equipment, and a lack of compensation after serious injuries.[130] Much like the environmental damage and regulatory noncompliance evident in natural resource industries, these labor abuses constitute flagrant violations of existing national laws that seek to protect host communities.

While countless numbers of such abuses go unaddressed, civil society organizations have successfully held perpetrators to account when national-level leaders are willing to demand a more equitable relationship with counterparts from China. Despite continued violations, the DRC has demonstrated some success in this regard. As outlined in the earlier discussion of natural resource extraction, in recent years DRC president Felix Tshisekedi has shown a keen willingness to engage with actors from China to strike a more favorable balance. In May 2021, Tshisekedi vowed that he would renegotiate contracts with foreign firms.[131] Subsequently, in July 2021, civil society groups circulated a video on social media that depicted allegedly trespassing artisanal miners being whipped by soldiers on the orders of managers from China in Lualaba province. The interim governor of the province, Fifi Masuka, publicly condemned the actions and vowed accountability.[132] Shortly thereafter, both the local soldiers and Chinese managers were detained and charged.[133] While other abuses have gone overlooked and unpunished, President Tshisekedi's stated desire of engaging with foreign actors in a more equitable manner appears to have given a green light to authorities within Lualaba province to enforce the law in a highly visible case of abuse. Other governments and civil society actors in the region can draw inspiration from this example.

Conclusion

The diverse nations of sub-Saharan Africa are bound to China by a web of linkages that are rich with opportunities and risks. This handbook documents the sharp power dimensions of those linkages with the aim of empowering Africans to strike a more favorable, vigilant, and democratic balance among them. Although the Chinese government touts its dealings in Africa as partnerships among equals, overall they fall far short of that ideal. Beijing's high-flown rhetoric masks a deeply asymmetric relationship full of unfulfilled promises, hidden costs, and corrosive impacts.

China's political system is characterized by autocracy, corruption, repression, secrecy, weak labor rights, environmental degradation, extreme inequality, and censorship. Whenever China ventures abroad it carries those burdens with it. When the Chinese government boasts that its engagements come with no strings attached, it is confessing that it is unprincipled. While superficially appealing, this position gives actors from China license to exploit local gaps in regulatory enforcement, administrative capacity, knowledge, and good governance, and to work with whomever will serve their interests. Given the resource advantages these actors often enjoy, none of this is good for Africa.

Yet, Africans have power. Every engagement cataloged in these pages involved African agency and negotiation, and an assessment and distribution of costs and benefits. Dealings that compromise sovereignty or sacrifice the public interest to enrich or benefit a few are regrettably common, but counterexamples are also sufficiently numerous to point the way toward an effective response.

Democracies prosper with vigorous investments in their foundations. Governments should train officials at all levels in recognizing, resisting, and building resilience against sharp power not just from China but also from all international partners. Those with greater capacity to defend their sovereignty, impartially monitor and enforce compliance with their laws, and resist state capture by powerful factions or parties can provide technical assistance to others. A constellation of courts, parliaments, journalists, anticorruption campaigners, environmental activists, unions, labor rights organizations, and engaged citizens can prevail over parochial interests and ensure transparency, rule of law, and public accountability. Broadening this base through support of genuinely independent civic groups, research, education, and advocacy is essential, because sharp power flourishes in ignorance and darkness.

Platforms for shared learning within and across nations can create redundancy and resilience. Those constrained from covering local instances of sharp power can expose them in neighboring jurisdictions. The African Union, international nongovernmental organizations, bilateral partners, and multilateral agencies can complement these initiatives and sponsor regional or national networks of experienced personnel to plug local gaps in skills and knowledge.

Just as China can help Africa achieve sustainable economic and technological development, Africa can supply the commodities and markets that China desires. The goal is not to exclude China from Africa, but rather to shift its engagements there onto a more equitable footing and to equip Africans to make wiser, more informed choices among *all* the global partners available to them. The capacity to expose and resist sharp power is an essential tool in the defense of universal democratic values, sovereignty, and good governance.

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