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China's Propaganda in Africa Hurts U.S. Interests—and the U.S. Must Counter It

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Beginning in the 1950s, Beijing sought to cultivate favor with developing countries in part to push back U.S. (and, at times, Soviet) influence, as it believed those countries were thwarting its own quest to become an unassailable global power. Chinese propaganda in Africa frequently attacked the U.S. presence as neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist,¹ and, in a practice that continues today, portrayed China as a fellow developing country selflessly aiding the cause of African liberation.

China's messaging on the U.S. presence in Africa is today more circumspect, but still poses a challenge to American interests. Chinese officials warn of the perils of foundational American principles, such as the protection of human rights and democracy,² and increasingly offer their own authoritarian developmental experience as the one best suited to African countries.³ China also frequently criticizes what it says is the unfairness of the unipolar (read: U.S.-led) international system,⁴ a system that significantly contributes to American security and prosperity.

More generally, Chinese propaganda contributes to Chinese power that limits U.S. ability to promote its interests in Africa, an increasingly strategic continent.⁵ Many American companies struggle, for instance, to compete with Chinese-government-

backed companies that use corruption and other anti-competitive measures to win contracts. There is the risk that U.S. companies will be shut out long term from some of Africa's growing economic opportunities as Chinese companies lock up entire industries.

Three strategic priorities should guide the U.S. response to this challenge:

1. Buttress democracy against Beijing's illiberal effect on African governance;
2. Facilitate regulatory and normative environments that ensure U.S. companies' ability to compete for the continent's rapidly growing economic opportunities on an equal footing with Chinese companies; and
3. Maintain and expand the status, means, and positioning of the U.S. in Africa to protect its current and future interests.

Pragmatism, Not Principle

One part of a U.S. effort to achieve these priorities should be challenging China's claims that it provided principled, important support to the cause of African independence.⁶ As with much of Chinese propaganda directed at Africa, Beijing's narrative is misleading.⁷ China did assist a number of African rebel groups. Yet its support was never very great in material terms,⁸ and Beijing was motivated primarily by the opportunity to use the anti-colonial struggles to achieve its own foreign policy goals. Its support for some revolutionary groups waxed and waned, often according to the vagaries of Sino-Soviet relations. In 1963, China abandoned the increas-

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ingly pro-Soviet MPLA, an Angolan rebel group that ultimately emerged victorious, in favor of a rival movement, the FNLA. The next year, China began supporting yet another Angolan group, UNITA, after a falling out with the FNLA.⁹

Similarly, Beijing sponsored the weak South West Africa National Union in what is now Namibia over the pro-Soviet South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO)—the party that dominates Namibian politics today—until it switched support to SWAPO in the late 1960s.¹⁰ In the mid-1960s, China transitioned its support for FRELIMO, Mozambique's pro-Soviet and now-ruling party, to the COREMO movement, before abandoning COREMO in the early 1970s to back FRELIMO again.¹¹

Beijing also inconsistently applied the principles it professed around issues of self-determination and anti-colonialism. At least rhetorically, China supported the Biafran rebellion seeking independence from post-colonial Nigeria. Yet Beijing also propped up Sudan as it fought various rebel groups battling for the independence of the ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally distinct region of southern Sudan (a region that ultimately achieved independence as South Sudan).¹² China supported a series of rebellions in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the early 1960s. It later abandoned the rebels and reconciled with the Congolese government, which Beijing rushed to aid as it fought secessionists in 1977 and 1978.¹³ China also abandoned the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), a rebel group fighting for Eritrean independence, shortly before beginning talks to establish ties with Ethiopia, Eritrea's powerful occupier.¹⁴ A splinter group of the ELF eventually led Eritrea to independence in 1993.

Finally, Beijing helped rebel groups fighting post-colonial, independent African governments in Angola, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger, and Upper Volta (modern-day Burkina Faso).¹⁵ Such support suggests that China's primary goal was not to support African self-determination, but to install its protégés in power.

Hypocrisy in South Africa

Beijing's narrative about its relationship with South Africa may be the best example of how misleading its propaganda often is. Beijing frequently references its common struggle with South Africa against imperialism and colonialism, and its support for the anti-apartheid cause.¹⁶

Beijing did initially help what is now South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). Yet as with its support of many other liberation movements, Beijing's rivalry with the USSR heavily influenced its treatment of the ANC. After Sino-Soviet relations worsened in the early 1960s, China switched support from the pro-Soviet ANC to the rival Pan-Africanist Congress. It was not until the later thaw with Moscow that Beijing reconciled with the ANC.¹⁷

China did fiercely and publicly denounce the South African government, yet also indulged in a range of secret and sanctions-busting engagements with the apartheid regime from the 1960s until the regime fell in 1994. These initiatives included selling weapons to South Africa, sending covert trade delegations to the country, and even cooperating with it on a nuclear weapons program.¹⁸

After relations with the Soviets improved, Chinese attention drifted from its African allies that were no longer as useful. During this same period, the emphasis in Chinese newspapers on third-world solidarity declined markedly, and overt displays of hostility and racism toward Africans living in China spiked.¹⁹ It was only after China faced international isolation for the Chinese military's 1989 massacre of as many as 10,000 peaceful students protesting in Tiananmen Square that Beijing decided it again needed African help, and embarked on its relationship-building blitz that continues today.

Counter Campaign Needed

China is propagandizing in Africa to further its own interests, many of which oppose those of the U.S.²⁰ As one part of protecting its prerogatives on the increasingly important continent, the U.S. should challenge Beijing's revisionism by:

- **Crafting a government-wide messaging strategy on Chinese activity in Africa.** The messages must be tailored to specific audiences, and be delivered in the spirit of friendly concern from a worried ally. Part of the messaging should include pointing out, in appropriately subtle and sensitive ways, the misleading and self-serving nature of Chinese propaganda.
- **Mobilizing the many U.S. civil society organizations concerned about China's effect on democratic and economic norms in Africa.** Many of these organizations have deep Africa experience, and can help to push back on Beijing's propaganda.

- **Deepening cooperation with allies whose interests align with those of the United States.** American allies such as Japan and India are increasingly active in Africa, and share the U.S.'s concerns about Chinese engagement on the continent.
- **Focusing on achievable goals.** The U.S. should not try to persuade African governments to abandon their relationships with Beijing as they are unlikely to do so, and because some of the investment and loans China provides does help African countries. The U.S. should instead focus on assisting African countries in striking fair and productive deals with Beijing; ameliorating the negative effects of Chinese engagement in Africa; and providing a realistic alternative for African governments on the projects and in the sectors where the U.S. or its companies have a competitive advantage or strong strategic reason for competing.

Narratives Matter

China is by far the ablest of the United States' global competitors, and for decades has built significant, unmerited goodwill in Africa with its inaccurate tales of principled support for African liberation struggles. The U.S. needs to respond with the urgency and commitment commensurate to the challenge, including by contesting China's misinformation campaign.

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Endnotes

1. For an illustrative quote from a senior Chinese official in 1960 publicly claiming that the U.S. wanted to become the new colonial power in Africa, and that U.S. imperialism posed the greatest risk to African independence, see David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
2. For example, a scholar at the prominent, government-linked Chinese Academy of Social Sciences claimed that the U.S. “often uses ideology (democracy, human rights and other value concepts) as weapons, spreads ideology, and even uses ideology as an excuse to launch a local war, in order to interfere in a country’s internal affairs, and to bring this country into its own system.” A 2013 communique circulated internally by the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) General Office demonstrated the alarm with which the CCP views these issues, warning against seven political “perils,” including constitutionalism and “universal values.” The scholar is quoted in Rosemary Foot, “Chinese Strategies in a US–Hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 1, January 2006, pp. 77–94, http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/Foot_Chinese_Strategies_international_Affairs.pdf (accessed November 15, 2018). A report on the communique can be found at ChinaFile, “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” November 8, 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation#start> (accessed November 15, 2018).
3. Aaron L. Friedberg, “Competing with China,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (June–July 2018), pp. 7–64, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2018/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-junejuly-2018/603-02-friedberg> (accessed November 16, 2018).
4. As just one example of this sort of rhetoric, at the inaugural Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in 2000, Chinese President Jiang Zemin spoke of the need for China and Africa to cooperate on “the establishment of an equitable and just new international political and economic order.” Beijing’s most recent Africa policy paper released in 2015 cheered the progress towards a “multi-polar world,” though it also lamented that the task was not yet finished. For Jiang’s remarks, see “China and Africa: Usher in the New Century Together—Speech by President Jiang Zemin of The People’s Republic of China at the Opening Ceremony of The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, undated, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/zyzl/zyjh/t157712.htm> (accessed November 15, 2018). For China’s 2015 Africa policy paper, see news release, “Full Text: China’s Second Africa Policy Paper,” China.org.cn, December 5, 2015, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2015-12/05/content_37241677.htm (accessed November 15, 2018).
5. Joshua Meservey, “Africa,” in *Solutions 2018* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2018), <https://solutions.heritage.org/restoring-american-leadership/africa/>.
6. In 1961, the government mouthpiece *Peking Review* claimed that China “resolutely supported the African peoples in their patriotic struggle for national liberation against imperialism and colonialism.” Forty-five years later, Beijing’s inaugural Africa policy white paper maintained the theme: “China provided both firm moral and selfless material support to African countries in their tough struggle against colonial rule and fight for national independence.” President Xi Jinping made similar remarks in South Africa during his recent four-country tour of Africa, writing in a local South African newspaper: “Our peoples forged a deep friendship during our common struggle against imperialism, colonialism and racism.” Chinese propaganda posters in the 1960s also highlighted China’s support of revolutionary movements in Africa. The posters have such titles as “Vigorously support the anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America” and “Chairman Mao is the great liberator of the world’s revolutionary people.” One poster depicts a group of apparent Africans clustered under a picture of Mao, with a woman holding her baby toward the picture. The poster is entitled “Savior.” For the *Peking Review* quotation, see Donovan C. Chau, “Assistance of a Different Kind: Chinese Political Warfare in Ghana, 1958–1966,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2007). For China’s Africa white paper, see “China’s African Policy,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, January 12, 2006, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/zt/zgdfzccwj/t230479.htm> (accessed November 16, 2018). For Xi’s editorial, see news release, “Full Text of Chinese President Xi’s Signed Article on South African Media,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, July 22, 2018, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1579384.shtml (accessed November 15, 2018). For Chinese propaganda posters, see “Savior,” April 1968, chineseposters.net, <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1968-s-001.php> (accessed November 15, 2018); “Zhou Ruizhuang–Vigorously Support the Anti-Imperialist Struggle of the Peoples...,” 1964, chineseposters.net, <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e3-724.php> (accessed November 15, 2018); and “Chairman Mao is the Great Liberator of the World’s Revolutionary People,” April 1968, chineseposters.net, <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e16-339.php> (accessed November 15, 2018).
7. For other examples, 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>; Joshua Meservey, “The U.S. Should Call China’s ‘Non-Interference’ Policy in Africa What It Is—A Myth,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4878, July 6, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-us-should-call-chinas-non-interference-policy-africa-what-it-myth>; and Joshua Meservey, “Chinese Corruption in Africa Undermines Beijing’s Rhetoric About Friendship with the Continent,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4895, August 8, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/chinese-corruption-africa-undermines-beijings-rhetoric-about-friendship-the>.
8. Steven F. Jackson, “China’s Third World Foreign Policy: The Case of Angola and Mozambique, 1961–93,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 142 (June 1995), pp. 388–422, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/chinas-third-world-foreign-policy-the-case-of-angola-and-mozambique-196193/65F93E21ABDCF7137ECD2B9F977C4F55> (accessed November 15, 2018).
9. Beijing did not recognize the Soviet- and Cuban-backed Angolan government until 1982, after its relations with Moscow improved. George T. Yu, “Africa in Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 8 (August 1988), pp. 849–862, <http://as.ucpress.edu/content/28/8/849> (accessed November 15, 2018). For a discussion of Beijing switching its support among the various rebel groups, see Garth le Pere, “China,” in Chris Saunders, Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa, and Dawn Nagar, eds., *Region-Building in Southern Africa: Progress, Problems and Prospects* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

10. The website for the Chinese embassy in Namibia, for instance, glosses over Beijing's complicated history in Namibia by claiming that the China-Namibia "friendship was forged during the hard period of liberation struggle in 1960s." Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Namibia, "Message of the Ambassador," August 11, 2017, <http://na.china-embassy.org/eng/dsxx/dszc/> (accessed November 25, 2018). For discussion of China's erratic support for SWAPO and SWANU, see Vincent P. de Ruiter, "China in Africa? The Namibian Example," *Atlantische Commissie*, undated, https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/Vincent_P__de_Ruiter_-_China_in_Africa_The_Namibian_Example.pdf (accessed November 15, 2018).
11. Jackson, "China's Third World Foreign Policy: The Case of Angola and Mozambique, 1961-93."
12. Alaba Ogunsanwo, *China's Policy in Africa 1958-71* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1974), and Lloyd Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).
13. Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*.
14. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence, "China's Role in Africa," *Special Report Weekly Review* No. 467, February 25, 1972, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP08S02113R000100080001-0.pdf> (accessed November 15, 2018); Dan Connell, "Inside the EPLF: The Origins of the 'People's Party' & Its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 28, No. 89 (2001), pp. 345-364, www.jstor.org/stable/4006615 (accessed November 15, 2018); and Richard Lobban, "Eritrean Liberation Front: A Close-up View," *Munger Africana Library Notes* Vol. 2, No. 13 (September 1972), pp. 3-20, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/eritrea/liberation-front.pdf> (accessed November 15, 2018).
15. Chau, "Assistance of a Different Kind: Chinese Political Warfare in Ghana, 1958-1966." For Chinese support of armed groups in Angola, see le Pere, "China." For Chinese support of rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, see Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*.
16. As one example, see Alex Chan, "Xi's South Africa Visit to Deepen Sino-South African, BRICS Cooperation," *China Daily*, July 23, 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201807/23/WS5b569773a31031a351e8fc89.html> (accessed November 15, 2018).
17. Ian Taylor, "The Ambiguous Commitment: The People's Republic of China and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle in South Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2000), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/025890000111986> (accessed November 15, 2018).
18. Ibid., and "Declassified: Apartheid Profits—China's Support for Apartheid Revealed," *Daily Maverick*, October 31, 2017, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-10-31-declassified-apartheid-profits-chinas-support-for-apartheid-revealed/#.Wx_ghlpKjcs (accessed November 15, 2018).
19. Barry Sautman, "Anti-Black Racism in Post-Mao China," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 138 (June 1994), pp. 413-437, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/antiblack-racism-in-postmao-china/862AF22CB97347DD0EF289792919640B> (accessed November 15, 2018).
20. 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 November 15, 2018).