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# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

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## Democratic Backsliding in Sub-Saharan Africa

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global  
Human Rights, and International Organizations  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
United States House of Representatives

September 30, 2020

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Chairman Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on this important topic. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing the official position of The Heritage Foundation.

### The CCP and Democracy

I am going to focus my remarks today on the potential role that foreign powers are playing in the democratic backsliding we are witnessing in parts of Africa. I am unaware of any comprehensive study that has drawn a direct causal link between a non-African country's engagements on the continent and democratic decline. However, the anti-democratic behavior by a number of outside

powers is well documented, and suggests that those countries are contributing to the problem, though the effect may vary according to specific African countries' circumstances.

The most committed anti-democratic activity in Africa comes from the Chinese government. To understand the threat Beijing poses to political liberalism in Africa, one has to first appreciate the depth of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) commitment to its belief system. The CCP has always been ideological, but under President Xi Jinping, who has a Ph.D. in Marxist legal theory and reportedly admires Josef Stalin,<sup>1</sup> the party has intensified its ideological devotion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Garnaut, "Asian Strategic and Economic Seminar Series, August 2017: Engineers of the Soul: What Australia Needs To Know about Ideology in Xi Jinping's China," Sinocism, <https://nb.sinocism.com/p/engineers-of-the-soul-ideology-in> and Tom Hancock, "China's Selective Version of Marxist Theory Is a Puzzle," *Financial*

*Times*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c0a449cc-4595-11e9-b168-96a37d002cd3>.

<sup>2</sup> Javier C. Hernández, "Mao 101: Inside a Chinese Classroom Training the Communists of Tomorrow," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/world/asi>

So what is the ideology? “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” as the CCP prefers to call it, is communism adapted for the Chinese context, meaning it is strongly informed by Chinese history and culture. Socialism, in the CCP’s understanding, is the only tool for avoiding the inertia and attenuation that crumbled Chinese dynasties. It is also the only way for China to return to its place as the preeminent world civilization, resurrecting the country from its nadir during the century of humiliation. This project of “national rejuvenation” requires the subordination of every element of government and society to the party; it requires ceaseless struggle to purify and invigorate the party and to protect the revolution it is executing. The type of weakness the USSR demonstrated in renouncing Stalin in 1956, of tacitly admitting that the party failed, is fatal. Its commitment to an authoritarian philosophy is, in short, an existential issue for the CCP.<sup>3</sup>

The CCP’s intensely ideological nature, combined with its obsession with survival, assures its antagonism towards democracy. In fact, for a regime so obsessed with survival, it would be strange not to oppose a system of government like democracy that would mean the end of the CCP’s reign if it were adopted in China. Senior CCP leadership believes in the democratic threat

explicitly. As just one example, a 2013 CCP communiqué warned CCP leaders of the danger of “constitutionalism,” “universal values,” and “civil society,” all hallmarks of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

In the CCP view, guarding against the democratic threat means not just smashing liberty at home, but battling democracy overseas to keep the virus from spreading to Chinese shores and ensuring an international system amenable to Chinese foreign policy goals. This campaign, the intensity and openness of which varies across the continent, manifests in Africa in a variety of ways. The manner in which China operates in Africa can also damage liberal governance, though some of that effect may simply be a natural byproduct of Chinese engagement and not by design.

Chinese officials criticizing democracy to African counterparts, claiming that the West’s advocacy of it is a Trojan horse to enable meddling in African affairs,<sup>5</sup> is one method of attack. Chinese officials have also blamed multi-party democracy for bringing chaos and poverty to Africa and cheer what they see as the continent’s increasing rejection of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Chinese diplomats in Africa spread the idea that “economic rights” trump fundamental, individual rights

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a/chinese-classrooms-education-communists.html and Hannah Beech, “China’s Chairman Builds a Cult of Personality,” *Time*, March 31, 2016,

<https://time.com/4277504/chinas-chairman/>.

<sup>3</sup> Garnaut, “Asian Strategic and Economic Seminar Series, August 2017: Engineers of the Soul: What Australia Needs To Know about Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China” and Daniel Tobin, “Hearing on ‘A China Model?’ Beijing’s Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2020,

<https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/testimonies/SFR%20for%20USCC%20TobinD%2020200313.pdf> and Tanner Greer, “China’s Plans to Win Control

of the Global Order,” *Tablet*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/china-plans-global-order>.

<sup>4</sup> ChinaFile, “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” November 8, 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation#start>.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Taylor, “Sino-African Relations and the Problem of Human Rights,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 107, No. 426 (January 1, 2008), pp. 63-87, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adm056>.

<sup>6</sup> Denis M. Tull, “China’s Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance and Consequences,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Sep., 2006), pp. 459-479, <http://archives.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/Tull.pdf>.

that form the core of any successful democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Beijing increasingly offers its own model of development—some economic freedom with repressive governance—as a solution for African nations. As early as the 1950s, the Chinese government at times pushed its economic and political model as the one most suitable for developing countries.<sup>8</sup> Since Xi Jinping’s ascension, Beijing has pursued this course more aggressively,<sup>9</sup> and strengthened its capabilities to make its case.<sup>10</sup>

Beijing’s supposed no-strings-attached, “demand-driven” aid policy allows regimes to use the aid to fuel patronage networks that help them stay in power. A study from the College of William & Mary found that Chinese aid results in the recipient

government directing a surge of investment to its leader’s birth region.<sup>11</sup>

China has also supplied the technology, training, and expertise for repression in some African countries. Beijing gave “technical support” on issues such as state security to Zimbabwe’s repressive ZANU-PF party,<sup>12</sup> and several of its companies reportedly provided equipment to jam independent radio broadcasts<sup>13</sup> and surveil telecommunications in Zimbabwe.<sup>14</sup> ZTE, the Chinese government-linked telecommunications giant, provided the Ethiopian regime—at the time one of the continent’s most oppressive—the technology to monitor its citizens’ telecommunications activity.<sup>15</sup> Chinese technicians allegedly helped the Zambian government create a surveillance system targeting political opponents and diplomats as well.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ian Taylor, “China’s Foreign Policy towards Africa in the 1990s,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), pp. 443-460, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/161792>.

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Foot, “Chinese Strategies in a US–Hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 1, January 2006, pp. 77–94, [http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/Foot\\_Chinese\\_Strategies\\_international\\_Affairs.pdf](http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/Foot_Chinese_Strategies_international_Affairs.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “Competing with China,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (June–July 2018), pp. 7–64, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2018/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-junejuly-2018/603-02-friedberg>, and Tull, “China’s Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance and Consequences.”

<sup>10</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping,” Wilson Center, September 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/magicweaponsanne-mariebradyseptember162017.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Axel Dreher et al., “Aid on Demand: African Leaders and the Geography of China’s Foreign Assistance,” AidData Working Paper No. 3,

November 2014, [http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/files/wps3\\_aid\\_on\\_demand\\_african\\_leaders\\_and\\_the\\_geography\\_of\\_chinas\\_foreign\\_assistance.pdf](http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/files/wps3_aid_on_demand_african_leaders_and_the_geography_of_chinas_foreign_assistance.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Alex Vines, “What is the Extent of China’s Influence in Zimbabwe?,” *BBC News*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42012629>.

<sup>13</sup> “All Communications Can Now be Intercepted under New Law Signed by Mugabe,” *Reporters Without Borders*, August 6, 2007, <https://rsf.org/en/news/all-communications-can-now-be-intercepted-under-new-law-signed-mugabe>.

<sup>14</sup> Itai Mushekwe, “China, Russia and Iran helping Zimbabwe to Set-up Own NSA,” *Bulawayo 24 News*, March 23, 2018, <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-technology-sc-internet-byo-131135.html>.

<sup>15</sup> “Ethiopia: Telecom Surveillance Chills Rights,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 25, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/25/ethiopia-telecom-surveillance-chills-rights>.

<sup>16</sup> *State of Internet Freedom in Zambia 2016*, Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa, December 2016, [https://cipesa.org/?wpfb\\_dl=244](https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=244) and “China Media Bulletin: Issue No. 82,” *Freedom House*, March 7,

As part of its effort to burnish its international image and build support for its foreign policy goals, Beijing provides tens of thousands of scholarships to African students to study in China.<sup>17</sup> Under Xi, Chinese universities require students to take courses that include heavy doses of Marxism and Maoism,<sup>18</sup> increasing the likelihood that African students in China are exposed to arguments sympathetic to those authoritarian philosophies.

Similarly, Beijing sponsors trips to China for African scholars, politicians, and media professionals. This charm offensive with African intellectual leaders increases the likelihood they will be sympathetic to, and perhaps even advocate in their home countries for, a political system similar to what the CCP has created.

Chinese state-owned or -linked companies frequently bribe African officials and political parties to win contracts and general favor,<sup>19</sup> an obvious challenge to accountable governance. Similarly, the opaque lending

and tendering arrangements that characterize Chinese economic engagement in Africa lend themselves to corruption, and may insulate leaders from being held accountable by their citizens.

### Other Countries and Democracy

China is not the only country influential in Africa that models illiberal governance. Under President Erdogan, Turkey has steadily grown more authoritarian, while also expanding its activity and influence in Africa. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has grown from 12 in 2009<sup>20</sup> to 42 today,<sup>21</sup> and by 2017 Ankara had signed economic cooperation agreements with 45 Africa countries, up from 23 in 2003.<sup>22</sup> As president and prime minister, Erdogan has made at least 40 trips to the continent,<sup>23</sup> the stock of Turkish FDI in Africa grew from less than \$100 million in 2003 to more than \$6 billion in 2015,<sup>24</sup> and Turkish Airlines, 49 percent of which is government owned, connects to 52 African cities in 34 countries, as of 2018.<sup>25</sup>

2013, <https://freedomhouse.org/china-media/china-media-bulletin-issue-no-82#5>.

<sup>17</sup> "Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Speech at Opening Ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit," *Xinhua*, September 3, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c\\_129946189.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c_129946189.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Javier C. Hernández, "Mao 101: Inside a Chinese Classroom Training the Communists of Tomorrow," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/world/asia/chinese-classrooms-education-communists.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Joshua Meservey, "Chinese Corruption in Africa Undermines Beijing's Rhetoric About Friendship with the Continent," The Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4895, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/chinese-corruption-africa-undermines-beijings-rhetoric-about-friendship-the>.

<sup>20</sup> Akihiro Sano, "Turkey Jockeys with China for Influence in Africa," *Nikkei Asia*, May 12, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkey-jockeys-with-China-for-influence-in-Africa> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> "Turkey Embassies & Consulates," Embassy Pages, September 27, 2020, <https://www.embassypages.com/turkey> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> "Bilateral Relations," Turkey-Africa Economic and Business Forum, <http://www.turkeyafricaforum.org/bilateral-relations.html> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Yunus Paksoy, "Turkey's Ties with Africa Deeper, Stronger in All Areas," *Daily Sabah*, February 24, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/02/24/turkeys-ties-with-africa-deeper-stronger-in-all-areas>.

<sup>24</sup> "Turkey-Africa Relations," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Trade, <https://www.trade.gov.tr/multinational-relations/turkey-africa-economic-and-business-forum/turkey-africa-relations> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Sano, "Turkey Jockeys with China for Influence in Africa."

Ankara is also, at least for now, ascendant in Libya as its intervention there saved the Government of National Accord from a challenge backed by Turkish rivals U.A.E., Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Turkey also has a strong position in Somalia where Turkish companies manage the Mogadishu airport and sea port, and where Turkey has its largest embassy and overseas military base.

In short, Turkey is a major player particularly in North and East Africa. Despite being a part of NATO and an American ally, it is an authoritarian government of the type the US does not want our African partners being influenced by or beholden to.

Other countries with undemocratic systems also have significant influence in Africa. I have already mentioned the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of which are monarchies we can assume have little love for democracy, at least within their own borders. Neither fare well in global measures of democracy. Both are ranked “unfree” in Freedom House’s

2020 Freedom in the World report,<sup>26</sup> and receive the worst possible rating from Civicus, an organization that tracks civic space.<sup>27</sup>

Both countries have spread some of their fabulous wealth to parts of Africa; in 2018, UAE deposited \$1 billion in the central bank of Ethiopia, arguably East Africa’s most important country, and \$1.4 billion in Sudan’s central bank.<sup>28</sup> UAE also has a military base in Eritrea, and its state-owned DP World is rehabilitating Berbera port in Somaliland, and has interests in ports in Algeria, Mali, Mozambique, and Rwanda.<sup>29</sup>

Saudi Arabia is Sudan’s biggest investor. In 2015, the kingdom deposited \$1 billion in Sudan’s central bank,<sup>30</sup> which followed over \$2 billion in support to Sudan between 2015 and 2019 alone.<sup>31</sup> Riyadh also has large agricultural investments in Ethiopia,<sup>32</sup> and in 2016 struck an agreement with Djibouti to eventually put a military base in the country.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2020> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Monitor Tracking Civic Space, <https://monitor.civicus.org/> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Justina Crabtree, “United Arab Emirates Gives Ethiopia \$1 Billion Lifeline to Ease Foreign Exchange Crisis,” *CNBC*, June 18, 2018, (updated July 5, 2018), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/18/united-arab-emirates-gives-ethiopia-1-billion-lifeline-to-ease-foreign-exchange-crisis.html> and “Sudan Central Bank Receives 1.4 Bln Deposit from UAE-SUNA,” Reuters, March 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/sudan-economy-emirates/sudan-central-bank-receives-14-bln-deposit-from-uae-suna-idUSC6N1M6000>.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Wachman, “Business and politics collide in the Horn of Africa for DP World,” *Arab News*, March 19, 2018,

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1269046/business-economy>.

<sup>30</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, “As Economy Crumbles, Sudan Ditches Iran for Saudi Patronage,” Reuters, January 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/sudan-saudi-diplomacy/as-economy-crumbles-sudan-ditches-iran-for-saudi-patronage-idUSL8N14V2WV20160112>.

<sup>31</sup> Mohammed Alamin, “Saudi Arabia Latest Nation to Offer Help to Crisis-Hit Sudan,” *Bloomberg*, January 24, 2019, (updated January 25, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-24/saudi-arabia-ready-to-give-sudan-economic-help-minister-says>.

<sup>32</sup> Christine Spolar, et al., “The Great Land Rush, Ethiopia: the Billionaire’s Farm,” *Financial Times*, 2016, <https://ig.ft.com/sites/land-rush-investment/ethiopia/>.

<sup>33</sup> “Djibouti Agrees to a Saudi Military Base on its Territory,” *Al Arabiya*, December 4, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2016/12/04/Djibouti-agrees-to-a-Saudi-military-base-on-its-territory.html>.

Another wealthy gulf monarchy, Qatar, is also increasingly important in East Africa especially. In 2018, it signed a \$4 billion deal with Sudan to develop the old port in Suakin Island in the Red Sea, adding to its already-significant investments in the country.<sup>34</sup> State-owned Qatar Petroleum owns stakes in hydrocarbon fields in African countries such as Kenya and Mozambique.<sup>35</sup> Doha also sends significant aid to Somalia and other African countries, and recently signed, in conjunction with Turkey, a military cooperation agreement with the Libyan government.

The U.S. should also be concerned for multiple reasons about Russian activity in Africa, including that Moscow is yet another influential foreign player on the continent that despises democracy. Russia is the top arms supplier to Africa, and since 2015 has struck more than 20 bilateral military agreements on the continent.<sup>36</sup> Russian mercenaries are active throughout the continent, and play a major role in the Libyan and Central African Republic conflicts. Moscow has also been in talks with 15 African countries about cooperating on

nuclear energy,<sup>37</sup> and Russian companies have stakes in hydrocarbon deposits in eight African countries.<sup>38</sup>

An upcoming event of concern where, if history is any guide, the Gulf States are likely to have an undemocratic effect is in Somalia's forthcoming electoral process. The last such process completed in 2017, but not before it had degenerated into a bidding war among rival Middle Eastern powers trying to push their preferred candidate over the finish line.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. has spent billions of dollars in Somalia, partly in hopes that a genuine democracy will take root there, and these countries' meddling in the electoral process makes it harder for the U.S.

I have seen no evidence that the Gulf States or Turkey attack the idea of democracy in the way the Chinese government does. However, even if they have a neutral perspective on democracy in their foreign policy, there is still the moral example these countries set, and their willingness to tamper in Somalia's electoral process

<sup>34</sup> "Sudan, Qatar Ink \$4 Billion Deal to Develop Suakin Seaport," *Daily Sabah*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/africa/2018/03/26/sudan-qatar-ink-4-billion-deal-to-develop-suakin-seaport> and Peter Schwartzstein, "One of Africa's Most Fertile Lands Is Struggling to Feed Its Own People," *Bloomberg*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2019-sudan-nile-land-farming/>.

<sup>35</sup> "Qatar Petroleum Takes Stake in Mozambique Exploration Block," *Reuters*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-eni-mozambique-exploration/qatar-petroleum-takes-stake-in-mozambique-exploration-block-idUSKBN1QS1MM> and Qatar Petroleum, Tweet, July 23, 2019, 8:24 a.m., ("Qatar Petroleum enters into an agreement with Eni and Total to acquire a 25% participating interest in 3 blocks offshore Kenya. #QP #QatarPetroleum #Qatar #Kenya <https://qp.com.qa/en/MediaCentre/Pages/News.aspx>"),

<https://twitter.com/qatarpetroleum/status/1153642041827459073> (accessed September 29, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Diana Stancy Correll, "How AFRICOM Plans to Counter Russian, Chinese Influence in Africa," *Military Times*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/01/20/how-africom-plans-to-counter-russian-chinese-influence-in-africa/>.

<sup>37</sup> Variety of sources compiled by author.

<sup>38</sup> They are Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Libya, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Nigeria 18. Eric Schmitt, "Russia's Military Mission Creep Advances to a New Front: Africa," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/31/world/africa/russia-military-africa.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffery Gettleman, "Fueled by Bribes, Somalia's Election Seen as Milestone of Corruption," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/world/africa/somalia-election-corruption.html>.

suggests they are willing to do the same elsewhere.

### The Way Forward

There are a number of steps the U.S. can take to try to strengthen democracy in Africa, but I will offer four brief recommendations:

- **Confidently advocate for American values** with the African public and its leaders. Most people yearn for representative government, rule of law, and individual freedom, and the U.S. should take every opportunity to advocate for democracy as the political system with the best record of protecting individual rights and delivering economic prosperity.
- **Strengthen civil society in Africa**, which is critical to the development and maintenance of a responsive and honest government. Ways of doing so could include facilitating exchange programs for African civil society leaders within

the continent, or to the U.S., to learn from one another.

- **Prioritize the fight against African government corruption**, which corrodes all efforts to broaden and deepen democratic governance on the continent. Ideas for fighting this scourge include promoting economic freedom, leveraging technology and the power of crowds to publicize instances of corruption, and elevating the fight against graft as part of U.S. development assistance.<sup>40</sup>
- **Deepen cooperation on the continent with pro-democracy allies.** There are a number of strongly democratic countries such as the United Kingdom and Japan that are active in Africa, and the U.S. should seek opportunities to partner with them on pro-democracy initiatives.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.

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<sup>40</sup> Joshua Meservey, "The Impact of Corruption on Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa," in James M. Roberts and William T. Wilson, eds., *2017 Global Agenda for Economic Freedom*, Heritage

Foundation *Special Report* No. 188, <https://www.heritage.org/international-economies/report/2017-global-agenda-economic-freedom>.