

Why Is the Biden Administration Enabling Chinese Influence in Africa?

Max Primorac

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Biden Administration has teamed up with the pro-China Bezos Earth Fund to electrify sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to being the world's leading polluter, China is also one of the world's most repressive countries and a hostile challenger to the U.S.

The U.S. must end the partnership with the Bezos fund, ban foreign aid to entities that collude with China, and prioritize national security over climate ambitions.

In its singular pursuit of curbing global warming, the Biden Administration has teamed up with the pro-China Bezos Earth Fund to electrify sub-Saharan Africa, one of the poorest areas of the world and a strategic priority of the Chinese Communist Party. The Administration must sever this partnership that threatens U.S. national security, prohibit any U.S. foreign aid dollars from supporting entities that collude with Beijing, and prioritize U.S. security interests over its unachievable climate ambitions.

Background

Last fall, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) struck a strategic partnership with the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet “to realize universal, clean energy generation and access

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5270>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

for sub-Saharan Africa by accelerating new distributed renewable energy and grid-based solutions through the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet.”¹ Sub-Saharan Africa is home to the world’s poorest countries, with tens of millions of people languishing in crushing poverty.² Providing cheap energy to the poorest of the poor is an admirable goal, given that two of three people in the region lack reliable access to electricity.

The “anchor partner” of the Global Energy Alliance, however, is the Bezos Earth Fund, launched in 2020 by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and seeded with a generous \$10 billion of his own money. The main purpose of the Bezos Earth Fund is to reduce climate change, which Jeff Bezos considers “the biggest threat to our planet.”³

In a recent public opinion poll on the most urgent issues facing Americans, only 6 percent of respondents agreed, listing inflation, immigration, election laws, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as greater concerns.⁴ However, helping poor countries, especially food producers, to adapt to and manage changes in climate is important. In fact, the developed world’s ability to manage droughts, floods, and other violent weather, far from being “the biggest threat to our planet,” has led to a dramatic 99 percent drop in disaster-related deaths over the past century.⁵

China’s Climate Proxy

Disturbingly, Bezos Earth Fund’s president and CEO Andrew Steer is a senior member of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, the chairman of which is China’s vice premier and member of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China’s top decision-making body. Steer also co-chairs the CCP’s Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC)⁶ with 140 international partners and the participation of many Communist Chinese officials. The BRIGC serves as a global platform to advance Beijing’s strategic interest through the international climate agenda. FBI Director Christopher Wray sees China as “the greatest long-term threat” to the United States and asserts that “China is engaged in a whole-of-state effort to become the world’s only superpower by any means necessary.”⁷ Chinese President Xi Jinping himself warned that anyone obstructing China’s global ambitions will “have their heads bashed bloody against the Great Wall of Steel.”⁸

Steer’s relationship with China’s communist authorities has been political. Prior to taking the reins at the Bezos Earth Fund, Steer attacked President Donald Trump for pulling the United States out of the Paris

Climate Accords in *The China Daily*, the media arm of the Chinese government. In his piece titled “Q&A with Andrew Steer: China Plays Big Climate Role on Global Stage,” Steer characterized the pullout as “defying common sense,” and explained in the main propaganda organ of the CCP how “President Donald Trump’s attacks on climate change have prompted a backlash and a growing number of states and citizens are responding with a sense of urgency.” He described China as having “taken on a larger climate role on the global stage, which has benefited the country and the international community.”⁹

Bezos has found himself at the center of controversy in his commercial relationship with China, where 38 percent of Amazon’s top-selling brands are sold.¹⁰ A Reuter’s investigation conducted last year found that Amazon acceded to a CCP edict that prevents Amazon from publishing negative reviews of Xi Jinping’s book of writings and speeches. An internal 2018 Amazon corporate document stated: “Ideological control and propaganda is the core of the toolkit for the communist party to achieve and maintain its success”—noting that Amazon will not make “judgement on whether it is right or wrong.”¹¹ Whether similar callous commercial interests drove Bezos to hire a China-friendly CEO is hard to know, but the move echoes the willing tone deafness of many corporations toward China’s neo-totalitarian character.

While China portrays itself as a global leader on climate challenges, facilitated through foreign proxies, such as Andrew Steer, it remains “the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases, the largest source of marine debris; the worst perpetrators of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and the world’s largest consumer of trafficked wildlife and timber products,” according to a 2020 U.S. Department of State report on “China’s Environmental Abuses.”¹² The report says that China “has been the world’s largest annual greenhouse gas emitter since 2006...twice that of the United States and nearly one-third of all emissions globally.”

Neither is China’s abysmal climate record a secret to the climate-focused community. In its “Global Energy Review: CO2 Emissions in 2021,” the International Energy Agency concluded that “China accounted for almost all of the global increase in electricity and heat sector emissions between 2019 and 2021.”¹³ The U.K. CarbonBrief website reported that “China—the world’s current largest emitter of carbon dioxide (CO2)—has seen an intense push to increase the production and supply of coal, its main energy source,” with “the nation’s daily output from coal mining [setting] record highs.”¹⁴

China's Gross Human Rights and Religious Freedom Violations

In addition to being the world's leading polluter, China can also boast of being one of the world's most repressive countries. In 2021, the U.S. Department of State described China as “an authoritarian state in which the Chinese Communist Party is the paramount authority,” where “genocide and crimes against humanity occurred during the year against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups,” where there are “forced disappearances by the government; torture by the government...coerced abortions; trafficking in persons...forced labor [and] severe restrictions on labor rights”—and where the government stands accused “of forcibly harvesting organs from prisoners.”¹⁵ Religious persecution is particularly pronounced in China. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan, federal government agency, has catalogued annually the CCP's increasing hostility toward religion, “implementing campaigns to ‘sinicize’ Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity” in order to justify the arrest of clergy and destruction of churches, temples, and mosques¹⁶ while religious persecution in China intensifies against Christians with the establishment of “brainwashing camps.”¹⁷

To its credit, the Biden Administration affirmed the Trump Administration's designation of China as committing genocide and crimes against humanity against its Turkic Muslim communities. But the Biden Administration's human rights commitments often clash with its doctrinaire climate ideology that sees China as a necessary partner for reducing global greenhouse-gas emissions and as the West's main industrial supplier to the heavily financed—and politically influential—energy-renewables industry.¹⁸ It would appear that, in this case, the Administration's climate commitment trumps its human rights commitments.

An Unnatural Partnership

USAID is America's flagship agency responding to global crises, attempting to alleviate world poverty, and promoting democracy, along with a host of worthy aims that include promoting free and fair elections, fostering a vibrant civil society and independent media, protecting human rights, countering human trafficking, and combatting resurgent authoritarian influences. Yet USAID has chosen to partner with a major enabler of Communist China—the Bezos Earth Fund. This partnership conflicts directly with USAID's core mission.

There is no room for excuses. USAID Administrator Samantha Power inherited a robust counter-China infrastructure from her predecessor. In 2018, USAID released its “Clear Choice” framework,¹⁹ laying out to the developing world the clear choice between China’s mercantilist authoritarianism and America’s emphasis on liberty, sovereignty, and free markets. From this framework emerged a digital strategy for safe access to fifth-generation (5G) wireless technology in developing countries amid “looming threats posed by authoritarian governments” (read: China), funds to support counter-China activities in the Indo-Pacific region, and U.S.–Japan energy cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa. USAID also signed memoranda of understanding with Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates to facilitate joint programs in Africa. A Clear Choice Coordinator position, reporting to the Office of Administrator, was created to coordinate USAID-wide efforts to push back against China. A Clear Choice Executive Council and a working group between USAID and the U.S. International Development Bank, both led by USAID’s Deputy Administrator, offered leadership venues to oversee counter-China efforts. Finally, Clear Choice was incorporated into every Country Development and Coordination Strategy. Despite all these mechanisms and tools, USAID chose as its “strategic anchor” a China advocate.

Strategic Threat

Partnering with a pro-China loyalist the size of Bezos’s Fund on the African continent also runs counter to America’s national security interests. China’s first overseas military base was in Djibouti, on the coast of the Horn of Africa near major Middle East oil trade routes. Beijing reportedly seeks to establish an additional military base on the Atlantic Coast, in Equatorial Guinea. For China, access to Africa’s rich natural resources—oil, gas, rare earth minerals—is a strategic priority reflected by its \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative loans to Africa. Ultimately, China seeks to shift global power relations and erode American global dominance as FBI Director Wray correctly asserted. USAID should not enable this shift.²⁰

Recommendations for the Administration and Congress

In order to return USAID to its core mission of promoting political liberty and economic prosperity overseas and safeguarding America’s national security, the Administration and Congress should:

- **Sever USAID's partnership with the Bezos Earth Fund.** USAID should immediately dissolve its strategic partnership with the Bezos Earth Fund considering the strategic risk this partnership poses to American national security. There are numerous private-sector companies with which USAID has existing relationships, as well as allies, such as Kuwait,²¹ that are keen to partner with the U.S. government and co-invest in Africa.
- **Prohibit U.S. foreign aid to entities that collude with China.** Congress should prohibit any U.S. foreign aid dollars from directly or indirectly assisting corporate entities with close working relationships with the CCP or CCP-controlled entities. It is a matter of national security as well as of moral clarity.
- **Prioritize national security over climate ambitions.** The Biden Administration must tie U.S. security interests to the disbursement of billions in foreign aid money in a way that promotes economic freedom and political liberty, not China's mercantilist authoritarianism.

The Biden Administration has instrumentalized U.S. foreign aid to pursue politically divisive goals. In the case of climate politics, the Administration forged an ill-advised strategic partnership with a climate-focused fund that has close ties to senior CCP officials. This partnership needs to end now.

Max Primorac is Senior Research Fellow for International Economics and Foreign Aid in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation. He previously held executive positions at the U.S. Agency for International Development, including as Co-Chair of the Agency's Clear Choice Executive Council.

Endnotes

1. News release, "USAID's Power Africa Signs Strategic Partnership with the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet," U.S. Agency for International Development, November 6, 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/nov-6-2021-usaid-power-africa-signs-strategic-partnership-global-energy> (accessed May 19, 2022).
2. Divyanshi Wadhwa, "The Number of People Continues to Rise in Sub-Saharan Africa," World Bank Blogs, September 19, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/number-extremely-poor-people-continues-rise-sub-saharan-africa> (accessed May 19, 2022).
3. Rachel Sandler, "With Jeff Bezos' Latest Grants, Here's How Far Along He Is on His \$10 Billion Earth Fund Giving," *Forbes*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelsandler/2021/12/06/jeff-bezos-just-gave-433-million-to-climate-groups/?sh=e190f3659d94> (accessed May 19, 2022).
4. Quinnipiac University Poll, "Slight Majority Say Masks Should Not Be Required on Airplanes, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds," April 27, 2022, <https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3844> (accessed May 19, 2022).
5. Bjorn Lomborg, "We're Safer from Climate Disasters than Ever Before," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/climate-activists-disasters-fire-storms-deaths-change-cop26-glasgow-global-warming-11635973538> (accessed May 19, 2022).
6. The Nobel Prize, "Nobel Prize Summit, Our Planet, Our Future," April 26–28, 2021, virtual event, <https://www.nobelprize.org/events/nobel-prize-summit/2021/panellists/andrew-steer/> (accessed May 19, 2022).
7. Jonathan Marcus, "FBI Director: China Is 'Greatest Threat' to US," BBC, July 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53329755> (accessed May 19, 2022).
8. Robin Brant and Waiyee Yip, "CCP 100: Xi Warns China Will Not Be 'Oppressed' in Anniversary Speech," BBC, July 1, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57648236> (accessed May 19, 2022).
9. Andrew Steer, "Q&A with Andrew Steer: China Plays Big Climate Role on Global Stage," World Resources Institute, December 14, 2017, <https://www.wri.org/insights/qa-andrew-steer-china-plays-big-climate-role-global-stage> (accessed May 19, 2022).
10. James Freeman, "Bezos and the New York Times Have a Question for Elon," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bezos-and-the-new-york-times-have-a-question-for-elon-11651004217> (accessed May 19, 2022).
11. Alex Rouhandeh, "Amazon Removed Reviews of Xi Jinping's Book in Order from Beijing," *Newsweek*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/amazon-removed-reviews-xi-jinpings-book-orders-beijing-report-1660795> (accessed May 29, 2022).
12. U.S. Department of State, "China's Environmental Abuses," <https://2017-2021.state.gov/chinas-environmental-abuses/index.html> (accessed May 19, 2022).
13. International Energy Agency, "Global Energy Review: CO2 Emissions in 2021," March 2022, <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-co2-emissions-in-2021-2> (accessed May 19, 2022).
14. Xiaoying You, "Analysis: What Does China's Coal Push Mean for its Climate Agenda?" CarbonBrief, March 29, 2022, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-what-does-chinas-coal-push-mean-for-its-climate-goals> (accessed May 19, 2022).
15. U.S. Department of State, "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet)," pp. 1–3, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/> (accessed May 19, 2022).
16. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2022 USCIRF Annual Report*, April 2022, pp. 16–17, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report_1.pdf (accessed May 27, 2020).
17. Olivia Enos and Hannah So, "Religious Persecution in China Intensifies With Brainwashing Camps for Christians," Heritage Foundation *Commentary*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/religious-liberty/commentary/religious-persecution-china-intensifies-brainwashing-camps-christians>.
18. Dominic Dudley, "China Is Set to Become the World's Renewable Energy Superpower, According to New Report," *Forbes*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/01/11/china-renewable-energy-superpower/?sh=431b287745a2> (accessed May 19, 2022).
19. For a detailed discussion of USAID's counter-China efforts, see James M. Roberts and Max Primorac, eds., "USAID 2017–2021: The Journey to Self-Reliance," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 249, November 18, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/usa-2017-2021-the-journey-self-reliance#:~:text=Conservative%20political%20appointees%20at%20the,dismissed%20as%20unrealistic%20and%20audacious>.
20. Michael Tanchum, "China's New Military Base in Africa: What It Means for Europe and America," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/chinas-new-military-base-in-africa-what-it-means-for-europe-and-america/> (accessed May 19, 2022).
21. Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, "USAID Signs MOU With Kuwait," November 24, 2020, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6438617/usa-2017-2021-the-journey-self-reliance#:~:text=Conservative%20political%20appointees%20at%20the,dismissed%20as%20unrealistic%20and%20audacious> (accessed May 19, 2022).