



**CHINA PREACHING AUTOCRACY TO
AFRICANS SHOULDN'T SURPRISE,
BUT IT WON'T WORK**

BY MICHAEL RUBIN

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On Aug. 21, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Axios' Taipei-based China reporter, released a bombshell [report](#) about the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania that she alleges is ground zero in China's efforts "to shape African politics in a fight for influence on a continent rich in raw materials and energy." She details how the Chinese Communist Party seeks to use the school to build a coterie of autocracy-friendly African leaders who could help China build a reliable political bloc on a continent of growing economic and diplomatic importance. Interviews reveal Chinese teachers preach that the ruling party should be paramount and the merits of fierce intra-party discipline.

Her reporting is excellent, but none of China's actions should surprise. Trade may have been one manifestation of China's ambition, but it has never been the only one, nor was trade only for trade's sake. Rather, as Michael Pillsbury shows in [The Hundred-Year Marathon](#), the Chinese Communist Party's strategy both spans generations and is more ambitious. Rather than simply make China wealthy, it seeks to make China the sole hegemon.

To replace the United States in this role requires reshaping the world order. Chinese officials have been blunt about such ambition. Long before President Xi Jinping took China's helm, Chinese officials had talked about their desire to craft a new world order. In 1997, for example, Chinese Communist Party leader Jiang Zemin and Russian President Boris Yeltsin

[signed](#) the "Joint Russia-Chinese Declaration about a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order" that would constrain if not supplant American hegemony. Just two years later, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the nucleus of what would soon become the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, issued the so-called [Bishkek Declaration](#) that declared, "The Parties believe that multi-polarity...contributes to the long-term stability of the international situation." In 2001, it was the turn of Russian President Vladimir Putin to join Jiang Zemin in a [call](#) for "a just and fair new world order." In 2005, Zheng Bijian, famous for coining the term "peaceful rise" to assuage Western concerns about Chinese ambitions, [explained](#) that "China...advocates a new international political and economic order one that can be achieved through incremental reforms and the democratization of international relations."

Such embrace of multipolarity to weaken the United States is now standard within Chinese political discourse. [Speaking](#) at the ASEAN foreign minister meeting in September 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi "urged the United States to follow the historical trend toward multipolarity in the world and democracy in international relations." Xi frequently [speaks](#) of a "new type of great power relations."

"Chinese-style modernization does not follow the old path of colonial plunder or the hegemony of strong countries," he [declared](#), while speaking by video to an array of political party leaders from around the globe.

It is against this backdrop that China seeks to solidify its gains in Africa. A scramble for Africa is nothing new. In the 19th century, European powers carved up the continent. During the Cold War, Washington and Moscow viewed the continent through the lens of their own geopolitical competition. With the end of the Cold War, the United States forgot about Africa. President George H.W. Bush visited Egypt once, but [never traveled to sub-Saharan Africa](#). President Bill Clinton waited until his second term before [visiting sub-Saharan Africa](#). The pattern continued under George W. Bush and even Barack Obama, who had Kenyan ancestry. President Donald Trump, meanwhile, was [contemptuous](#) of the continent and

never bothered to visit. When the president or secretaries of State would visit, they inevitably declared a new beginning and renewed commitment that quickly sputtered out. This was also the pattern with President Joe Biden's administration, despite hosting [US-Africa Leaders' Summits](#).

Other countries, recognizing both Africa's strategic and economic potential, have not been so dismissive and have sought to fill the vacuum left by US neglect. Within the continent, [Morocco](#), [Ethiopia](#), and South Africa have long played a game of influence. Revisionist states such as [Iran and Turkey](#) have also battled for economic and diplomatic influence on the continent. Russia, too, has made spotty advances. Its efforts to grab Mozambique's hydrocarbon-rich Cabo Delgado province [failed](#), but it has made [great progress across the Sahel](#) as [French influence hemorrhages](#), and now seeks to [extend its footprint](#) into Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire.

China's turn to Africa has been more noticeable and sustained. Since 2000, China has become the [largest trading partner](#) for almost every country in Africa. Whereas Washington lectures, Beijing builds. China built hospitals on main roads in Kinshasa and Bangui. Entire boarding gates in airline hubs like Addis Ababa appear filled with Chinese businessmen. China inaugurated its first overseas naval base in [Djibouti](#), threatening to squeeze the American military out of one of its main logistical hubs. Current fighting between Taiwan-friendly (but unrecognized) Somaliland and China-friendly Somalia over the dusty town of Laascanood have the hallmarks of a [China-Taiwan proxy war](#). Chinese leaders have long been astute at the power of [debt-trap diplomacy](#), but African leaders are not stupid. They understand they must balance their creditors to immunize themselves against any predatory action. Ethiopia, for example, now welcomes European investment to balance China, while Rwanda turned to Turkish construction firms to prevent China from gaining too much leverage over the tiny country.

Nor does Beijing's old strategy of bribing the man at top necessarily work. A case in point is the Democratic Republic of Congo. Chinese firms believed they had consolidated control over Congo's

rich lithium resources when they bribed President Joseph Kabila for concessions, but after Félix Tshisekedi succeeded him in 2019, he too [wanted his cut](#); China had to renegotiate to grease the new patronage networks.

This brings us back to China's new leadership academy for dictators. If Congo's tentative democratic turn threatened Beijing's long-term multi-trillion-dollar lithium interests, then what better insurance policy than to immunize the continent against democracy? Practically speaking, streamlining the palms Beijing needs to grease, or the politicians Chinese officials must call makes the practice of policy easier from Communist China's point-of-view.

Chinese Communist officials neither understand nor tolerate democracy; they disdain it. While Africa has suffered recent setbacks on the road to democracy, it has still made great strides. With its new school in Tanzania, China seeks to reverse that. While the United States' own [indifference to African democracy](#) is a lost opportunity, the Chinese strategy will nonetheless fall flat because Africans have agency. They suffered through decades of socialism, but now see the fruits of democracy and free-market reforms. Hundreds of millions of Africans have emerged from poverty and now fuel a middle class. Teaching autocracy and preaching a return to the past will never work. Rather, only those who treat Africans as equals on the road to prosperity will "win" the new great game.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.