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, 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, and increasingly offer their own authoritarian developmental experience as the one best suited to African countries. China also frequently criticizes what it says is the unfairness of the unipolar (read: U.S.-led) international system, 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. 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. As with much of Chinese propaganda directed at Africa, Beijing’s narrative is misleading. China did assist a number of African rebel groups. Yet its support was never very great in material terms, 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.

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


