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The U.S. Should Call China’s “Non-Interference” Policy in Africa What It Is—A Myth

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A Supposed Policy of Non-Interference

China’s ostensible non-interference principle began in 1954 as one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence negotiated between China and India during their settlement of differences over Tibet.¹ During a tour of ten African nations beginning in 1964, Zhou Enlai—China’s first premier—presented the principles as those that would steer Chinese relations with Africa.² The non-interference principle remains a key piece of Beijing’s narrative in Africa, frequently contrasted with the U.S.’s approach of urging partner countries to respect human rights and deliver good governance.

Burkina Faso’s recent decision to sever ties with Taiwan is a reminder of how Beijing’s carefully cultivated narrative is misleading. Since a new Algerian government reciprocated Chinese help by publicly supporting China’s claims on Taiwan in 1960,³ Beijing has pressured its African partners to align with its One China policy. In 1963, 13 African countries maintained ties with Taiwan, compared to only five that recognized Beijing. All told, 30 African countries at one time or another have had relations with Taiwan.⁴ After Burkina Faso’s defection in May 2018, only Swaziland—of Africa’s 54 countries—now recognizes Taiwan.

Beijing’s campaign to pressure Taiwan’s African partners to fall in line with the One China policy has included overt meddling in their affairs. In 2006, the Chinese ambassador to Zambia publicly announced that Chinese companies were withholding investments, and that Beijing might cut ties with Lusaka, if Zambians elected the pro-Taiwanese candidate for the Zambian presidency, Michael Sata.⁵ In 2003, China sent troops to participate in the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Liberia after that country cut ties with Taiwan. Contrast that response with Beijing’s use of its U.N. Security Council veto to hamper peacekeeping operations to countries that recognized Taiwan.⁶

China also interferes on other issues. Beijing threatened both South Africa and Botswana over their plans to allow a visit from the spiritual leader of the Tibetan enclave, the Dalai Lama. The pressure caused South Africa to three times refuse the Dalai Lama a visa.⁷ Before the Dalai Lama’s scheduled visit to Botswana, Beijing invited a group of Botswanan journalists and intellectuals to China in an apparent attempt to persuade them to oppose the visit. Botswanan President Ian Khama said that Beijing even warned that it would recall its ambassador and work with other African nations to isolate Botswana if the Dalai Lama visited.⁸

Beijing has also taken sides in African conflicts. In Ghana during the 1960s, its instructors in guerrilla warfare trained revolutionaries from across Africa, some of whom were trying to overthrow post-colonial African governments.⁹ At one time or another, China supported all three of the major rebel groups in Angola fighting a civil war, and allegedly supplied weapons to the post-genocide government in Rwanda, as well as the shadow government

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in exile in eastern Zaire trying to overthrow the new Rwandan government.¹⁰ China also aided the Sudanese government's brutal campaign against its Darfur region by supplying Khartoum with arms in violation of a U.N. arms embargo.

Most recently, Chinese diplomats have been trying to negotiate an end to the civil war in South Sudan, including by engaging with rebel leader Riek Machar. Credible reporting indicates that Beijing approved the coup that unseated long-time dictator and Chinese ally Robert Mugabe in November 2017.¹¹

Expect Further Interference

China's meddling in its African partners' domestic affairs will likely continue. In March 2015, China's

foreign minister said that Beijing wished to "play a constructive role in the political settlement of international and regional issues."¹² This followed then-President Hu Jintao's 2012 assertion at the Forum for China–Africa Cooperation that China wanted to participate in efforts to bring peace and stability to Africa.¹³

China's rhetoric sounds appealing, and it may yet have a constructive role in helping end African conflicts. But Beijing believes that African states should follow its own authoritarian model to achieve stability, challenging the core U.S. interest of encouraging the growth of global democracy. Beijing also wishes to diminish U.S. influence in favor of its own, and frequently seeks to frustrate U.S. interests.¹⁴

1. The Chinese government claims Mao conceived the principles that were later presented to the Indians, who agreed. Other sources say the principles were mutually developed in the Chinese–Indian negotiations. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence," http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml (accessed July 2, 2018), and U.S. Department of State, "Bandung Conference (Asian-African Conference), 1955," <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/97935.htm> (accessed July 2, 2018).
2. David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 36–37.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
4. Timothy S. Rich and Vasabjit Banerjee, "Running Out of Time? The Evolution of Taiwan's Relations in Africa," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 141–61, <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/viewFile/818/819> (accessed July 2, 2018).
5. In 2015, the Chinese ambassador to Sri Lanka behaved similarly when he openly lobbied for a presidential candidate who had taken large Chinese bribes in exchange for acquiescence, and who was running against a candidate less amenable to Chinese ambitions. Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html> (accessed June 29, 2018). For the report on Chinese interference in Zambia's election, see John Reed, "China Intervenes in Zambian Election," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2006, <https://www.ft.com/content/d6d5d176-3d0a-11db-8239-0000779e2340> (accessed June 13, 2018).
6. Mathieu Duchatel, Richard Gowan, and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, "Into Africa: China's Global Security Shift," European Council on Foreign Relations *Policy Brief*, June 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Into_Africa_China%E2%80%99s_global_security_shift_PDF_1135.pdf (accessed July 2, 2018).
7. A senior Chinese official also claimed that the CIA funds the Dalai Lama. Philani Mazibuko, "Dalai Lama 'Threat to China, SA,'" IOL, December 28, 2015, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/dalai-lama-threat-to-china-sa-1964436> (accessed June 13, 2018).
8. Dikarabo Ramadubu, "'We Are Not a Colony of China'—Khama," *Botswana Guardian*, August 21, 2017, www.botswanaguardian.co.bw/news/item/2790-we-are-not-a-colony-of-china-khama.html (accessed July 2, 2018).
9. A number of African leaders, including President Diori Hamani of Niger and President Houphouët-Boigny of Ivory Coast, were concerned enough that they publicly denounced China's extensive support for revolutionary movements. See Donovan C. Chau, "Assistance of a Different Kind: Chinese Political Warfare in Ghana, 1958–1966," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2007), and Drew Middleton, "Ivory Coast Head Calls China Peril," *The New York Times*, April 10, 1966, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1966/04/10/issue.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=ArticleEndCTA®ion=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article> (accessed June 29, 2018).
10. "Stoking the Fires: Military Assistance and Arms Trafficking in Burundi," Human Rights Watch Arms Project, December 1997, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/b/burundi/burundi97n.pdf> (accessed June 29, 2018).
11. MacDonald Dzirutwe, Joe Brock, and Ed Cropley, "Special Report: 'Traacherous Shenanigans'—The Inside Story of Mugabe's Downfall," Reuters, November 26, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-politics-mugabe-specialreport/special-report-treacherous-shenanigans-the-inside-story-of-mugabes-downfall-idUSKBN1DQ0AG> (accessed June 13, 2018).
12. Duchatel, Gowan, and Rapnouil, "Into Africa: China's Global Security Shift."
13. Peter Fabricius, "Should China's New Approach to Africa be Labelled 'Non-Interference with Chinese Characteristics?'" Institute for Security Studies, November 6, 2014, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/beijings-peacemaking-efforts-in-south-sudan> (accessed June 13, 2018).
14. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2018).

Beijing increasingly has the influence to bend African countries to its will. China is the greatest source of imports for 19 of sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries, up from being the largest import source for only one sub-Saharan African country in 2001.¹⁵ In 2015, Chinese loans issued between 2013 and 2015 constituted an estimated one-third of all new debt in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ Beijing also cultivates influence in Africa through a range of military cooperation activities and an increasing number of soft-power initiatives.¹⁷

The Way Forward

Many countries try to shape other countries' internal politics in a favorable direction. Unlike other countries, however, China has made its supposed non-interference policy a central part of its messaging to Africa. The U.S. should highlight the truth of Chinese interference in African countries' affairs, and simultaneously communicate and demonstrate the benefits for African states of its own model. To do so, the U.S. should:

- **Increase its engagement with Africa and reorient the focus of some extant initiatives.** Such measures should include focusing the U.S.'s overseas development assistance on enhancing countries' free-market systems and encouraging accountable and competent governance; increasing the efficiency of U.S. aid by eliminating "buy American" provisions and subsidies to U.S. shipping companies that deliver aid; boosting trade beyond the African Growth and Opportunity Act; and making the U.S.–Africa Leaders Summit a regular event.¹⁸

- **Advocate for foundational American values.** The U.S. should take every opportunity to communicate to African publics and leaders how its system promotes the values proven to best facilitate human flourishing: representative government, rule of law, free markets, and individual freedom. The U.S. should also remind African publics and leaders that Chinese claims of non-interference are hollow, and that Beijing's interference is pushing their countries in an illiberal, repressive direction.
- **Prioritize the fight against African corruption.** Steps to win that fight include helping countries strengthen their civil societies, promoting economic freedom, leveraging technology and the power of public opinion, and elevating the fight against graft as part of U.S. development assistance.¹⁹

Debunk the Non-Interference Myth

Chinese interference in African countries' domestic affairs frequently advances illiberal goals opposed to U.S. interests that are also detrimental to most Africans, and its meddling is likely to continue and be effective. In what must be a long-term, strategic effort, the U.S. needs to marshal all of its resources to meet the challenges Chinese activity in Africa presents. Debunking the myth of Beijing's "non-interference" policy is a good place to start.

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15. Daniel F. Runde and Christopher Metzger, "Is the United States Prepared for China to be Africa's Main Business Partner?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 31, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-prepared-china-be-africas-main-business-partner> (accessed July 2, 2018).

16. For more on the surging levels of sub-Saharan debt owed to China, see Joshua Meservey, "Zambia and Mozambique Illustrate Ballooning African Debt, Growing Chinese Influence, and Challenges to U.S. Interests in Africa," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4845, April 26, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/africa/report/zambia-and-mozambique-illustrate-ballooning-african-debt-growing-chinese-influence>. Data on Chinese loans issued between 2013 and 2015 is from Irene Yuan Sun, Kartik Jayaram, and Omid Kassiri, "Dance of the Lions and Dragons," McKinsey & Company, <https://www.africa-newsroom.com/files/download/aa9f2979a3dc18e> (accessed July 2, 2018).

17. See Joshua Meservey, "China in Africa: The New Colonialism?" testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, March 7, 2018, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20180307/106963/HHRG-115-FA16-Wstate-MeserveyJ-20180307.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2018).

18. See Joshua Meservey, "Africa," *Solutions 2018* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2018), <https://solutions.heritage.org/restoring-american-leadership/africa/>.

19. See Joshua Meservey, "The Impact of Corruption on Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa," in James M. Roberts and William T. Wilson, eds., *2017 Global Agenda for Economic Freedom*, Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 188, <https://www.heritage.org/internationaleconomies/report/2017-global-agenda-economicfreedom>.