The “China Dream” and the African Reality: The Role of Ideology in PRC-Africa Relations

BY JAMES BARNETT
Cover: A Chinese paramilitary policeman patrols past a memorial to the late South African leader Nelson Mandela outside the South African embassy in Beijing on December 11, 2013. South Africa’s ambassador to China has compared Nelson Mandela to Mao Zedong, the Communist leader whose rule saw tens of millions killed by famine and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. (Mark Ralston/AFP via Getty Images)
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promotes its worldview and political and economic model overseas, particularly in the developing world, albeit in a very different manner than it did in the era of Mao Zedong. Under Mao, who fashioned himself the champion of Third World revolutionary movements, China exported a comprehensive, proactive, and universal ideology. Today the party’s theorists are struggling to develop a message of similar caliber. What they have produced so far has not translated into a particularly coherent or compelling “Xi Jinpingism” that appeals across cultures and societies. But this has not stopped the PRC from pursuing an ideologically grounded foreign policy. President Xi speaks frequently of a “Community of Common Destiny,” a still-vague vision for a Sinocentric world order in which the CCP’s model is lauded as a contribution to human civilization, liberal democracy is widely discredited, and the developing world looks to China above all others for inspiration.

To this end, Beijing seeks to provide developing world elites with a malleable intellectual and practical program for advancing illiberal governance. In the intellectual arena, the CCP provides a critique of the existing international order and political and economic liberalism along with a defense of developmental authoritarianism. In a more practical sense, the CCP disseminates certain governance tools, technologies, and practices—such as organizational techniques for managing a single-party state—in a piecemeal and ad hoc manner in order to bolster illiberalism where it already exists. In this sense, the CCP acts as a partner or mentor in illiberal governance rather than as the agenda-setter of a tightly bound ideological coalition.

This ideological element is present in China’s approach to Sub-Saharan Africa, a region long considered to be primarily if not exclusively of economic importance to Beijing. The PRC has earned the reputation for being a pragmatic, transactional actor in Africa, and for good reason. Since 2000, Chinese lending, trade, and investment in Africa have all increased dramatically, while over a million Chinese migrants have moved to Africa to engage in various commercial ventures. The PRC is not selective in its partnerships; it maintains diplomatic relations with all but one African state, and it has long abandoned support for revolutionary armed movements. At the same time, as a continent of 54 mostly developing countries, Africa is central to Xi’s “Community of Common Destiny.” In order to realize this vision, the CCP systematically introduces African elites to its theories, norms, and practices through a variety of avenues, including party-to-party and military-to-military trainings that augment China’s economic ties with the continent.

The impact of these efforts on African politics is quite varied and fluid. Many African elites, such as those in Kenya and Nigeria, appear to see political engagements with the CCP as a cost of doing business with the world’s second largest economy. They have not meaningfully emulated elements of the CCP “model” to date and do not appear to have much appetite for such political learning. In contrast, those southern and east African countries ruled by former liberation movements have tended to be more receptive to Beijing’s lessons in illiberal governance. Many of the liberation movements received some degree of support from China during their armed struggles in the Cold War and drew inspiration from the CCP in notable ways, such as by adopting Maoist notions of the military as a “people’s defense force.” These historical and ideological affinities facilitate close cooperation with the CCP today, representing the clearest example of CCP partnership or mentorship in the realm of African governance.

The CCP’s overall impact on African politics should not be overstated, however. Ideological affinities matter, but economic interests play a greater role in pushing African states into Beijing’s orbit. African states, the former liberation movements included, tend to look to multiple countries for lessons in development and governance—particularly to the East Asian “late industrializers”—rather than trying to replicate any single model offered by China. More importantly, the behavior of Africa’s illiberal regimes is generally best understood as a
product of local and regional politics rather than imported ideologies or practices. In other words, the CCP's support and ideas can bolster illiberal regimes, but African ideas and political realities are ultimately what drive these regimes’ behavior.

Even if the CCP were to develop a more exportable ideology and push African states to adopt it wholesale, such efforts would face notable limits. Africa's authoritarian states generally lack the capacity to achieve anything close to the near-totalitarian control that the CCP exercises. Certain authoritarian regimes, such as Rwanda's and Tanzania's, are relatively disciplined and efficient, and their relationships with the CCP merit scrutiny. But these represent the exception rather than the rule. In the near-term, it seems likely then that the CCP's theories, practices, and technologies will continue to embolden certain illiberal regimes, but no “Xi Jinpingist” state is likely to emerge in a meaningful sense.

The CCP therefore represents a very different ideological challenge than the Soviet Union, the historical analogy that has increasingly been invoked in this era of great power competition. Whereas the USSR and Maoist China sought to overthrow governments and gain satellite states in a zero-sum competition, the PRC today is more circumspect in its efforts to build and sustain its influence in Africa. It enforces notable conditions on its partnerships with African states—such as adhering to the "One China Policy"—but it has not systematically sought to force any state to choose between Washington and Beijing. Unlike the Cold War, US-China competition is not likely to play out as a contest between ideologically opposed camps in a divided world so much as it will be a struggle over the norms and values that each side hopes will guide a globalized world, Africa included.1

To best compete, therefore, the US must first present a positive vision for liberal values and development rather than adopt a zero-sum mindset that is liable to alienate Africans who understandably wish to avoid a repeat of the Cold War. Second, the US must be pragmatic and patient in its approach to Africa, recognizing that it does not have the resources or influence to dramatically reduce China's footprint on the continent in the near future. This will require identifying and prioritizing core strategic interests on the continent that may be at risk while accepting that there are limits to how much any state can shape African geopolitics.

In order to be competitive in Africa in the long-term, the US will ultimately need to focus more on African needs and interests than on Chinese behavior. Forging stronger ties across Africa, the world's fastest growing continent in terms of population, is not simply something that great power competition necessitates. It is a smart move in its own right.
INTRODUCTION

One of the most important debates in US foreign policy circles today is the role that the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ideology plays in China’s foreign policy. After decades of hopeful attempts at constructive engagement, Western policymakers have grown increasingly wary of Beijing’s hegemonic aspirations as well as the draconian domestic policies of President Xi Jinping’s regime. National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien took such a tone in June 2020 when he stated unequivocally that “the Chinese Communist Party is a Marxist-Leninist organization,” a remark that would have met with much eye rolling in the Clinton era. Others have downplayed the importance of CCP ideology and framed Beijing’s hegemonic ambitions in traditionally realist terms. But even many of these skeptics have acknowledged that the CCP is more ideological than most analysts previously appreciated.

In contrast, discussions of ideology have not featured prominently in most analyses of contemporary China-Africa relations. According to the dominant narrative, China abandoned its revolutionary ambitions in the Third World following Mao’s death and now primarily views Africa through a pragmatic economic lens. When China has been discussed as a potential “model” for Africa, it has generally been seen in a depoliticized—and often favorable—light, with analysis focusing on Chinese economic policies as a potential blueprint for industrialization rather than on political theories and systems. Many critics of China’s engagement in Africa have similarly focused on the deleterious effects of Chinese investment, highlighting the negative impacts on local labor conditions, government transparency, and the environment. A common theme throughout these narratives—

Photo Caption: A group of performers hold Chinese flags during the inauguration ceremony of Ivory Coast’s new 60,000-seat Olympic stadium, built with the help of China, in Ebimpe, outside Abidjan, on October 3, 2020 ahead of 2023 Africa Cup of Nations. (Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images)
pro-China, China-critical, and neutral—is that China primarily acts as a businessman in Africa.

This narrative of pragmatic China-Africa relations gets a lot right. The CCP has indeed abandoned the overtly revolutionary policies of the Mao era, and its immediate interests in Africa have less to do with exporting a political philosophy than with more conventional diplomatic and economic considerations. African governments, for their part, are primarily interested in Chinese trade and investment rather than CCP ideology.

But ideology nevertheless underpins China’s engagement with Africa in important ways. The CCP has ambitious aspirations to achieve a form of global hegemony and redefine international norms of governance in the coming decades. Towards this end, Beijing hopes to align more governments, particularly those in the developing world, with its political and economic theories and practices. The CCP is laying the groundwork in places such as Sub-Saharan Africa through its media and official rhetoric as well as through personal engagements with African elites.

This report examines these avenues through which the CCP disseminates its inchoate ideology and its governance practices and assesses some of the notable effects such efforts have had on African politics to date. It is not meant as an exhaustive overview of China's impact on African politics, nor is it meant to comprehensively capture African attitudes toward China. The report focuses on African political elites rather than the broader public. This is not because African public opinion does not matter—and it is worth noting up front that new polling suggests that the US maintains a slight edge over China on the continent in the realm of soft power. Rather, the CCP focuses its efforts on winning over and mentoring African elites, from heads of state to military officials and prominent journalists. Hence the importance of studying these relationships.

Chapter One offers an historical overview of the PRC’s engagement with Africa through the early 21st century, focusing on the shift from the active export of revolution in the Maoist days to a more conservative approach at the end of the Cold War. The second chapter offers a brief summary of the PRC’s primary strategic interests in Africa today, and examines some of the ways in which China presents itself as a pragmatic partner that avoids “interference” in African states.

Chapter Three looks at the CCP’s evolving ideology, both the role it plays at home and the ways in which it underpins a still-ambiguous vision for a new international order. This is not meant to offer a precise definition of the CCP’s ideology, which remains a matter of scholarly debate. Rather, I attempt to disentangle some of the threads in the CCP’s theories and rhetoric to show what type of “model” and international “community” the CCP purports to offer the world, as well as to show the limits to this model’s appeal. Chapter Four examines the primary avenues that the CCP uses to promote this model to African partners.

Chapter Five looks at some of the effects of this ideological dissemination in Africa. The chapter compares the reactions of political elites in two loose sets of countries: Kenya and Nigeria, two multiparty democracies that have relatively non-ideological, business-oriented relationships with China; and the southern and east African countries ruled by former liberation movements, regimes which, as a whole, enjoy strong historical and ideological ties with the CCP in addition to economic ties. The CCP clearly sees itself as a mentor in illiberal governance to many African regimes, some of which have tangibly emulated elements of the CCP’s political and economic model, but we should not overstate the CCP’s influence in this regard. This is not to excuse Beijing’s promotion of authoritarianism. Rather, the illiberal behavior of the African regimes in question is best understood by looking at local political realities rather than any theories or practices adopted from Beijing.

The report concludes by comparing the Cold War in Africa with today’s contest between the US and China, underscoring some of the notable differences in order to suggest how the US can best compete with China in the long-term.
The modern era of Sino-African relations began in the 1950s, when the newly formed People’s Republic of China (PRC) began cultivating ties with various African independence movements during the twilight of European colonialism. Mao Zedong’s interest in Africa grew in the 1960s as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, after which Mao sought to outflank Moscow as the leading force of revolution in the Third World. Maoism had natural appeal to African revolutionaries. Mao emphasized that revolution should not be dictated by Europeans but should rather conform to the local social and economic conditions of the pre-industrial world. In contrast to the Bolsheviks’ urban...
roots, Mao’s CCP could claim to be a movement of the rural masses. China’s experience with European colonialism, although quite different from Africa’s, also produced a degree of Chinese-African solidarity.  

For an impoverished country, Mao’s PRC was relatively generous with its assistance to Africa for both ideological and geopolitical reasons. Eager to present China as the granary of the world, the PRC increased its food aid to Africa in 1960 even as millions of Chinese starved amid the Great Leap Forward.  

Across the continent, the PRC distributed translations of Mao’s *Little Red Book*, established local radio stations to compete with Soviet propaganda, and dispatched doctors and engineers to support rural development projects. In the first Chinese mega-infrastructure project in Africa, thousands of Chinese laborers helped build the Tanzania-Zambia Railway in the early 1970s to ensure that landlocked Zambia would not be dependent on Portuguese-controlled Mozambique or white-ruled South Africa and Rhodesia for its trade.  

Mao’s CCP invited thousands of African politicians, soldiers, militants, and students to China on a host of scholarships and training programs that covered everything from Marxist economics to guerrilla warfare. One of the most consequential figures to attend these trainings was Tanzania’s founding president Julius Nyerere. Affectionately known as “teacher” by Tanzanians, Nyerere and his Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) party were the lodestars of Pan-Africanism and African socialism throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Despite his own peaceful rise to power, Nyerere supported Pan-African armed movements across southern and eastern Africa that sought to unseat the existing colonial, minority-rule, or ostensibly neocolonial regimes in their respective countries. These so-called liberation movements included the ANC in South Africa, ZANU in Zimbabwe, MPLA in Angola, and FRELIMO in Mozambique. All these movements established offices in Dar es Salaam, with numerous young African revolutionaries, including future statemen, studying leftwing political philosophy at the city’s flagship university.  

Nyerere drew inspiration and support from the CCP as he went about hosting these movements. In addition to inviting revolutionary leaders to China for political-military trainings, the Chinese funneled weapons to several of the movements through Tanzania and helped run training camps in the country. Many of the liberation movements employed Maoist guerrilla tactics to notable effect. Josiah Tongogara, a senior commander in ZANU’s military wing, credited his education at the PLA’s academy in Nanjing with his shift to population-centric rural warfare, which proved decisive in ZANU’s eventual victory against Rhodesia’s white minority government. Many other liberation movement leaders, including Nyerere, praised Mao for providing the political and military tools needed to achieve African independence. China’s popularity across the continent paid off in 1971, when African votes helped the PRC replace Taiwan at the UN.  

Beneath the flowery rhetoric of Sino-African solidarity, however, the PRC could be as unscrupulous as any other Cold War power as it navigated the complexities of African politics. At one point or another the PRC backed all three factions in the Angolan Civil War, including concurrently sponsoring the US- and South Africa-backed FNLA and UNITA against the Soviet- and Cuban-backed MPLA (which eventually won power). Although a few ANC leaders received guerrilla training in China, the PRC gave more support to the ANC’s rival, the Pan Africanist Congress. Beijing only strengthened ties with the ANC in the 1980s once it became apparent that it was the ascendant faction among the South African liberation movements. In fact, the PRC maintained discrete trade ties with South Africa’s apartheid governments for many years and allegedly supported its nuclear program.  

There were limits to the Maoist influence in Africa. Mao’s most important partner, Nyerere, drew as much inspiration from British Fabian socialism—a product of his time studying in Edinburgh—as from anything Chinese. Nyerere adopted Maoist aesthetics, from the Mao suit to TANU’s “Green Guards,” and modeled the
The Tanzanian People’s Defence Force (TPDF) on the PLA. But his landmark socialist program of villagization, Ujamaa, was rooted more in a romanticized notion of pre-colonial African “class harmony” as opposed to the Marxist theories of class conflict that underpinned Mao’s brutal expropriations. Likewise, while many of the other liberation movements had varying degrees of cooperation with China, nearly all drew inspiration if not material support from a variety of other regimes seen as anti-colonial, including the USSR, India, Cuba, and Albania. Mao’s China was a natural partner for African revolutionaries, but it was far from the only force shaping Africa’s revolutionary politics.

**World Revolution No More:**

**PRC-Africa Relations from Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao**

Following Mao’s death in 1976, the PRC began adopting a subtler and more economical approach to Sub-Saharan Africa. Beijing maintained ties with several African liberation movements, but the CCP no longer spoke loudly of global revolution. Mao’s rigidly ideological foreign policy, his paranoid purges of Chinese diplomats, and his support for armed groups fighting post-colonial African governments had limited the PRC’s ability to make friends on the continent and, indeed, had created multiple enemies. His successors saw a need to correct this approach. The CCP began adopting a more modest foreign policy agenda as it shifted its focus to internal reforms under Deng Xiaoping, reflecting the Sichuan native’s cautious “24-character strategy” for China to “hide its capabilities and bide its time.” Africa, however, remained important for the PRC’s diplomacy: Beijing had earned diplomatic recognition from 44 African countries by the mid-1980s, and the CCP benefitted from widespread indifference if not sympathy from African governments amid the international outcry over the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. But China’s aspirations in Africa at this time seemed much humbler than they had been in Mao’s day.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Africa’s strategic importance to the US diminished. Just as the “China Miracle” narrative was beginning to emerge, relative Western disengagement from Africa offered Beijing an opportunity to present itself as the partner of choice to African states eager for investment and trade. President Jiang Zemin announced his “Going Out” policy in 1999 to stimulate Chinese investment overseas, particularly in emerging markets. The Chinese considered Africa a “high dividend, high risk” market where they would face minimal competition from other countries. For their part, African governments welcomed Chinese investment as they faced significant risk premiums in international debt markets and were happy to secure loans that were not conditional on the types of economic and governance reforms pushed by western donors.

Chinese loans to Africa thus increased exponentially, from $129 million in 2000 to a high of $29 billion in 2016, while the total volume of China-Africa trade also steadily increased. Along with trade and investment came a wave of Chinese migrants to the continent. Between short-term contract workers and traders and small business owners looking to establish new bases of operation, it is estimated that anywhere between one and two million Chinese presently live in Africa.
The PRC’s primary strategic interests in Africa can be loosely categorized as such:

- **Economically** the PRC seeks to maintain continued access to African natural resources and markets for its exports while also investing in Africa’s long-term economic potential.
- **Politically** the PRC seeks to maintain support from African countries in important international fora like the UN General Assembly.
- **Militarily** the PRC seeks to incorporate East Africa into its strategy for projecting power in the Indo-Pacific region and also protect Chinese investments and citizens in Africa from local threats.
- The CCP seeks to **build soft power** by presenting itself as a responsible global actor through participation in multilateral initiatives such as UN peacekeeping operations.
- The CCP also seeks to **demonstrate to the Chinese people** that it is restoring China to global prestige and power by expanding its diplomatic, commercial, and military presence across Africa. 25

## The Balance Between Economic and Political Interests

The predominant narrative of PRC-Africa relations in the 21st century is one of pragmatic engagement primarily driven by economic interests on both sides. There is much truth to this. In the near term, the PRC seeks to maintain and expand its access to Africa’s natural resources as well as to African
markets for exports. The PRC also sees tremendous long-term economic potential in Africa, which is expected to have a population of more than two billion by 2050. To this end, the PRC has invested heavily in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Africa. Analysts have suggested that Chinese firms will increasingly offshore light manufacturing to Africa (as well as to Southeast Asia) as wages in China rise. Such a shift would not simply be the result of free market forces, and indeed, the line between public and private economic interests in the PRC is blurred. Rather, the CCP is making a strategic choice, through initiatives such as BRI and “Made in China 2025,” to transform China from the low-cost manufacturing “factory of the world” to the global hub of science and technology. The growth in Chinese investment and construction projects in Africa over the past two decades, which amounts to over $300 billion dollars, should be understood in this light.

At the same time, Africa’s economic significance to China is outweighed by its political significance—at least at present. African states account for less than 4% of the PRC’s global trade balance but constitute more than a quarter of the UN’s membership. Whereas most of the oil and other natural resources China extracts from Africa can be found in other BRI-participating countries, Beijing needs African support within key international fora to advance its global agenda.

China’s investments in Africa are thus not simply intended to make money but also to purchase political clout. Beijing has been quite successful in this regard. Fifty-three out of fifty-four African countries now adhere to the “One China policy,” Eswatini being the lone holdout. African countries’ voting records within the UN align more closely with China’s than that of the US. A study by the AidData research initiative found a positive correlation between Chinese aid disbursements and African states’ support for Chinese positions in the UN, although ideological sympathies also no doubt play a role in this regard (see Chapter Five). African states have supported Chinese candidates for important UN positions, such as the head of the Food and Agriculture Organization. Most notably, many African states have voiced support for China’s most egregious human rights abuses: more than 20 African countries expressed support for the CCP’s crackdown in Hong Kong and none have criticized its repressive policies in Xinjiang.

The CCP places a premium on cultivating strong personal relationships with African officials, an emphasis that has its roots in the Confucian concept of Guanxi (often translated as “personal connections” or “social networks”). The most prominent venue for such relationship-building is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which launched in 2000 and meets every three years at the summit or ministerial level. More recently, the PRC held a China-Africa Defense and Security Forum in Beijing in 2018, which hosted senior military and defense officials from 50 African nations, as well as a Peace and Security Forum the following year. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has increased its cooperation with African militaries since 2000 and there has been a similar uptick in engagements between the CCP and African political parties under the auspices of the CCP’s International Department (ID-CCP), also known as the International Liaison Department or ILD (see Chapter Four). The PRC maintains active diplomatic representation with every African country besides Eswatini, and thousands of African students study on scholarships in China each year.

**China’s Expanding Security Interests**

As its interests in Africa have grown, the PRC has expanded its military footprint on the continent. In 2007, rebels in eastern Ethiopia attacked a Chinese-run oil field, underscoring the vulnerability of Chinese interests in the region. Four years later, the chaotic evacuation of thousands of Chinese workers from Libya during the NATO intervention reportedly pushed Chinese officials to accelerate plans for establishing a permanent military presence on the continent. In 2017, the PRC established
its first overseas military base in Djibouti, located strategically along the Bab al-Mandab just a few miles from the US’s largest base in Africa.\(^41\)

The base in Djibouti reflects a strategic investment not only in Africa but in the wider Indo-Pacific region, throughout which China aspires to achieve maritime and commercial hegemony. Some analysts have suggested that China is pursuing a “string of pearls” strategy to project power throughout the region via strategically located bases such as the one in Djibouti. Consequently, there is much speculation that the PRC seeks a second base in East Africa.\(^42\) The PLA may also have an interest in basing in Walvis Bay, Namibia, which would expand its reach into the Atlantic. Some analysts have suggested that it may already be using its satellite tracking station there for military purposes.\(^43\)

The CCP is wary of accusations of neocolonialism and has sought to present its newly established military presence in terms of benign multilateralism. China has contributed to counter-piracy efforts in the Horn of Africa since 2008 and is a significant contributor of troops to the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.\(^44\) Beijing has claimed that its base in Djibouti is simply a logistics hub for missions such as these.

**The Pragmatic Partner**

The PRC has managed to secure an impressive degree of influence across Africa over the past 20 years, and not simply due to the loans that it has dispensed. It has also been Beijing’s willingness to work with all varieties of African regimes, from democracies to authoritarian states, left-wing and conservative governments, entrenched regimes and those new to power (including those who came to power by force), that has facilitated smooth Sino-African relations. The PRC has presented itself publicly as a non-ideological partner willing to do business with any nation under the principle of “non-interference,” a jab at those Western states that have often made assistance conditional on governance or economic reforms. The PRC speaks of “partnerships” with African states rather than “alliances,” the former connoting a more pragmatic relationship premised on interests and incentives rather than shared values.

The PRC has received its share of international criticism for this seemingly ultra-pragmatic approach, particularly with regards to its relationships with pariah states like Zimbabwe. Amid the violence in Darfur, the PRC faced mounting criticism in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics for its support of Sudan’s dictator Omar al-Bashir. The CCP has defended its unsavory relationships in Africa by suggesting that sovereignty is inviolable and that such issues are “internal” matters, echoing the language it employed over issues such as the Tiananmen Square massacre and Tibet.

The CCP’s claims of “non-interference” in African affairs are belied by multiple instances in which the PRC has interfered in domestic politics to bolster its preferred partner. Chinese officials have allegedly made cash payments to ruling parties or governments in Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Somalia, and Malawi.\(^45\) The CCP bolstered Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF party with an influx of cash ahead of the 2008 Zimbabwe elections.\(^46\) Circumstantial evidence suggests that nine years later the CCP may have given the greenlight to a coup against Mugabe by a rival faction within ZANU-PF.\(^47\)

Even when the PRC does not directly meddle in African affairs, there is a natural power asymmetry that allows the CCP to enforce strict conditions on bilateral relations. According to Eric Olander of *The China Africa Project*, Beijing’s “red lines” include questioning the party line on the Tiananmen Square massacre, the legitimacy of the CCP, Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang.\(^48\) The CCP is not averse to coercing African partners, either when it feels that its “red lines” are being crossed or when it fears that its status as a preferred business partner is threatened: After Kenya banned Chinese fish imports in 2018, the PRC threatened trade sanctions and a termination of its...
funding for Kenya’s landmark Standard Gauge Railway project. More recently, the PRC’s ambassador to Somalia reportedly tried to entice and pressure officials in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland to cease talks over establishing relations with Taiwan, although this effort failed.

While such incidents are notable, African states have not experienced the same level of Chinese aggression as the PRC’s more proximate neighbors in Asia—and Sino-African relations are ultimately stronger for it. The lack of historical baggage has facilitated the PRC’s efforts to promote itself as a more benign partner in contrast to those Western powers whose reputations suffer from the legacies of colonialism and controversial post-colonial interventions. The CCP also claims that it has no interest in forcing African states to adopt its ideology as opposed to Western states that actively, if imperfectly, seek to promote liberal democracy in Africa.

The reality, however, is that the PRC is not the non-ideological actor that it claims to be. The CCP is presently engaged in an unprecedented experiment in authoritarian governance that it believes carries world historical significance. This “third revolution,” to use Elizabeth Economy’s term, entails bold if still vague aspirations to transform the existing international order over the coming decades. Africa, and the developing world more broadly, play an important role in this vision.
Ideology has continued to both legitimate and shape the CCP’s governance in the post-Mao era even as the CCP has moved further from its socialist and revolutionary roots. As Jude Blanchette notes, “Looking back at the great political swings in China since Mao’s death, we see a recurrent pattern whereby seemingly abstruse ideological discussions on topics like alienation, the nature of truth, or the definition of socialism are in fact groundwork for meatier policy debates that begin with references and reinterpretations of the existing theoretical canon.”

Efforts to inculcate ideological fervor in the pursuit of a semi-utopian “China Dream” have been a defining feature of Xi’s tenure that began in 2012. Xi fears that the CCP, and Chinese society more broadly, has become corrupt, decadent, and ideologically bankrupt; that party cadres lack the spirit of self-sacrifice necessary for China to achieve greatness; and that ideological weakness is an existential threat to the CCP.

These fears are most clearly spelled out in the “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere,” also known as Document Number 9, a leaked internal CCP memo from 2013 that warns of seven subversive liberal ideas that...
could spell the end of the Party. These include the notion of universal values, constitutional democracy, an independent press, neoliberalism, and “historical nihilism,” meaning any interpretation of the Party’s past or Chinese history not approved by the Party. This document reflects a core pillar of CCP thinking: that liberal democracy is not a universal good but rather a parochial (and deeply flawed) Western tradition. The CCP fears that Western powers are pursuing a sinister policy of gradual regime change, labeled “peaceful evolution,” through the promotion of such values. The CCP sees in this a danger as grave as any posed by a foreign military. To quote Xi, “If the ideological defenses are breached, other defenses become very difficult to hold.”

Xi’s ideological crusade corresponds with a perceptible shift in the nature of the Chinese regime towards an aspirational totalitarianism. There is debate about how long this shift has been in the making and the extent to which Xi represents continuity or an aberration from his predecessors. (Xi certainly claims to represent the former, as laid out in his 2013 “Two Undeniables” speech synthesizing the Mao and Deng eras.) Whichever view one takes, Xi clearly enjoys a greater cult of personality than any Chinese leader since Mao, as underscored by the abolition of term limits and introduction of “Xi Jinping Thought” (a vague blueprint for rejuvenating China by expanding the CCP’s supremacy over all facets of society under Xi’s leadership) into both the party and national constitution. More worryingly, Xi has technology at his disposal that Mao could have only dreamed of. The CCP is engaged in a massive Al-driven surveillance experiment, including a pilot social credit system, that could give authorities unprecedented control over citizens’ daily lives. China’s “Great Firewall” represents a bold attempt to bifurcate the internet. The dystopian surveillance, interment, and forced sterilization of minorities in Xinjiang region—which some experts believe constitute genocide—and the sweeping extraterritoriality of the Hong Kong National Security Law cannot be brushed off as conventional authoritarian tactics. Xi’s regime is without precedent.

Totalitarianism, as Hannah Arendt explained, is a system in which politics cease to exist. In such a system, the ruling party penetrates so deeply into all aspects of society that the individual has no public space in which to express themself as an autonomous, thinking being. The totalitarian movement exists ontologically above all else—the individual, the family, and the state. Totalitarian rule is very difficult to achieve in practice. In Arendt’s telling, neither Hitler nor Stalin governed as true totalitarians for most of their time in power. Similarly, the term aspiring totalitarian is probably most appropriate for Xi’s CCP, in part because so many of its surveillance tools are still under development. Additionally, politics do indeed exist in Chinese society, albeit within ever-shrinking bounds.

Nevertheless, Xi’s totalitarian aspirations are apparent. The sociologist Stein Ringen notes that the CCP under Xi clearly employs three of the four mechanisms Arendt associated with totalitarian movements: that rule is upheld by terror; that rule reaches into the regulation of natural human bonds and private spheres, including the family, and even mindsets; and that governing is exercised via an extensive impersonal bureaucracy.

Increasingly, the CCP also employs the fourth mechanism of totalitarianism—that the movement justify its rule with an overarching ideology—although it so far only does so partially. Despite Xi’s vocal emphasis on ideology, the Party’s theorists are still in the process of articulating a coherent theory and vision for post-Mao, post-Deng China. Even defining the Chinese economic system is not straight-forward: The CCP insists that it is in a transition state to socialism under a “socialist market economy,” but most economists describe China’s system as some form of authoritarian capitalism, state capitalism, political capitalism, or corporatism.

The ambiguity of Xi’s theories aside, the CCP today shares characteristics to varying degrees with traditional Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, and fascism.
Marxism-Leninism

It may seem laughable that men like Bo Xilai, the former Party Secretary in Chongqing accused of embezzling millions of dollars, have the audacity to claim the mantle of communism. But such cognitive dissonance should not obscure the fact that the CCP’s Marxist-Leninist roots continue to shape its behavior in genuine, if complicated, ways. Marxism-Leninism can be best understood by disentangling the two components. Karl Marx posited an ostensibly scientific theory of economics and history. Vladimir Lenin put this theory into action through an ideology and practical program of revolutionary politics. Marxism remains an important rhetorical and theoretical tool for justifying the CCP’s policies, particularly its positivist claims to have deduced “the laws of history” via dialectical materialism. Some analysts have also suggested that Xi shares Marxist critiques of Western political economy.

Leninism, however, is more relevant to the CCP today. The party’s structure, and indeed its raison d’être as a “vanguard,” is thoroughly Leninist, as are many of the theories that underpin its authoritarianism: for example, the theory of “democratic centralism,” which states that the Party leadership’s vote on a decision is ultimate and binding for every member, thus rendering internal dissent a form of criminal sabotage. Lenin was also one of the most notable advocates of the belief that material conditions rather than political rights are the benchmark of progress, which is at the heart of the CCP’s worldview. And while one does not find much theoretical support in traditional Marxist exegesis for the argument that markets, if they are to exist, must fall under the control of the party, such thinking has some precedent in Lenin’s New Economic Policy.

Stalinism

The CCP never subscribed to the “End of History” hypothesis. The Party’s official position is that the USSR collapsed not because liberal capitalism triumphed over authoritarian communism or even because Glasnost and Perestroika represented too abrupt a reformation. Rather, it was Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 that laid the groundwork for the USSR’s collapse, the implication being that Khrushchev was guilty of undermining Party cohesion if not of being insufficiently totalitarian himself. Xi reiterated this line shortly after his ascent to power when he explained the Soviets’ demise in a speech by stating, “to repudiate Lenin, to repudiate Stalin was to wreck chaos in Soviet ideology and engage in historical nihilism.”

Stalin was the crucial intermediary through which Marxism-Leninism reached China in the first half of the 20th century. Mao, and later Xi, revered Stalin because he succeeded in sustaining a revolution whereas Lenin had only to begin one. Stalin is thus a source of practical lessons for Xi, who, like the late Georgian “Man of Steel,” has to justify the party’s rule at a time when the promised utopia is as distant as ever. Repression becomes the principle means of doing so. Xi’s fear of sabotage within the party, his purges, and his desire to achieve totalitarian control over ordinary citizens more broadly have strong Stalinist overtones. To quote Francis Fukuyama, Xi’s vision “borrows more from Stalin’s Soviet Union than it does from anything in earlier Chinese history.”

Maoism

In his biography of Russia’s revolutionary leader, Victor Sebestyen writes, “Lenin’s tomb once symbolised an internationalist ideology, world Communism. It has since become an altar of resurgent Russian nationalism.” We might say the same of Mao’s mausoleum in the Chinese context today.

Xi has leaned into the CCP’s Maoist roots more than any of his predecessors, reviving the late Chairman as a towering figure of Chinese greatness while eschewing his economic policies and global revolutionary ambitions. Xi, who seems to be personally nostalgic for the Mao era, has resurrected elements of Mao’s political strategy in an effort to correct the corruption and decadence he fears could destroy the Party. These include criticism and self-criticism sessions, the “mass line” approach of improving party relations with the public, the
cult of personality embodied by the canonization of Xi Jinping Thought, even down to the revival of Red Guard songs from the Cultural Revolution. The true Neo-Maoist activists, those who share not just Mao’s chauvinism and authoritarianism but also his leftist economics, have proven useful allies of Xi in his attacks on “historical nihilism” in Chinese society, resulting in the banning of books and termination of professors for questioning the wisdom of the CCP’s founding father.

Fascism

The “China Dream” is one of the most consistent threads in Xi’s narratives. This appears to be a vision of ultra-nationalism and totalitarianism in which the individual forfeits their autonomy to be subsumed into a semi-spiritual, mythologized civilization-state. A 2013 *Beijing Daily* front-page article—quoted by Ringen, who identifies multiple fascistic trends in the CCP—describes the China Dream as one in which:

“the future and destiny of every person is inseparably linked to the future and destiny of the country and nation… patriotism is the nucleus of the national spirit… [and] soul of a powerful and invigorated country which joins minds and gathers strength, and as the spiritual force which strengthens and unites the Chinese people… realizing the China Dream requires the consolidation of Chinese power… the China Dream is the dream of the nation, and is also the dream of every Chinese person.”

Chinese emperors may have claimed divine mandates and been prone to despotism, and needless to say Chiang Kai-shek was a harsh authoritarian, but no Chinese regime ever demanded so much from its citizens in such *Völkisch* terms. At the same time, nationalism has always coexisted alongside Marxism-Leninism within the CCP. As John Garnaut remarked, “Marxism-Leninism did not enjoy an immaculate conception in China. Rather, it was grafted onto an existing ideological system – the classical Chinese dynamic system.” Garnaut argues that it is the legacy of this dynastic system, in which those who are dethroned are not simply out of power but erased from history, that drives the paranoia of the CCP. Lingering resentment from the “century of humiliation” and a sense of civilizational exceptionalism have similarly shaped the PRC’s foreign policy since its inception. Xi and his allies are careful to present the CCP as the natural heir to traditional Chinese civilization and culture (with “traditional” being defined by the Party), including by appropriating elements of Confucianism.

The Community of Common Destiny: The CCP Envisions a New Global Order

Xi’s vision does not stop at China’s borders. Whereas Hu Jintao laid out the CCP’s vision for international relations with the phrase “Harmonious World,” Xi speaks of a “Community of Common Destiny,” implying a more integrated world in which the PRC is preeminent. Xi and his comrades do not export this ideology in a Maoist manner, but they have begun to openly promote their vision as one with global relevance.

In the post-Mao era, CCP officials began speaking more critically of the existing international order in the fallout of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, suggesting that the “Washington Consensus” of neoliberalism had failed and that fatal shortcomings of liberal democracy had been exposed. This trend accelerated once Xi took office. Xi has publicly placed more emphasis on foreign affairs than any of his predecessors, repeatedly arguing in his speeches that the current international order is inequitable and not reflective of the interests of a rising Global South. The implication is that China is best suited to lead the world towards a new order and should be considered the standard bearer of developing countries looking to develop alternative governance models.

In his speech during the pivotal 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi declared that China is “blazing a trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. [Our example] offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up
their development while preserving their independence.”82 Xi has painted a bleak picture of liberal governance, claiming that “since the end of the Cold War countries affected by Western values have been torn apart by war or afflicted with chaos.”83 What is needed, Xi argued in a June 2018 speech, is reform of the international system under the leadership of the CCP.84 The CCP is uniquely suited to this task, as Xi has explained, because China’s party-state model is “a great contribution to the political civilization of humanity.”85 Echoing this sentiment of exceptionalism, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed the importance in a July 2020 speech of “conduct[ing] active international exchanges to better inform other countries and peoples of the world of the scientific and advanced nature of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy.”86

It should be no surprise that as Xi has sought to revitalize ideology within the Party, he has spoken more openly about the superiority of the Chinese system on the international stage. There is an interplay between foreign and domestic politics in any country, but history suggests that totalitarian movements especially lay claim to a form of global preponderance to justify their rule at home. The CCP’s pronouncements on foreign affairs thus always have a domestic audience as well as a foreign one. The classical Chinese tribute system offers a precedent here: while not always economically sound, the elaborate processes of receiving foreign tribute endowed the emperor with a prestige that bolstered his legitimacy among his subjects.87

Nothing the CCP has said suggests that it intends to compel other countries to adopt its system by force (Taiwan is the obvious exception, as the CCP does not recognize its sovereignty) or “rule the world” in a classically imperialist fashion. Chinese officials have criticized the US for its idealistic interventions in the Middle East and suggested that such adventurism is anachronistic in the modern world.88 Rather, the CCP seeks a “partial, loose, and malleable” hegemony89 in which other nations, particularly developing, non-Western nations, recognize the CCP’s accomplishments and willingly adopt the political and economic tools and theories that Beijing exemplifies. This is a world in which liberal democracy is not simply repressed within China, but discredited by much of the globe—left on the “ash heap of history” (as Ronald Reagan had it, with Marxism-Leninism his target).

A Difficult Ideology to Export

Bold as Xi’s vision appears, his ideological project suffers from significant shortcomings. For starters, The China Dream is ambiguous, full of contradictions (chief among them the contrast between Marxist-Leninist theory and a capitalist reality), and lacking in the revolutionary appeal of Maoism. Xi is himself a far less powerful speaker and writer than the late Chairman. Xi’s language is proceduralist and technical, the rhetoric of a “company man” rather than a revolutionary, to quote James Palmer.90

In the global arena, the primary shortcoming of the “Community of Common Destiny” is that Xi has yet to fully articulate this “community” as a proactive vision for a new world order. What this vision entails, apart from greater Chinese overseas investment via BRI, is not entirely clear. Rather, the CCP offers an anti-ideology, to use Nadège Rolland’s phrase.91 This vision is defined almost exclusively by what it opposes: a Western-led international order rooted, in aspiration if often not in practice, in the promotion of liberal values. Jiang Shigong, a prominent Party-aligned scholar fond of the German theorist and Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, encapsulates this anti-ideology when he writes that, “[the world order] faces three great unsolvable problems: the ever-increasing inequality created by the liberal economy; state failure, political decline, and ineffective governance caused by political liberalism; and decadence and nihilism created by cultural liberalism.”92 93 [emphasis mine]

These attacks on the status quo resonate with many around the globe. Anti-liberal critiques have gained traction in the US and Europe in recent years in response to persistent inequality, political gridlock, polarization, and social unrest. In
the developing world the CCP hopes this message will resonate even more under the assumption that elites in such countries are resentful of a Western-dominated global order and desire rapid modernization without political liberalization. This ethos was captured by Former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing when he defended China’s investments in African nations with records of human rights abuses: “Do you know what the meaning of human rights is? The basic meaning of human rights is survival—and development.”

But Xi’s vision of a global community stops there, with a critique of the status quo and a vague defense of developmental authoritarianism. He lays no claims to universal truths or a common pursuit towards a higher cause of the sort that animated traditional Marxism-Leninism or Maoism. This is a crucial source of tension within Xi’s vision: The CCP claims not to believe in universal values, but moral relativism is not strong glue for an international order. The CCP may yet refine its vision into something more proactive, specific, and compelling. But for now, the most coherent element of Xi’s vision is the ultra-nationalism of the China Dream, which has no intrinsic appeal to non-Chinese. It is telling that CCP officials have taken interest in studying the demise of Japan’s imperial project during the Second World War. Japan failed to win the support of the populations it colonized for a variety of reasons such as the brutality of its occupation forces, but also because its imperial ideology was fascistic, premised on the superiority of Japanese civilization and its Kokka Shinto state religion. Ian Buruma summed up this dilemma pithily: “Uniqueness cannot be exported.”

In short, while many political elites in the developing world sympathize with Beijing’s anti-ideology, it is not clear that this is sufficient for Xi to achieve the new international order he seeks, vague as it is. There are two other important constraints on Beijing’s ability to promote its vision. First, the demographics, geography, culture, and history that laid the groundwork for China’s rise are unique to China, suggesting that a comprehensive “Beijing Model” is not applicable to most countries. China is not unique, however, in achieving high rates of growth and modernization since the 1980s. Many of its neighbors have achieved similarly impressive growth in recent decades, hence the “Asian Tigers” moniker. Developing countries are therefore liable to pick and choose specific elements of the CCP’s political and economic model, as well as those of other economies that have rapidly developed, rather than adopt a single blueprint from Beijing.

The CCP’s engagement with Africa reflects this reality, as the next two chapters will explain. Beijing no longer exports a coherent, universal ideology in a comprehensive manner, nor does it set the agenda of a tightly bound coalition of ideologically aligned movements like the Stalin-era COMINTERN. Rather, the CCP promotes its model and evolving worldview to African states in a subtle, piecemeal, and ad hoc manner.
The best way to understand the CCP’s role in shaping African governance is as a partner or a mentor in illiberal governance. To this end, the CCP provides certain theories as well as practical tools, mechanisms, and technologies to bolster such governance where it already exists—with varying success, as the next chapter will explain—but it does not attempt to create regimes in its exact image.

Take the issue of surveillance technology: Chinese firms are far from the only ones selling such technology to repressive regimes—Israeli, German, and American companies have all done so.\(^\text{97}\) China’s exportation of surveillance technology is not merely driven by commercial interests, however. The CCP is methodically attempting to shape international norms of cyberspace and privacy by appealing to regimes that seek to spy on their citizens and/or desire greater regulation or censorship of the internet. As it attempts to develop a panopticon-like surveillance regimen at home and achieve AI supremacy by 2030, China has also become the world’s leading seller of AI-powered surveillance equipment globally.\(^\text{98}\) These technology transactions are thus part of an ideological project, albeit one that looks very different from conventional Marxist proselytizing.

Keeping in mind that these are developing trends, we can nonetheless identify some of the vectors through which the

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Photo Caption: A Chinese engineer poses with construction workers from Mozambique for a photo on September 27, 2015 in Beira, Mozambique. (Thomas Trutschel/Photothek via Getty Images)
CCP attempts to promote its inchoate ideology and diffuse elements of its political and economic model in Africa.

“Stability Comes First”: Shifting Rhetoric in Sino-African Relations

The past decade has seen a notable shift in China-Africa relations as CCP officials have begun more openly suggesting that African governments can learn from China’s success. Whereas the PRC’s first whitepaper on Africa policy, released in 2006, emphasizes the importance of African states forging their own development paths, the 2015 whitepaper claims that “the development strategies of China and Africa are highly compatible.”99 The document lists a litany of grievances against the existing international order before noting that the PRC is particularly suited towards partnerships with the Global South in areas such as media, law enforcement, and the judicial process. In a 2018 speech, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that China and Africa were “natural allies” given shared grievances over the international order and similar experiences with colonialism.100 And in contrast to earlier summits, the 2018 FOCAC echoed the CCP’s emerging “anti-ideology” in the form of the “Five No’s,” which include a commitment to no-strings-attached economic assistance, a clear jibe at the traditional international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF.101

Chinese state media outlets have also suggested that the CCP offers an alternative model to liberal democracy in Africa. These outlets have often run op-eds by Africans praising the CCP so as to avoid the impression that the Party is overtly exporting its ideology. To take a few examples: During the violent 2007-2008 Kenyan election crisis, an editorial in People’s Daily entitled “Stability comes first in country’s development,” claimed that “transplanted Western democracy could not take hold in Africa... The post-election crisis in Kenya is a product of democracy bequeathed by Western hegemony; and a manifestation of values clashing when democracy is transplanted onto disagreeable land.”102 In 2017, People’s Daily published an op-ed by a Tanzanian journalist praising the CCP single-party model and suggesting that Tanzania’s ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party (the successor to TANU) should revert to the single-party system of Nyerere’s day in order to foster development and peace.103 In May 2020, a Kenyan writer penned an op-ed in Global Times praising China’s COVID response and imploring Africans to learn from the CCP’s political philosophy; African politics are corrupt and ethnocentric, the author argued, whereas the CCP is strong because it is ideologically grounded. 104 105

Experience-Sharing in Practice: Beijing’s Bilateral Trainings

The most notable efforts to promote and diffuse elements of the CCP model occur behind closed doors under the auspices of party-to-party, military-to-military, or other professional trainings. The CCP’s International Department (ID-CCP) plays a crucial role in these efforts, bolstering the CCP’s relationships with foreign political parties and elites. The ID-CCP’s external engagements, not simply in Africa but globally, have increased under Xi as part of a larger centralization of power that has weakened the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.106 The ID-CCP has several advantages over the MFA: whereas the latter is bound by tight diplomatic protocol, the ID-CCP has more flexibility to engage with a variety of foreign political actors, including party powerbrokers or rising stars within who do not hold official ministerial positions.

ID-CCP engagements with foreign political parties often take place in China, allowing the CCP to carefully showcase the fruits of its system and attempt to dispel criticisms. In November 2019, for example, the ID-CCP sponsored a Potemkin village-like tour of Xinjiang intended to show how the CPP’s policies foster “ethnic harmony.”107 Party-to-party trainings also serve as a form of “authoritarian diffusion,” to quote Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader, as they allow the CCP to provide lessons in specific authoritarian governance practices and socialize partners into CCP ideology.108 These lessons can cover everything from the abstract such as Marxist political theory and development
economics to more practical lessons on managing party cadre inspections or developing multimedia strategies. While the trainings are couched in the language of “cooperation” and “exchanges,” there is a clear pedagogical dynamic in which CCP officials are teachers and Africans are students.

The trainings are a prime vector for cultivating Guanxi as well as for collecting intelligence. African officials seem to respond positively to the engagements. By all accounts, the CCP acts a gracious host to African officials, rolling out the red carpet and offering high-level access to Chinese policymakers. The ID-CCP clearly views Africa as a priority region: seven of the 20 parties with the most engagements with the ID-CCP between 2002 and 2017 were African, according to data collected by Hackenesch and Bader. In 2019, the ID-CCP reported 24 engagements with African parties according to reports collected from its website and also held a virtual seminar with South Africa’s ANC in June 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CCP is pragmatic in its engagements with African parties, seeking to maintain relationships with the dominant political party in a given country rather than cultivating insurgent upstarts. Consequently, the ID-CCP engages almost exclusively with ruling parties and their coalition partners in Africa. For example, the ID-CCP meets frequently with South Africa’s ANC and its smaller coalition partner, SACP, but not the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a left-wing rival of the ANC that shares many of the CCP’s critiques of Western hegemony and neoliberal economics. Similarly, the African party with which the ID-CCP held the most engagements between 2002 and 2017 was the National Congress Party (NCP), Sudan’s now defunct ruling party. One would not think that the Leninist CCP has much in common with an Islamist party, but there is a clear logic to such engagements: China has made major investments in Sudan’s oil sector over the past two decades, and party-to-party trainings are one way for the CCP to remain close to its business partners, especially when those partners are fellow authoritarians like the NCP. The CCP is also opportunistic, identifying potential partnerships as they emerge: the ID was quick to host officials from Tanzania’s semi-autonomous Zanzibar archipelago after a national unity government was formed in 2010, having previously ignored the opposition component of the unity government.

The PLA’s trainings of African militaries are another vector for the CCP to disseminate its ideology, namely the PLA’s “party-army” model. Each year the PLA trains thousands of African officers and NCOs in China, through which African soldiers are exposed to a theory of civil-military relations that is fundamentally incompatible with constitutional democracy. Rather than being subordinate to elected authorities, the PLA is inextricably part of the CCP. Its paramount purpose is to ensure the survival of the CCP regime. It was founded as the armed wing of an insurgent movement whose leader believed that “political power comes from the barrel of the gun.” As explained in the next chapter, several African liberation movements that adopted Maoist models in their insurgent days have since imposed party-army models on their countries.

Finally, the Chinese disseminate unique ideas and practices in a variety of professional fields, from journalism to engineering, through a host of government-sponsored scholarships and training programs designed for African professionals. As with the ID-CCP’s political engagements, these programs reflect the CCP’s perception of “Africans-as-consumers of Chinese knowledge and not experts” in their own right, to quote Lina Benabdallah. Despite the rhetorical emphasis on South-South cooperation, the CCP clearly views itself as a mentor to African elites rather than as their equal.

The PRC is not alone, of course, in promoting its values and interests in Africa through party-to-party or military-to-military engagements and the like. The US and Europe remain popular destinations for military education for African officers, and a variety of democracy promotion organizations, such as the US’s National Endowment for Democracy and the German Stiftungen, are active in Africa. What distinguishes the PRC is
that it is the only country engaged in a relatively systematic effort across the continent to promote distinctly illiberal ideas, norms, and political practices. Russia and Saudi Arabia are authoritarian states and are increasingly involved in African affairs—often in a destabilizing manner—but neither has established as institutionalized an approach to disseminating an authoritarian political model on the continent. But while China is the most significant global advocate of authoritarian governance, the effects of Beijing’s engagement on African politics to date are less clear-cut.
The variations across Africa’s political landscape and the evolving nature of Beijing’s engagements with the continent preclude a succinct assessment of the PRC’s impact on African politics. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some general conclusions about how African political elites view China’s economic and political models (as many Africans distinguish between the two), the extent to which the CCP’s “anti-ideology” resonates with African elites, and the ways in which African parties have employed some of the authoritarian governance practices that the CCP promotes. We can also predict, with caveats, how China will continue to try to shape African governance moving forward and what this will mean for the continent.

Admiring the “China Miracle” from Afar: African Interest in the Chinese Economic Model

There is an understandable interest among African elites in learning from China’s development success. In 1960, most African states enjoyed similar or higher GDPs per-capita than China. In the decades since, more than 850 million Chinese

Photo Caption: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni (R) and China’s third vice prime minister, Wang Yang (2nd L) cut a red ribbon during the inauguration ceremony of the Chinese-funded 51-kilometer expressway linking the capital city and the international airport in Entebbe, Uganda, on June 15, 2018. (Sumy Sadurni / AFP via Getty Images)
have lifted themselves out of poverty while most African economies have fared much less impressively. This lends itself to a natural sense of admiration for China’s economic model as well as a belief that similar growth could be achievable in Africa with the right policies. Unsurprisingly, discussions of economic policy and development programs often feature prominently on the agenda in the CCP’s exchanges with African ruling parties. Additionally, many African governments appear to share some of the CCP’s criticisms of the institutional architecture of the international economic order. In July 2019, for example, the African Group of the World Trade Organization (WTO) joined China en masse in opposing the US’s veto power over appointments to the body’s trade court.

However, it is not only China but the East Asian economies more broadly that serve as economic lodestars to the developing world. The extent to which a government sees China as the best model as opposed to one of its neighbors varies a great deal across the continent. Since the 1990s, Ethiopia has sought to emulate the state-led development model of China, but also has shown an interest in the Chaebol conglomerate system of South Korea. Economic planners in Kenya have traditionally been more interested in learning from Singapore and Malaysia. Similarly, the Rwandan regime of Paul Kagame has drawn many comparisons to Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore due to Kagame’s efforts to rapidly develop his small nation under a highly centralized and authoritarian regime.

There are vast political, demographic, and economic differences between China and Africa that prevent any African country from adopting the “Beijing Consensus” in toto. As David Shinn and Joshua Eisenmann note, China’s economic success was contingent on numerous factors—such as internal market integration, developed state institutions, and a high national savings rate—that most African countries lack. Additionally, the influx of foreign capital and technology was a sine qua non of the “China Miracle.” Foreign investors have so far not shown the same appetite for Africa, however. These crucial differences are apparent to many African elites. As one Zanzibari politician noted to the author, an ID-CCP-sponsored trip to China left members of his party split on the question of the “Beijing Consensus”: Those who had minimal experience in business or economic planning were thoroughly impressed and sought to implement the CCP’s development advice, while those with a stronger understanding of economics were skeptical that China could offer many lessons to a small archipelago with a population of a little over a million.

African leaders therefore tend to experiment with different facets of the various economic models of the East Asian powerhouses, China among them. Certain Chinese promoted policies, such as special economic zones (SEZs), agricultural co-ops, and agro-processing facilities, have become popular with economic planners in countries like Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, and Ethiopia, in part because these programs are often supported with Chinese capital. China’s economic relationship with Africa cannot be reduced to pure statistics: with Chinese investment and trade come certain ideas, norms, and practices related to business and development that are liable to shape the political economy of the country in question. But no African government has yet implemented what we might consider a “Beijing model” of growth in a wholesale fashion.

Business First: Kenyan and Nigerian Elites Engage the CCP

Given China’s economic importance to Africa, we must consider whether African politicos genuinely seek to emulate China’s political model or instead see participation in ID-CCP trainings and the like as merely the cost of doing business with Beijing. Kenya and Nigeria, economic heavyweights in their respective wings of the continent, are two instructive examples of a pragmatic relationship with China in which ideology appears to play a minimal role. Both countries are multiparty democracies, Kenya since 1992 and Nigeria since 1999, and both were generally aligned with the West during the Cold War. Both faced their share of violence in the post-independence period, Nigeria
particularly during a bloody civil war in the late 1960s, but no Maoist-inspired insurgency ever took power in either country.

Kenyan and Nigerian politics are highly neopatrimonial and are shaped by strong ethnic and regional divisions. The dominant political parties in each country are not organized around ideological lines so much as they serve as vehicles during elections for different cross-sections of the elite to secure votes. Unsurprisingly, these coalitions can be incredibly volatile. For example, Nigeria's current ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), was formed ahead of the 2015 elections with the sole purpose of unseating the sitting People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and was assisted by the defection of a PDP splinter faction. Ahead of the 2020 elections, many APC senators then defected back to PDP, although APC candidate Muhammadu Buhari secured enough votes to secure reelection. The APC is a large, fractious coalition with frequent disagreements between state-level committees and the party’s national body. Similarly, Kenya’s ruling Jubilee party was founded in 2016 ahead of national elections. By early 2019, the party was already showing signs of breaking up as a faction loyal to the current President, Uhuru Kenyatta, began seeking to sabotage the chances of his deputy, William Ruto, ahead of the 2022 elections.

Both Jubilee and the APC have had high-level engagements with the ID-CCP in recent years, which has raised concerns that the CCP is helping these parties adopt more authoritarian practices. These concerns are not invalid, since nothing is preventing Beijing from trying to export authoritarian techniques and technologies to democracies. But the troubling trends in each country are driven more by local political logics and incentives than by any governance philosophy Beijing has exported. The CCP can provide an empirical justification for illiberal policies in these countries, such as when Nigerian first lady Aisha Buhari cited China's social media restrictions to defend controversial hate speech legislation. But in this sense the CCP's illiberalism need only serve a functional role for those predisposed to authoritarianism; such a role could easily be filled by another country (many African governments, for example, have mimicked Western language on counterterrorism to justify repressive policies). There are also limits to the application of the CCP’s practices and technologies in countries like Nigeria and Kenya where bureaucratic and social norms are very different than in China. For example, Chinese surveillance technologies have so far proven ineffective in Kenya, where the installation of Huawei “safe city” systems had no notable effect on crime rates in Nairobi and Mombasa.

Given the fractiousness of the APC and Jubilee, it is hard to imagine that either party will become more CCP-like in a meaningful sense. There is no common vision or experience such as a revolutionary struggle that could bind the party cadres together into a “vanguard” party. There are incentives for each party to seek to retain power extra-legally, which is why President Kenyatta’s appointment of senior military officials to traditionally civilian positions is troubling. But it seems unlikely that either country will abandon the multiparty system any time soon. The current system serves the political elites well enough: there is ample opportunity for self-enrichment, and defecting from the ruling party remains an enticing option for those dissatisfied with their share of the spoils, assuming one can build a coalition with enough powerbrokers to be competitive. In neither country has a single party managed to unify the most important ethnic constituencies in a sustained manner, which would seem to be a necessary precondition of one-party rule. There is no indication that will change anytime soon—Kenya in particular looks set to experience another round of ethnically charged elections in 2022. Additionally, both countries have relatively robust civil societies that could serve as potential bulwarks against a slide into one-party rule.

It therefore seems unlikely that either APC or Jubilee is trying to transform itself into a vanguard party along the lines of the CCP. Jubilee has sometimes spoken of itself as such, but the behavior of senior party members indicates that they are more interested in edging out their rivals within the existing multiparty system.
than in building a durable coalition to transform Kenyan politics. As new parties, the APC and Jubilee may appreciate certain lessons the ID-CCP offers in areas such as developing a party newspaper or messaging strategy. But the relevance of the CCP’s political model is limited to narrow practices such as those. As one Nigerian observer told the author, “the APC is focused on getting votes in strategic areas; the CCP has never had to run in an election.”

A former Kenyan government official similarly noted that “Kenyan political parties are not ideological… [Jubilee] officials see no need for the type of theorizing that the CCP does.” Furthermore, there are strong capitalist streaks in both countries that suggest that there is limited interest in learning from the CCP’s development model.

Jubilee and APC officials likely see party-to-party trainings primarily as a means of staying in the good graces of one of their country’s most important economic partners rather than as avenues for genuine political or economic learning. Former APC chairman Adams Oshiomhole, for example, was highly critical of China before coming into office. He subsequently shifted his tone, which presumably does not reflect an ideological transformation so much as it underscores how China can serve as a political punching bag of sorts in African democracies: When out of power, politicians can criticize the government for selling out their national interests to China, but once in power, praising the CCP seems like a reasonable price to pay for doing business with the world’s second largest economy. (A similar dynamic has been apparent in Zambian politics over the past decade).

This is not to say that China’s engagements with Nigeria and Kenya will not impact those countries’ politics. Indeed, lessons on seemingly innocuous topics like party messaging can advance illiberal norms and practices, given that the CCP does not distinguish between state and party media. But the cases of Kenya and Nigeria underscore the limits of what China can “export” to countries that do not already share important political characteristics with the PRC.

Working from a Strong Foundation: The Liberation Movements and the CCP

The eastern and southern African countries ruled by former liberation movements, as a whole, have been more receptive to Beijing’s political model and worldview than most other African regimes. These movements include the former liberation movements of southern Africa, which form a loose regional coalition and enjoy close party-to-party cooperation. These are:

- Tanzania’s CCM
- South Africa’s ANC
- Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF
- Mozambique’s FRELIMO
- Angola’s MPLA
- Namibia’s SWAPO

These also include the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which seized power in 1991 but has since rebranded as the Prosperity Party (see below); the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) now the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice; and Uganda’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), two movements with intertwined histories that took power in 1986 and 1994, respectively.

The liberation movements do not share a single coherent philosophy. Each movement has evolved since the days of armed struggle (the exception being Tanzania’s CCM, which was never an insurgent movement) as they have faced the complex realities of governing. Despite their interconnected histories, the movements have not always remained on friendly terms: the late 1990s saw former comrades-in-arms turn on each other in separate Ugandan-Rwandan and Ethiopian-Eritrean conflicts.

That said, the liberation movements have shared roots in the in Pan-African and anti-colonial struggles of the late 20th century that make them more amenable to the CCP’s party model and ideology than most other African regimes. As noted in chapter
one, many of the liberation movements drew inspiration from Maoist China—as well as other Asian anti-colonial movements, the USSR, Albania, and Cuba—during their insurgent days. Socialist and Leninist ideas, rhetoric, institutions, and practices have continued to influence how these movements have governed in the post-Cold War era, albeit in complex and varied ways. As Harry Verhoeven writes, the legacies of the left-wing guerrilla struggle have “helped [the liberation movements] resolve, for at least a generation, their post-1989 dilemma of balancing their need for Western aid and the discrediting of command economies with still wanting to retain their leftist commitment to autonomy from foreign interference and embedding the market.”141 Leaving aside notable policy differences among them, the liberation regimes have shared a commitment to “illiberal state-building,” to use Verhoeven’s term, within a Marxist-Leninist-inspired framework.142

The liberation movements still speak of themselves as vanguard parties in the Leninist tradition of mass mobilization. The movements all preside over de facto one-party or dominant-party systems, although what this means in practice varies greatly: Eritrea and Rwanda are highly repressive authoritarian regimes whereas Namibia and South Africa are constitutional democracies in which the ruling party remains dominant through the benefits of incumbency and the prestige of the liberation struggle rather than coercion. The concept of democratic centralism, popularized first by Lenin and later Deng Xiaoping, has been central to the decision-making of the liberation movements.143 And just as Beijing speaks of alternative governance models, many liberation movement leaders have rejected the premise of universal values and argued that liberal systems are a uniquely Western tradition, such as when former South African President Jacob Zuma lamented that his country’s legal framework was not the “African way” but the “white man’s way.”144

Economically, the liberation movements have sought to maintain strong state-led development agendas even as some, such as Uganda, have implemented certain neoliberal policies in line with IMF- and World Bank-led structural adjustment programs. The theoretical framework for these economic agendas remains rooted in a materialist view of human rights in which economic development rather than civil liberties or political participation are the standard of progress, similar to Beijing’s “right to development.”145 Tanzanian President John Magufuli’s quip that “We should put Tanzania first and politics later—Tanzanians need development”146 or Paul Kagame’s suggestion that political liberties are a product of rather than a precursor to development and state-building are reflective of such thinking.147 A Leninist-Stalinist view of ethnicity has also influenced how many liberation movements have governed their heterogenous societies, particularly in Ethiopia. Such thinking posits that material advances will eventually eradicate ethnic cleavages in favor of a national revolutionary consciousness, but that a degree of ethnic autonomy should be tolerated in the interim.148

Finally, the liberation movements share a strong skepticism of or outright hostility to US hegemony and Western interventions in Africa. This has often been underappreciated in American commentary, in part because US officials welcomed many of the liberation leaders as a “new generation” of African statesmen at the end of the Cold War149 and because many of these regimes have played Western policy to their advantage. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, for example, has benefited as much as any African leader from Western security policy in Africa, positioning Uganda as a peacekeeping and counterterrorism partner of choice. Yet the former guerilla leader has not hesitated to accuse the US and Europe of neocolonialism, such as when aid was withheld in response to his government’s repressive laws targeting homosexuals. There is no doubt an element of domestic political theater at play in such comments, but there is also every reason to believe that he genuinely views Western states’ ability to leverage aid in promotion of certain values to be a form of “social imperialism.”150

Given these ideological commonalities, when the CCP engages with the liberation movements, as it does more than any other
set of parties in Africa, it is pushing on an open door in a sense. More so than Kenya and Nigeria, the liberation movements represent the clearest examples of parties to which the CCP has diffused certain ideas and governance practices in support of illiberal state-building projects.

The CCP’s party structure has served as a model for several liberation movements. The policymaking process of South Africa’s ANC, for example, closely mirrors that of the CCP’s: the ANC’s “clusters,” similar to the CCP’s “leading small groups,” work on discussion documents on various aspects of policy which are then transmitted to the National Executive Committee and, once approved, diffused through various government ministries. Policies are revised and refined at the party’s Policy Conference, which is held at intervals between the National Conference, another similarity to the CCP.151

Cadre training is one of the most important areas of engagement between the CCP and the liberation movements. Topics like discipline and loyalty inspections, cadre recruitment strategies, and the organization of youth leagues and women’s leagues feature prominently in ID-CCP engagements with these parties. Cadre loyalty and discipline is crucial to the liberation movements’ succession strategies as the generation that waged the liberation struggle ages and younger cadres who are not bound by the same sacrificial experiences rise through the party. The CCP’s longevity is therefore much admired, as are Xi’s anti-corruption and party discipline crusades. Senior ANC officials including Cyril Ramaphosa (now South Africa’s President), among others, have praised the CCP for the lessons it has offered in these areas.152

The CCP has funded and helped organize party schools within Africa, such as the ANC’s Political School and Policy Institute and the EPRDF’s Central Policy School.153 In 2018, ID-CCP chief Song Tao joined President Magufuli in laying the foundation stone of the Mwalimu Nyerere Leadership School outside Dar es Salaam. The academy is modeled on the CCP’s Pudong Cadre College and will train civilian and military officials form the six former liberation movements of southern Africa once opened.154

Military training is a bedrock of the CCP’s ties with the liberation movements. The PLA tailored its academy in Nanjing to train African liberation movements in the Cold War and to this day, hundreds of officers and NCOs from these movements as well as “militants,” armed party members with no formal military title, attend PLA academies in China annually.155 These trainings include political education centered around the party-army model, in addition to instruction in the nuts and bolts of military organization and warfighting.

The politicization of the military is not a phenomenon unique to the liberation movements, but nowhere else in Africa is the party-army model as apparent. While this model has strong historical and ideological roots in the liberation struggles, it also serves a practical function of bolstering regime security.156 Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF blurs the lines between military and political authority in a Maoist fashion, with the powerful Political Commissariat traditionally being staffed by generals.157 The Ethiopian, Tanzanian, and Ugandan militaries maintain political commissar systems despite their ostensible subordination to constitutional oversight.158 Yoweri Museveni modeled the Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF) after Nyerere’s TPDF, which itself drew inspiration from the PLA.159 Namibia’s SWAPO and the ANC have also adopted politico-military schools similar to those of the PLA.160 While the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) remains a European-style military in many regards and has avoided the same degree of politicization as other African militaries, it is notable that every SANDF chief since the end of Apartheid has come from the ranks of the ANC’s armed wing, uMkhonto weSizwe (MK).161

The ERPDF as a Case Study: Adopting the CCP’s Lessons “with Ethiopian Characteristics”

For centuries Ethiopian monarchs have sought to prevent internal disorder and external invasion by looking abroad for...
When the multi-ethnic rebel coalition known as the EPRDF came to power in 1991, it continued this tradition to notable effect.

The architect of the new Ethiopian state was Meles Zenawi, an ethnic Tigrayan rebel-statesman who served as prime minister until his death in 2012 and whose Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated the EPRDF regime until recently. Meles came from a Hoxhaist background but moved away from the Albanian model once in power, looking east instead. Meles’ theory of “revolutionary democracy” drew heavily on Mao’s New Democracy that explicitly rejected parliamentarianism as bourgeois and Western. Meles took inspiration from Deng’s economic reforms as well as those of South Korea, where the state maintained a strong role in the economy. Cognizant that Ethiopia’s unique character—including its significant ethnic heterogeneity and long history of imperial conquest—limited the applicability of imported ideas, Meles was careful not to rely too much on any single foreign model. He was an original thinker—exceptionally sharp in theoretical matters, equipped with practical political acumen, and possessing the creative sensibility necessary to meld various foreign and indigenous intellectual frameworks into a coherent, though highly controversial, ideology of Ethiopian developmentalism and ethnic federalism. Yet in practical matters of managing his party-state, the CCP was an undeniably important partner.

EPRDF-CCP ties grew after Meles’ crackdown on protests during the 2005 elections, an inflection point that underscored the party’s authoritarian nature. Eager to find non-Western donors that would not look askance at his repression, Meles found a willing partner in Beijing. On the CCP’s advice, the EPRDF launched a massive recruitment drive that quintupled party membership after 2005. In 2010, the two parties signed an MoU at the EPRDF’s request pledging to increase party-to-party cooperation. Since then the CCP has offered the EPRDF advice on everything from managing relations between central and regional party offices (which is crucial in a fractious society in which regional offices correspond with specific ethnic groups) to organizing its women’s league. The EPRDF even sent railway operators to China for lessons in everything from ticketing procedures to track maintenance. At the same time, China has made major investments in Ethiopian infrastructure: Chinese firms built the Addis Ababa-Djibouti standard gauge railroad, a major BRI project, and Ethiopia’s national telecommunications network was mostly built by ZTE under the largest telecomms agreement in African history.

Ethiopia has been undergoing a fundamental political shift since Abiy Ahmed’s ascent to the premiership in 2018. Abiy is very much a product of the EPRDF, having joined the armed struggle as a teenager, but he is from a younger generation than Meles and hails from a long-marginalized community. He has diverged from the late Prime Minister on everything from economics to ethnic federalism, taking the country in a more neoliberal direction while rebranding and restructuring the EPRDF, now the Prosperity Party, in a way that reduces the power of many traditional party elites. Abiy’s ideology is vague and it is not apparent to what extent internal party mechanics, cadre education and the like have changed in line with the Prime Minister’s reforms. Abiy does not appear to have the same instinctive sympathy for the CCP’s worldview that Meles did, which could well lead to a decrease in engagements and tangible policy diffusion between Abiy’s party and the ID-CCP.

Abiy’s politics notwithstanding, China is likely to maintain strong ties with Ethiopia in the near future even if there is less party-to-party engagement. Ethiopia hosts the African Union headquarters and is a geopolitical heavyweight in the Horn of Africa, incentivizing Beijing to stay close to whoever is in power in Addis Ababa. Abiy is pragmatic and will likely seek to maintain Ethiopia’s lucrative partnership with China even as he seeks to attract greater Western investment. He has also shown more authoritarian proclivities than many had initially hoped, suggesting that he may have an interest in at least some of the illiberal governance practices that the CCP promotes, such as
restrictions on the internet. Predicting the future of China-Ethiopia relations is ultimately complicated by the turbulence of Ethiopia’s ongoing political transition as well as the heightened geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa, both of which could combine to significantly destabilize the country in the near future.

The case of Meles and the EPRDF underscores an important caveat to the discussion of the CCP's relationship with the liberation movements, which is that the latter are not passively receiving and replicating Chinese ideas and practices. The CCP has not fully "exported" an ideology in recent years in the same way it did in the Maoist era. (It seems unlikely that Magufuli has perused his CCP-gifted copy of Xi’s Governance of China with the same excitement that Nyerere read Mao’s Little Red Book.) One cannot speak of “Xi Jinpingist” regimes the same way one could say that many of the liberation movements were Maoist in their guerrilla stages, even if they were never full Chinese proxies. Rather, as former left-wing revolutionaries attempting to modernize in a world in which free markets and liberal democracies are touted as the pinnacle of progress, the liberation movements see the CCP as something of a fellow traveler and a source of practical lessons in successful illiberal, single-party governance.172

Still, the liberation parties are ultimately products of their environments more than anything else. To take one example: in the 1990s the new NRM, RPF, EPRDF, and EPLF regimes redefined the geopolitics of eastern and central Africa through a series of horrific conflicts in the Congo and along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border. It was not abstract theories imported from abroad but rather the hyper-militarized mentalities that these movements’ cadres had developed over the years in the bush that drove their hawkish foreign policies.173 In short, the CCP’s ideas and support matter, but African ideas and political realities matter more.

Looking to the Future
Predicting the future of China-Africa relations is exceedingly difficult when the health of the global economy is so uncertain due to COVID-19. The promotion of the CCP governance model is only one element of the PRC’s foreign policy in Africa—the ability and willingness of the PRC to continue investing in Africa will have a far greater role in determining China-Africa relations. Similarly, the attractiveness of the “China model” is inextricably tied to China’s continued economic success. Some analysts—such as Dexter Roberts, who warns in The Myth of Chinese Capitalism that “Stagnation or something much worse happening in China is bad for the world,”174—have suggested that BRI and China’s economic outlook in general are extremely precarious. Others, such as Irene Yuan Sun of McKinsey, suggest that an economic slowdown would in fact accelerate the offshoring of Chinese firms to places like Africa.175 The question of debt will also play a major role in shaping China-Africa relations moving forward, and there is growing concern of an impending wave of African defaults on Chinese loans.176

Nevertheless, we can expect the CCP to continue promoting its model and philosophies in Africa through the avenues described in the previous chapter. In an era of increasing competition with the US and its allies, China will continue to see significant political value in maintaining strong ties with Africa regardless of the continent’s economic significance to Beijing at any given moment. A primary means of maintaining these ties, in addition to distributing largesse, is to continue trying to build sympathy for the CCP’s worldview and garner admiration for its political and economic model. Xi and the party theorists will no doubt continue to develop and refine their ideology in the hopes of formulating a more compelling justification for totalitarian rule at home and creating the conditions for a China-centric order abroad. If they succeed in conceptualizing a more coherent and universal ideology, they may well seek to export it in a more pronounced and comprehensive manner.

What this means for Africa is less certain, but suffice it to say that there are clear limits to how much Beijing can shape African politics. Democracies across Africa are vulnerable, but the threat does not principally come from CCP-like Leninist movements.
To reiterate, Kenyan and Nigerian political elites seem like implausible candidates for a revolutionary vanguard. The ANC, despite its structural similarities to the CCP and sympathy for Beijing’s “anti-ideology,” operates within a relatively robust constitutional framework and must contend with a strong civil society, including powerful trade unions that have often served as a counterweight to the party. In other words, regardless of what type of political system ANC leaders would like to operate in—and some have certainly implied that they would prefer China’s—they are constrained for the time being by social and political realities that are not necessarily of their choosing.

More broadly, African states tend to lack the capacity to achieve anything resembling totalitarian control. Geography and colonialism, among other factors, have produced states whose power is generally limited outside the urban center. Authoritarian states abound, some of them quite brutal, but their brutality is often rooted in weakness rather than strength. The Sudanese regime of Omar al Bashir is a telling example. While sometimes labeled a totalitarian state in the Western press over concerns about genocide in Darfur, Bashir’s crimes against humanity were in fact the product of a deeply insecure regime constantly battling insurgencies in the country’s peripheries. In notable contrast to the PRC, Ethiopia’s EPRDF, though authoritarian, adopted an ethnic federal system in response to centuries of what Meles and his ilk viewed as failed attempts at overly personalized and centralized state-building. To take another example, Uganda, despite Museveni’s wishes, hosts a far more vocal and popular opposition than anything the CCP has had to face.

There are notable exceptions to this trend of fragile authoritarianism. Kagame’s Rwanda is closer to a totalitarian state than any of its neighbors. His highly disciplined and secretive RPF regime is suspected of several assassinations of dissidents well beyond the country’s borders. The CCP’s engagements with the RPF are therefore particularly concerning given the latter’s authoritarian capacity. Take the issue of surveillance: the RPF has long maintained an extensive human surveillance network that has increasingly been augmented with sophisticated technological tools. Whereas Chinese surveillance systems have often proven ineffective in countries like Kenya, Rwanda appears to have the existing internal security architecture to utilize such systems efficiently. The similarities between the RPF and CCP regimes are, of course, limited, the former being rooted in a minority ethnic group for starters. But in terms of countries where something like a CCP-style “controlocracy” (to use Stein Ringen’s phrase) could conceivably emerge, Rwanda is one of the strongest candidates in Africa.

Tanzania’s CCM is another Beijing-friendly party that has demonstrated notable longevity and discipline as well as an unsuble desire to return to formal one-party rule. The party has won every national election since the first multiparty contest in 1995, but its popularity has decreased in recent years, primarily due to frustrations with corruption. President Magufuli’s response has been similar to Xi’s campaigns to target graft and promote ideological vigor, albeit Magufuli’s approach is slightly more erratic. Magufuli has sought to rekindle the spirit of Nyerere’s one-party state in order to strive towards national development, a process that is simultaneously, “radical, reactionary, and progressive” in the words of Dan Paget. Magufuli’s party has waged controversial “morality” campaigns in reaction to “liberal values” being pushed by ostensibly hostile Westerners and has stepped up the harassment of opposition figures. Assuming Magufuli wins the election set for late October, as he is widely expected to, it is likely that a constitutional amendment removing term limits will follow. Given their close historical and ideological affinities, CCM is liable to seek further material support, inspiration, and instruction from the CCP as it seeks to undermine the country’s remaining checks on its power.

While the cases of Rwanda and Tanzania are particularly concerning, the overall picture suggests that few African states will tangibly and comprehensively emulate the CCP’s model.
much more than they already have. Rather, the CCP is likely to continue emboldening illiberalism in the subtler ways described throughout this report, both by providing a theoretical and empirical defense of developmental authoritarianism, and by disseminating illiberal norms, practices, and technologies in a piecemeal, ad hoc manner. These efforts are significant, as they can prove deleterious to African societies in areas spanning from journalism to civil-military relations and because they represent part of a growing challenge to the larger international order. But these efforts are different in nature and require a different response than the ideological contest that is most familiar to the US foreign policy community: that of the Cold War.
Ideology and Geopolitical Competition in Africa

As talk of a new Cold War has grown in recent years, there has been no shortage of commentary highlighting the differences between the Soviet and Chinese challenges. Whereas the USSR was peripheral to the global economy, China is increasingly at its center, complicating any efforts at decoupling, merited though they may be. The Cold War followed on the heels of stunning Soviet military expansion in Europe, whereas the PLA has not fought a major conflict since its bungled invasion of Vietnam in 1979. Ultimately, the competition between the US and China is not one between rival ideological blocs in a divided world but rather a struggle over the norms and values that each side hopes will guide a highly globalized world (it is also very much an economic contest between the world’s two richest countries).

The differences are quite apparent in the context of Africa. The Soviets and Maoist China sought to overthrow regimes and gain proxies across the continent. In contrast, the CCP today is far more circumspect in building influence in Africa. Beijing enforces notable preconditions on its bilateral relations—downgrading ties with Taiwan, not questioning the official stance on Xinjiang, etc.—but it has not waged a zero-sum competition with the US to date. Ethiopia, for example, has reaped the benefits of significant Chinese investment and CCP engagement while also positioning itself as a key US partner in the War on Terror. The CCP has shown no interest in directly overthrowing democracies or working with revolutionary armed movements, of which there are far fewer today than during the Cold War. It has a natural affinity for authoritarian states, but no China-centered alliance of authoritarians has emerged in Africa, where the US and its Western partners also maintain ties with authoritarian regimes. Beijing promotes its

CONCLUSION

Photo Caption: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army personnel attending the opening ceremony of China’s new military base in Djibouti on August 1, 2017. China has deployed troops to its first overseas naval base in Djibouti, a major step forward for the country’s expansion of its military presence abroad. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)
model opportunistically, but it has yet to develop a “Xi Jinpingism” that can cut across cultures and rally the masses in the way that Marxism-Leninism or Maoism could. It seeks at minimum to make the world more amenable to authoritarianism. But this poses a very different ideological challenge than that of the Soviet Union, as authoritarianism is not itself an ideology.

To this end, the US must be thoughtful in its messaging towards Africa as it competes with China. The US should proudly highlight the impressive work it has done and continues to do on the continent, such as the millions of lives it has saved by the PEPFAR program. But a dose of intellectual humility is also called for. The years heralded as the End of History were anything but that in Africa: the 1990s saw numerous wars, genocide, and continued authoritarian repression across much of the continent that was often met with international indifference and occasionally tacit support. The US and its partners made notable advances in shifting towards a more proactive promotion of democracy towards the end the Cold War, principally by attaching greater importance to governance reforms when conditioning aid. But the record has been far from perfect. Multiple Ugandan observers, for example, noted to the author that while there was widespread anger amid revelations that Huawei had helped Museveni’s government hack the phones of opposition figures, many Ugandans saw this as little different than the US and European countries equipping Museveni’s military.

This is not to suggest moral equivalency between the US and the CCP as, needless to say, the two countries represent vastly different political models, values, and foreign policies. This is simply to note two things. First, the US needs to present a positive vision of liberal values and their relationship to development. A zero-sum approach to Africa based on Cold War paradigms of “us vs. them” or the “free world vs. tyranny” is liable to alienate African elites who have no desire to revisit the havoc that that contest wrought on the continent. Vague exhortations to preserve an international order will not resonate strongly on a continent that Western policymakers have often treated as peripheral to broader global affairs. Actions ultimately speak louder than words. To take one example, continued support for Sudan’s democratic transition, precarious as it may be, is far more representative of the US’s commitment to its ideals than any rhetoric about universal values.

Second, while there are certainly ideological stakes to this competition, the US will need to temper its idealistic ambitions with a dose of pragmatism and patience. African leaders will naturally try to play US-China competition to their advantage by maximizing what they can gain from each side. There are many low-cost efforts the US can take to make itself a more competitive partner in the near term, but there is little the US can do to stop China from continuing to build infrastructure, mentor African political parties, or train African militaries in the near future. The US must find a balance between promoting liberal values and avoiding overly moralistic rhetoric. Washington will not win many friends by painting every Chinese loan as a blow against good governance. Africans will see this as paternalistic scolding, particularly in the absence of a serious counter-offer. The US should identify core strategic interests in Africa, mitigate against any threat China poses to them, and respond to any unacceptable Chinese behavior when appropriate; but it must also tolerate a level of Chinese influence on the continent moving forward. Senior US defense officials acknowledged this much in a recent conference when they said, “The expectation is that China will be in Africa for a long time.”

The challenge moving forward for the US and its allies will be to defend and promote the values that are being contested by the CCP while recognizing the limits of any state’s ability to order a chaotic world. The emerging contest between the US and China will undoubtedly affect Africa’s trajectory, for better or worse. But an exclusive focus on great power competition overlooks the tremendous complexity of African politics and is liable to produce significant shortcomings, at best, in any US strategy towards Africa. At the end of the day, we would do well to recognize that the continent’s future is not in either Washington’s or Beijing’s hands.
ANC: African National Congress

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

EPLF: Eritrean People's Liberation Front

EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

FNLA: National Liberation Front of Angola

FOCAC: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

FRELIMO: Mozambique Liberation Front

ID-CCP: International Department of the CCP (also known as the International Liaison Department or ILD)

IMF: International Monetary Fund

MFA: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China

MK: uMkhonto we Sizwe (former ANC armed wing)

MPLA: People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola

NCP: National Congress Party (former ruling party of Sudan)

NRM: National Resistance Movement (ruling party of Uganda)

PLA: People's Liberation Army

RPF: Rwandan Patriotic Front

SANDF: South African National Defence Force

SWAPO: South West Africa People's Organization (ruling party of Namibia)

TANU: Tanganyika African National Union (later renamed Chama Cha Mapinduzi or CCM)

TPDF: Tanzania People's Defence Force

UNITA: National Union for the Total Independence of Angola

UPDF: Uganda People's Defence Force

ZANU-PF: Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front
ENDNOTES


4 A new poll of 18 African countries conducted by Afrobarometer shows that more respondents (32%) see the US as a development model for their country than China (23%). At the same time 59% of respondents had positive views of China’s influence on their country compared to 58% vis-a-vis the US. See Edem Selormey, “African’s perceptions about China: A sneak peek from 18 countries,” Afrobarometer, September 8, 2020, http://afrobarometer.org/media-briefings/afrobarometer-voicesafrica-china-af-ricomedia-briefings/.


6 Ibid., 134.


10 Lovell, Maoism, 216-218.


15 Lovel, Maoism, 200-202; and Verhoeven, “party and the gun.”


20 A Google Books Ngram Viewer search for the term “China miracle” shows a marked increase in frequency beginning in the 1990s.


Meservey, “China’s Strategic Aims.”


Shinn and Eisenman, China and Africa, 365.

This caveat applies to the majority of Chinese society but unfortunately not to the Uighurs, who face an unimaginable level of intrusive control and terror at the hands of the CCP.

Ibid, 43.


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Stein Ringen, The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 139-143.


This analogy only goes so far, however, as the NEP was a temporary effort to stabilize the Russian economy after the Russian Civil War. One can be forgiven, on the other hand, for questioning what sort of socialism Xi’s coterie envision when they speak of capitalism’s eventual demise as an historical inevitability. See Victor Sebestyen, Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 488-495.

Greer, “Xi Jinping in Translation.”


Fukuyama, “What Kind of Regime.”


Economy, The Third Revolution, 36-37; Lovell, Maoism, 421; and Fukuyama, “What Kind of Regime.”

The relationship between the Neo-Maoists and Xi’s CCP is complicated. The CCP has shown no indication of returning to Mao’s socialist economics, and Xi has great reason to fear a Cultural Revolution-style uprising. As Jude Blanchette summed up the dilemma facing Xi: “Crush the neo-Maoists and risk laying bare the Party’s abandonment of its socialist sympathies; allow them to operate untethered and risk a populist revolt.” Quoted in Lovell, Maoism, 438.
Ringgen, The Perfect Dictatorship, 176.

Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul.”

Economy, The Third Revolution, 43.

Tobin, “Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’.”

Brands, “Democracy vs Authoritarianism.”

Xi has delivered more speeches on foreign affairs and defense issues than any PRC leader before. See Tanina Zappone, “Translating Xi Jinping’s speeches: China’s search for discursive power between ‘political correctness’ and ‘external propaganda’.”


Ibid.


“China’s party system is great contribution to political civilization: Xi,” Xinhua, March 5, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/05/c_137015955.htm.


Greer, “Theory of History.”


Ibid.


Perhaps unsurprisingly, Shigong believes empires rather than nation-states to be the natural building blocks of global order.


The CCP seems to follow this practice of outsourcing promotion of its model in multiple domains. For example, while CCP officials generally remain quiet about the applicability of Chinese surveillance technology abroad, Huawei and ZTE promotional materials frequently boast about the effectiveness of their systems in foreign environments. See Iginio Gagliardone, “The impact of


109 Ibid.


111 For his part, EFF founder Julius Malema has criticized Chinese foreign policy in South Africa, accusing Beijing of neocolonialism. The extent to which this anti-China sentiment is driven by Pan-African ideology as opposed to bitterness towards Beijing for its support of the ANC is unclear.

112 Hackenesch and Bader, “Struggle for Minds.”

113 Author interview with Zanzibari politician, July 2020.


116 Benabdallah, Shaping the Future, 114.

117 This is not to suggest that these regimes do not export elements of their ideology in other ways. Saudi government-linked NGOs have a long history of promoting the Kingdom’s ultra-conservative Wahhabi Islam in African Muslim communities. Similarly, Kremlin-linked operatives have engaged in disinformation operations in various spots in Africa over the past two years. Since 2018, Russia has expressed its intention to bolster political, economic, and military ties across Africa and could conceivably end up adopting a systematic CCP-style approach to disseminating its ideology and political model. It has not yet done so, however, and there is good reason to believe that Russia lacks to resources to pull off such an endeavor. See Krithika Varagur, The Call: Inside the GlobalSaudi Religious Project (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020); and “Russian Disinformation Campaigns: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 18, 2020, https://africacenterr.org/special/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/.


123 Many Chinese scholars and officials have traditionally appreciated this fact, but as the CCP has begun speaking more openly of its vision for a new international order, so too have CCP officials begun to suggest that a “Beijing model” will spur African growth.

124 Shinn and Eisenman, China and Africa, 53-54.

125 Interview with Zanzibari politician.


130 Data drawn from ID-CCP website.


133 This is not to suggest that the CCP suffers no internal divisions. But political infighting within the vanguard party of a totalitarian movement takes on fundamentally different characteristics than in a multiparty democracy.


135 Author interview with Nigerian academic, July 2020.

136 Author interview with former Kenyan government official, July 2020.

137 Interview with Nigerian academic.

138 To take one example, Oshiomhole led an APC delegation on an ID-CCP sponsored trip to Beijing in December 2019, during which he praised China’s development progress and thanked the CCP for its support of Nigeria, according to CCP readouts. See “Song Tao Meets with APC Delegation,” International Department – Central Committee of the CPC, December 3, 2019, https:// www.idccpc.org.cn/english/news/201912/l20191218_121207. html.


140 Multiple other movements throughout Africa’s colonial and post-colonial history could be considered liberation movements. But political infighting within the vanguard party of a totalitarian movement takes on fundamentally different characteristics than in a multiparty democracy.

141 Verhoeven, “party and the gun.”

142 Ibid.

143 The EPRDF in particular was vocal in its emphasis on democratic centralism during the period of TPLF dominance. See Tefera Ne- gash Gebregziabher, “Ideology and power in TPLF’s Ethiopia: A historic reversal in the making?,” African Affairs 118, no. 472 (July 2019): 463-484.


147 Verhoeven, “party and the gun.”


153 Verhoeven, “party and the gun.”

Nantulya, “Party-Army Model.”

This model is not without its downsides, however. As the November 2017 Zimbabwe coup made clear, the party-army model can facilitate the efforts of one party faction to oust another.


159 Verhoeven, “party and the gun.”

160 Nantulya, “Party-Army Model.”

161 Interview with Paul Nantulya.


165 Christine Hackenesch, The EU and China in African Authoritarian Regimes: Domestic Politics and Governance Reforms (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2018), 117-118.

166 Verhoeven, “party and the gun.”


168 Clapham, “developmental state.”


172 It must also be stressed that the liberation movements’ ties with Beijing vary in degree. The MPLA, for example, has strong diplomatic, military, and economic ties with China (the latter centered around Angolan oil) but has had relatively few engagements with the ILC. This may indicate that it continues to harbor some resentment against the PRC over Beijing’s backing of its rivals during the civil war even as the two regimes maintain close cooperation in many practical domains. See Christine Hackenesch, The EU and China in African Authoritarian Regimes: Domestic Politics and Governance Reforms (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2018), 183-185.


177 Cheeseman, Democracy in Africa, 17.

178 The Stalinist regime that the EPRDF overthrew in 1991, the Derg, had struggled to expand its reach into much of the countryside, underscoring the limits on totalitarian rule in Ethiopia.


181 Paget, “making Tanzania great.”


