

# Comparing the Strategic Worldviews of the United States and China

## Implications for Strategy and Engagement with Africa

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Strategy is a master narrative, a story that we tell ourselves and others about how we see the world and our role in it; in other words, strategy communicates a particular worldview. Strategic worldviews exert a powerful influence on our priorities, policies, decisions, and activities and are best examined with a reflexive approach. In the field of Western security studies, there is no shortage of research into Chinese activities, which are typically (and not altogether wrongly) characterized as insidious, nefarious, and malign. From embedding surveillance technologies in cooperation with autocratic regimes to enriching Chinese and African elites at the expense of African populations and their resources, there is certainly much to critique regarding the Chinese approach to Africa. Yet, these critical lenses are rarely applied to the West, and specifically to the United States by American authors, with the same vigor. The aim here is neither self-flagellation nor Chinese apologia (or parroting its propaganda). Rather, I argue that if we continue to have a selective memory and a largely unexamined Americentric worldview, our strategic communication will continue to be tone deaf, and worse, US policy toward Africa will remain underprioritized and not as productive as it could be. For if US policy toward Africa were more prioritized, productive, and focused on Africa in its own right—and not mostly a (reactionary) “China in Africa” policy—there would be enormous potential to truly “build back a better world” with a more broadly beneficial transatlantic political economy supportive of more sustainable national and collective security.

### Examining Worldviews, Contextualizing the Competition

While Anchorage is a long way from Addis Ababa, the following scene of geopolitical theater reflects fundamental dynamics at play globally, with supposedly “off-script” comments revealing “a new world view” that China brought to the table.<sup>1</sup> Deviating from protocol (after accusing US representatives of doing the same), Yang Jiechi, director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office, remarked:

What China and the international community follow or uphold is the United Nations-centered international system and the international order underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries of the so-called rules-based international order. . . . I don't think the overwhelming majority of countries in the world would recognize that the universal values advocated by the United States or that the opinion of the United States could represent international public opinion, and those countries would not recognize that the rules made by a small number of people would serve as the basis for the international order.<sup>2</sup>

Blustering and at times deeply ironic/hypocritical as this entire statement was, and perhaps aimed as much or more at his domestic audience than the assembly, Director Yang has a general point here: the rules-based international order is not universally perceived and understood; neither does everyone around the world view the United States as an unblemished white knight upholding such an order. Secretary of State Antony Blinken responded that the hallmark of American leadership is its willingness to acknowledge, not ignore, our faults as “a constant quest to . . . form a more perfect union.”<sup>3</sup> National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan added that “a confident country is able to look hard at its own shortcomings and constantly seek to improve,” calling this characteristic America’s “secret sauce.”<sup>4</sup> I take their responses as a bit of inspiration for this article.

It is easy to critique China and react with utter alarm at its presence and growing influence in Africa—and more difficult but ultimately perhaps more fruitful to be reflexive in developing our own strategy. Indeed, one reads and hears much more about the former and much less about the latter. African partners may acknowledge their position in the current world order and have pragmatically sought to get what they could out of it from whomever. However, for most African states their positions were hardly advantageous, even in the vaunted post–World War II rules-based order, and Americans should not assume that all thought highly of such an order. Millions of African troops fought and died during the world wars, even for the victors, and were denied the benefits and ability to set the terms for the new order after victory. Neither should Americans expect that our current primary focus on (bordering on fetish with) China and the Chinese presence in Africa will be always and everywhere appreciated. Being a Cold War proxy or now a pawn in others’ great game is just not appealing. Even if it were a zero-sum game (which it is not), without appeal, there is limited influence—and without influence, you lose.

For all the negativity directed at Chinese activity and for all the charges of neocolonialism, survey data indicates generally favorable ratings for both the United States and China in Africa.<sup>5</sup> Although more recently “Beijing’s influence

has weakened in popular perceptions . . . many Africans welcome both Chinese and US engagement with their country.”<sup>6</sup> We need to think beyond demonizing China, making heroes of ourselves, and treating Africa like cake to be carved up, a prize won in a game, or some damsel in distress whose affections we need to court.<sup>7</sup> Some frank truth-telling about our histories and current trajectories, and some inquiry into these “metaphors we live by,” is warranted.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging the limitations of the practice of anthropomorphizing countries—and generalizing entire continents—this article will attempt to examine and compare the ways in which the United States and China perceive Africa and their roles in and relationship with the continent. Ultimately, and taking seriously the declaration that “our world is at an inflection point,” I contend that practicing reflexivity and proactively shifting our strategic worldview will lead to better policies and outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

### *US Lenses and Liabilities*

One of the main faults of both the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) is their facile historical context—if not selective memory and outright amnesia. While the 2017 NSS decries the international institutions that rivals have manipulated against us, the 2018 NDS takes the so-called US-led rules-based international order (RBIO) as a given—and good and true, “free and open,” if only it went unchallenged. The current administration has also referred to the RBIO as if it is entirely noble and universally understood. If ever there were a historical moment to take more honest and fuller stock, it seems as though now is the time for strategists, particularly those in the West, to acknowledge that the international state system as we know it today was largely designed and came to exist in the context of colonialism and imperialism, both in imagination and in practice. As the self-appointed leading power of this international order, the United States can claim no immunity (as we may like to compare ourselves more favorably to the Europeans in Africa especially).<sup>10</sup>

Far from being a gift of a “free and open order” given by the victors of World War II to the rest of the world, the underlying imperial structures have given way, yet Western powers have often continued to meddle, enabling in those post/neo-colonial states leaders given to autocracy and extraversion.<sup>11</sup> Many African citizens, at least those outside of patronage networks plugged into largely predatory and/or weak states, have too frequently been left with less than ideal options amid a globalizing, neoliberal political economy with very little stability and security. Regardless of just who or what structures and constraints are to blame, it should be plain enough to agree that this order has not enfranchised or protected populations to even minimally acceptable levels in too many places. And we should acknowledge that marginalization and disenfranchisement are significant, if not *the*,

drivers of violent extremism, conflict, and migration; they are the root causes of what the West perceives as threats.

The strategic worldview that we even have an order upright and good for all, underwritten by the torchbearers for freedom, if only the emerging, so-called great—but also nefarious—powers would not compete for and destabilize it, is at least incomplete if not deeply flawed. What is worse is this worldview convinces the purveyors of such prideful perspectives that they should either run or save the world, engineering systems and solutions for other societies they do not understand well enough. In actuality we are relatively naïve about “the way the world actually works,” especially in societies foreign to ours; we wind up picking winners and losers either inadvertently or for expedience. As we have seen in this century, and too often during Cold War-era puppeteering as well, this willful ignorance about the world combined with a hubris and drive to remake it in our image or just to serve (what we think are) our interests has consistently led to strategically catastrophic results. And so a purely Americentric worldview, particularly when myopically focused on a singular boogeyman, whether communist, terrorist, or Chinese, must be guarded against with continual discipline.

We also need to get real about our self-image. As much as Americans like to say we did not have colonies in Africa (with the special case exception of Liberia), we have not exactly been on the side of African independence movements and black liberation per se. Our own national narrative championing the ragtag colonies’ defeat of the British crown and our ascent to “the world’s lone superpower . . . [being] a testimony to the strength of the idea on which our Nation is founded”<sup>12</sup>—liberty and justice for all—serve as a cover for all the ways we have accrued power that had more in common with British imperialism than we would like to acknowledge. Immigrants and rugged pioneers of European descent moving west may have helped build this country, but so did enslaved peoples of African descent. The United States should not just suddenly recognize Africa’s importance because China has made major inroads there in the last decade—Africa has always been part of what made America.

Because so much of this history was suppressed and lost, much of our intellectual inheritance is from Europe, which includes Enlightenment ideals of reason, liberty, equality, and brotherhood—but also a persistent imperial imagination. The ideologies of manifest destiny, the white man’s burden, and American exceptionalism—as rationale for ongoing civilizing missions and sociopolitical engineering—are foundational to an American worldview. And these are not nineteenth-century ideas long forgotten. As recently as last year, a presidential Fourth of July speech referenced and reiterated this mythology, delivered while

standing in front of Mount Rushmore no less, on Sioux sacred land, a dissonance that was amplified on Twitter using decidedly twenty-first-century social media.<sup>13</sup>

For the West, perhaps no continent has been as wholly Othered as Africa. As Mbembe reminds us: “It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world.”<sup>14</sup> And this assertion of difference meant not just defining (neutral) categories but that the West was different in the sense of being set apart, chosen, called, and, yes, exceptional and superior. Africa has served as a sort of foil: the dark negative to Western self-image, the wild to be tamed, the savage to be civilized. Critical to this effort was the social construct of race as something inherent, natural, and biological that signified human evolution and justified that white might made right. Speaking of notions, we would do well to acknowledge and conjure so as to exorcise them—this is definitely one such notion. Such a mentality leads to misadventures at best and profoundly destabilizing violence at worst.

Again, the US strategic worldview is not imperialist or inherently racist in an entirely totalizing sense. Neither do I necessarily refer to the obvious evidence (e.g., referring to “shithole” countries or wearing pith helmets on safari).<sup>15</sup> Rather we can think of these ideas and practices as a sort of repertoire from which we borrow and reenact in ways both obvious and subtle. This repertoire is primarily revealed through the still-operative notions of a tiered world, strategic priorities based on a hierarchy of humanity and human societies, and in the unexamined ethnocentrism and default paternalism deeply embedded in so much of what we still think, design, and do. When US–Africa policy and decision makers get around the conference room table in our various working groups or task forces in Washington and Stuttgart, to what extent are African voices heard and integrated? Even though we repeat the mantra, “African solutions for African problems,” which if any African voices drive decisions?

The strategic worldview that we can remake entire societies and institutions in our image, especially when knowing so little about them, is also imperialist in nature. So can be a great power competition (GPC) framework, through which we can carve up a continent in competition with other powerful states outside that continent. At least the colonial project more effectively utilized anthropologists as handmaidens; since 9/11 we have relied more on one-hour briefs and culture smart cards and sent our military to do far more than that for which we have properly trained them, when they often should not have been the instrument of choice in the first place. That we do not demonstrate the proportional amount of investment required to develop any real, deep knowledge and expertise on any respective locale, that our systems are *the* systems and should work for so-called

less-developed societies, reeks too of the civilizing mission, of bringing light to darkness and our shining city to the bush.

Furthermore, from the eras of colonialism and African independence movements, to Cold War struggles via African proxies, to a prioritized Global War on Terror (GWOT), and to now China and so-called great power competition—have we ever really strategically prioritized relations with Africans themselves? Has Africa ever mattered to US foreign policy in its own right, or mostly as a secondary backdrop (at best) to these primary threat-based concerns?<sup>16</sup>

### ***Chinese Lenses and Liabilities—and Comparative Opportunities***

China does see its Belt and Road Initiative as a pathway to Europe, a re-enactment of the ancient Silk Road, and one could argue its engagement with Africa is secondary to a prioritized Europe as well. One could also argue any Chinese prioritization of Africa has more to do with resource extraction to serve China's own economic growth rather than any African benefit. However, China does not suffer from the same historical liabilities of former colonial powers in the West and has been able to credibly claim and demonstrate solidarity with Africa, providing inspiration for the Global South with its model of development. Colloquially referred to as China's "second continent," Africa has become more central to Chinese strategic worldview as a key testing ground for "the China dream": "If they can demonstrate the efficacy of China's model in Africa, Chinese strategists hope that this model can be spread across the global South, eventually reshaping the world."<sup>17</sup>

China's self-image is also informed by its longer history, centered in the world as the Middle Kingdom, with the glories of the Silk Road as its mythological repertoire. Through international institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, from which the United States has withdrawn, China is documenting ancient land and maritime silk road heritage and enshrining more and more sites as world heritage sites, thereby granting legitimacy to its narrative that China has supported global trade, driving development as the central connector of civilizations for centuries—as it positions itself to play that role again. For example, as Chinese state media reported last year at the kickoff to the China–Italy "year of culture":

Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism Luo Shugang recalled the historical ties between the two countries centuries ago, when western travelers—such as Marco Polo and priest Matteo Ricci—travelled through Asia along the ancient Silk Road to China. "We represent two different civilizations that have relations since ancient times, and, in this historic framework, the Silk Road has provided us a hint that is still valid today," the Chinese minister told the forum.<sup>18</sup>



As China attempts to reestablish these connections to Europe, it has even fewer problematic pathways to renewed engagement with Africa. After the Western colonial project, decades of Cold War proxy warfare and neoimperialist meddling, and more recent unilateral Western/NATO militarism from Afghanistan to Iraq to Libya, is it any wonder why those Africans who did not benefit from such a Western-led order might find a vision of renewed global trade—and not global forever war—appealing? This is not to say that China did not also support warfare in Africa during the Cold War—it did, only it was in support of independence and revolutionary movements against European colonialism and later the Western bloc. China's emergence out of its own "Century of Humiliation," marked by occupation and subjugation to Western (and Japanese) powers and referencing more favorable histories of support to African liberation from shared sources of oppression, bolsters its credibility in claiming South–South solidarity.<sup>19</sup>

The United States has had some level of concern with Chinese activities in Africa for quite some time,<sup>20</sup> but current dynamics do not reflect a "new Cold War," as Chinese engagement has changed in both degree and kind and our globalizing political economies are more entangled instead of purely oppositional systems. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is communist in the sense of centralized political authority, it is hardly passing out little red books anymore; its model is more hybrid and less totalizing or rigid, what some have labeled "developmental authoritarianism."<sup>21</sup> China continues to use the language of creating a global "Community of Common Destiny" and "common prosperity" in selling the China Dream. Yet this China Dream seems somewhat familiar to the American one, promising economic advancement for hard work and determination. Indeed, it is less the ideological affinities of communism that have motivated African engagement with China in the last decade and more the business that can be conducted and the money that can be made. That communist China is beating the United States—the greatest engine of globalizing capitalism, promoting neoliberal economics, and privatization—in terms of trade and investment in Africa is perhaps ironic.

Sixty years ago, China's economic power was less than that of many newly independent African nations; now it is a powerhouse and an example for what African countries could become.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, whoever delivers in ways most mutually beneficial will have the most credible, sought-after voice and vision to shape any future order. Furthermore, Africans often point to continued Western influence as having arrested their development compared to developing economies in Asia. In terms of African perception, there is something about being seen, of not existing only beyond the gaze of African populations wary of the opaque machinations of power in this world, populations who are tired of the arrangements

corrupt leaders make with faceless multinational conglomerates, populations who have watched the wealth underneath their feet become extracted and accumulated sums in Swiss or Chinese banks. To see Chinese workers, even foremen, on the streets building infrastructure, rather than disembodied multinationals taking from a distance, helps China differentiate itself from the West.

The Chinese worldview, while not suffering from the white man's burden, nevertheless does contain its own elements of exceptionalism and a superiority complex, especially as a model for so-called developing countries in Africa. This complex has perhaps been more notable in recent years after the rise of Xi Jinping, expressed in his speeches and those of his foreign minister, Wang Yi. But China has also faced blowback for talking too presumptively and dictating terms to smaller countries. Being the preferred partner also means managing one's hubris, a lesson the CCP may also need to learn, particularly as BRI spending has leveled off in recent years.<sup>23</sup>

This "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" aims to project a more confident image of China. In addition to Chinese media outlets propagating in the region and carrying favorable messages to African audiences, other forms of Chinese cultural production reveal a Chinese vision for their place and role in the world.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps no single piece is more revealing than the highly successful action film series of the same name, *Wolf Warrior*, with its second installment released in 2017 and set in a nameless African country experiencing rebellion and civil war, featuring American mercenaries as the primary villains. Wu Jing, the film's director and lead, characterized so much of Chinese cinema and its war movies as being preoccupied with the Opium Wars and times when China was struggling to resist imperialism.<sup>25</sup> He argued that the opportunity for Chinese audiences to see themselves out in the world, protecting their citizens and their African friends, respecting the United Nations and being respected as the country that answers the 9-1-1 call globally (but does not act unilaterally) was an appealing self-image that accounted for the film's massive success.<sup>26</sup>

A decade ago, when China became the leading trading partner with Africa and "China in Africa" became a matter of American policy makers' attention, we could more credibly talk about the United States and China as operating in different lanes. The United States was promoting democracy, providing aid and security cooperation through our 3Ds: diplomacy, development, and defense. And when it came to defense, we were fighting a GWOT the Chinese were not, and so our emphasis on counterterrorism and "advise and assist" was our lane, and we were global standard-bearers for special operations. Where we would make engagement and assistance dependent on meeting certain democratic standards, the Chinese posture was one of "noninterference," focusing instead on making deals



with African elites for energy and resource extraction, and later for massive infrastructure projects. Most American interests in these sectors were separate from state and US government initiatives, certainly when compared against the entangled nature of China's state-driven mercantilism.

We were perhaps too slow to officially shift to a government-led and -supported emphasis on fair trade, instead of relying on an aid model that suffered from too much inefficient bureaucracy and paternalism. The Chinese are not so much interested in fair trade per se, but they were not as interested in aid as charity for the general population; they do not share the intellectual history of the Western civilizing mission. Rather, they have historically and presently still frame their engagement—at much higher levels, both in terms of budget and ministerial/presidential engagement—as more peer-to-peer, South–South solidarity. The narrative is more “we are all up-and-comers, ending our respective centuries of humiliation, and resisting Western hegemony which has exploited us all.” In promoting of their rising power, China can less problematically reference past greatness, as the historical center of commerce and exchange over the centuries—without the colonial/imperial exploitation, and now with only traces of a more Maoist ideology. A zero-sum, black-white worldview, reductive of complexity, intolerant of ambiguity and hybridity, will also not serve us well. After all, we are now entangled with a China “that is both bright red and wildly capitalist, a synthesis that the West thought would be impossible to achieve between these two seemingly incompatible ideologies.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***What Now, Then?***

Perhaps due to transition in US administrations in the last year and the number of high-level positions given to those with significant Africa experience (e.g., UN ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, USAID director Powers), there has been some hope from Africa-watchers that the region may receive more attention (and resourcing) than it has under prior administrations. And there has been no shortage of excellent suggestions on how to rethink US–Africa policy.<sup>28</sup> While more comprehensive policy proscriptions are beyond the scope of this article, I will conclude with examples of how a shift in strategic worldview could affect our strategy and engagement.

### ***Broader Security Frames***

For an example of the sort of worldview shift involved, if we want to demonstrate resolve and leadership in the RBIO, and truly recommit to multilateralism beyond rhetoric, perhaps we should commit more troops to UN peacekeeping

operations. The United States may pledge the most for the bill, but that is not as seen and appreciated as we might like—especially since we are currently in arrears and compared to our own defense budget our pledge is miniscule. Beyond writing checks, deploying personnel would give our service members a “broadening assignment” par excellence and invaluable experience in working with multinational teams, preparing them for leadership roles interoperable with foreign partners; meanwhile, closing the credibility gap with our rhetoric that America is back and ready to reassume its fuller participation and leadership role in the RBIO. As of now, China has paid its bills to the UN and sends thousands of peacekeepers every year (compared to our approximately 120 pax); we are in an awkward position to claim they are undermining an order we are not exactly supporting with the full weight of our own military–industrial complex, which is perhaps the greatest the world has ever seen by most metrics aside from productive strategic impact.<sup>29</sup>

Wars do not end where you want. We may want to “pivot to Asia” or reorganize toward great power competition and/or revise it to strategic competition, but terrorist organizations, insurgents, narco-traffickers, banditry, small arms trafficking, ethnic- and resource-based conflict, and the like will continue to dominate the security landscape in Africa for quite some time. Finding ways to build and right-size partner capacity for the threats and challenges they face, without protecting autocratic regimes and empowering security forces respective populations equally fear, remains a sort of holy grail for our security policy. I have witnessed other general officers smirk at AFRICOM Commander Gen. Stephen Townsend’s suggestion that we think of GPC as *global* power competition and that both building partner capacity (BPC) and countering violent extremism (CVE) is GPC, but he has a point.<sup>30</sup> When the RBIO fails to protect villagers from slaughter in the Sahel, for example, witnessing such widespread insecurity and violence while leaders of the order are relatively indifferent also discredits it.<sup>31</sup> Just because the US military is not optimized for counterinsurgency or small wars, or because violent extremist organizations do not pose existential threats to our republic, does not mean we should let the region burn and not strive for better ways to collectively counter violent extremism and growing insecurity in Africa, lest we create too many openings for Chinese and Russian weapons sales, Wagner goons, and ultimately influence—after we have built \$100 million drone bases in the desert only to potentially abandon them. Can we continue to establish bases not as imperialist outposts of some dark forever war but as logistics and rapid response depots that enable African militaries to provide population-centric collective security regionally?

There is a difference between selling Nigeria attack helicopters and providing Niger with C-130s that can be used to fight the infamous “tyranny of distance”

(and less than optimal road networks) to support UN peacekeeping operations or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technology that can provide the warnings and indicators that prevent continual attacks on military bases and police stations, which has consistently proven to further undermine state capabilities and credibility. And what if we made the Economic Community of West African States stronger instead of the republican guard special forces that either protect or overthrow particular autocrats? We all want to be Wolf Warriors, when world peace and our national interest (and treasure) would be better served if we were UPS men, leveraged our logistics and mobility capabilities instead of just our special operations, and encouraged our private sector to invest in ways for Africans to add value to their industries and products, instead of encouraging them to remain victims of exploitative, extractive economies that benefit the few and kleptocratic regimes.

Continuing to prioritize Europe at the expense of Africa is also short-sighted. NATO is the greatest alliance globally, but renewed emphasis on the transatlantic partnership needs to more heavily and fundamentally include Africans.<sup>32</sup> We need to accept and understand Africa on its own terms, value its security, not just the threats that may emanate from there to Europe, for example. General Townsend's recent comments about creating a firebreak with the littoral states to prevent the fire in the Sahel from spreading betrays a certain strategic worldview that undeniably prioritizes Europe over Africa. Europe would likely be more secure moving away from a border control paradigm and toward political and economic solidarity with Africans, which could address root causes of migration. To take another major example, privileging NATO and mostly ignoring the pleas of the African Union prior to the 2011 Libyan intervention is a set of choices we remain reminded of by African partners to this day, and rightly so. We need to cut down on these inconsistencies: We project ourselves as the preferred partner but still act in major ways that seem to disregard African partners in discussion and planning efforts, treat them more like pupils and pawns than peers—if considered at all—and then destabilize entire regions for years to come because of this Eurocentrism.

Globally, perhaps the United States' most significant turning point and glaring liability to its credibility to uphold a rules-based international order was the 2003 invasion of Iraq and continued strategic prioritization—and perhaps disproportionate fixation—on the Global War on Terror, often at the expense of our other stated priorities and policies, such as promoting the rule of law, protecting human rights, and good governance. In Africa in particular, being a dependable security and counterterrorism partner inadvertently served to cover a multitude of other sins and abuses committed by various authoritarian, or at least nondemocratic,

regimes (e.g., Chad, Cameroon, Uganda)—and it may be better to not make such tradeoffs. Because the GWOT was not China’s to fight, and their supposedly lofty principle of “noninterference” meant nonconsideration of and nonaccountability for any of these abuses, China did not have to make such strategic tradeoffs. China (and other competitors, most explicitly Russia) has and will continue to frame US and Western power as being defined by these lapses in judgment, arguing that these are not simply missteps in what are otherwise sound policies and productive activities but instead evidence of a systemically heavy-handed and needlessly violent philosophy focused on militarization—further framing US appeals to shared values and attempts to stake moral high ground as being ultimately hypocritical.

The point here is not to absolve either of these so-called great powers of their own abuses and hypocrisy regarding their key principles such as noninterference and respecting sovereignty (of the authoritarians they have often bought off and protect). Both China and Russia have also leveraged and even constructed their own neocolonial networks with aplomb, exploiting resources and making money with African elites, while ordinary African citizens see no such benefit, oppressed by the very regimes they have helped to empower. But not all Chinese activity is entirely malign. Having new stadiums and roads is nice. Moreover, the United States has a credibility gap when it comes to warning of the dangers of, say, China’s export of surveillance technology to authoritarian regimes, when we have courted and strengthened some of the same and similar regimes because of their alleged indispensability as a security partner, even though they may be acting in dangerously undemocratic ways (e.g. Museveni)—which ultimately does not bode well for security and stability. Plus, if we are to take the information environment seriously, these are the narratives propagated against us, and it is important to recognize the shape of these discourses so as to counter them or, better yet, demonstrate an alternative vision.

### ***Democratic Principles, Representative Governance***

How might we prioritize political reform, as well as protect and enfranchise various constituencies and marginalized communities, instead of incentivizing militarization, especially in the image of a more kinetic-minded military such as ours? One approach is not to compromise standards on the protection of human rights with regard to security cooperation and foreign military sales. If African partners have to use Chinese drones in service of ultimately counterproductive counterterrorism efforts, we cannot stop them. Rather than a total washing of our hands, however, we should have deep, frank conversations with African partners and develop better options together through a more complete understanding of

the local social, political, and economic dynamics that fuel conflict—instead of arguing over who sells the superior technology or the most weapons. The most intractable security crises on the continent—which, again, should not serve to define Africa, its populations, and dominate our own worldview—are the result of “the manipulation of identity for political purposes and the breakdown of traditional dispute management mechanisms [that] aggravate tensions and conflict,” which foreign security assistance missions—particularly those that protect specific regimes and groups at the expense of others—do little to truly and productively address and may actually exacerbate. We need to go to school to know our partners and their social realities before we roll out around the world to show them what right looks like, especially if we have not done enough to study the potential (and somewhat predictable at this point) second- and third-order effects of what our resources and presence actually are, particularly in terms of entrenching dependence and fueling corruption.

China’s strategy of building infrastructure appears to be inherently productive (whether it is or not, and for whom, is a separate consideration), certainly more so than support to endless counterterrorism operations or “advise and assist” missions that do not always add up to much in the way of capable security forces or just, sustainable police and military institutions—and which may be a liability not only for US strategic communications but also in that the local populace suffers from “collateral damage” that may beget yet more violent extremism. To take just one example: the decades of training to the Malian military that was simply and rather easily overrun by Tuareg rebels and the jihadists that coopted the rebellion in 2012. At the time of writing, nearly another decade later, Mali’s military remains incredibly vulnerable in the field and seems more effective when conducting coups—and appealing to assistance from Russia and China in the meantime. Nearly a decade ago, Mark Quarterman warned, “Countries and international organizations interested in helping Mali should not succumb to this election fetish,” which has been persistent.<sup>33</sup> As Debos writes: “In Chad, as elsewhere, it is easier to organize elections than to restructure the state administration and to alter the mode of government. Previous elections have not modified the rule of the militarised political field.”<sup>34</sup>

Leaders like Chadian president Idriss Déby had learned to use the West’s preoccupation with terrorism and support to such “militarised political fields” to their advantage, to hold onto power and dodge accountability. One wonders with the (hopes of) GWOT waning, and with the recent deaths of leaders like Déby and Our Man in Africa before him, the convicted war criminal Hissène Habré, that we might take this opportunity to reconfigure our worldview and our understanding of these relationships.<sup>35</sup> Large swathes of the Sahel may still be on fire and,



especially in the short term, cannot be doused by the Peace Corps per se (or any outside force), but one wonders if supporting more legitimate forms of governance attuned to local conditions would do better than the last twenty years and the Cold War before it could.

Probably too many officially postcolonial African countries were characterized by, as Piot notes regarding Togo, “military control and dictatorial authority—a style of government that was largely, of course, an imitation of the brutal absolutist rule of the colonial era.”<sup>36</sup> After choosing largely not “to be on the side of the natives”<sup>37</sup> in liberation movements against their former colonial masters/our European allies, US policy seemed too often to consist of endless attempts to find “Our Man in Africa,” with logics heightening in the Cold War but persisting even now—and which would be a mistake to continue as we compete against China, setting our autocracies against theirs, all while rhetorically promoting democracy. Often our fears of Soviet or communist influence, combined with black/white either/or thinking—again and again *our* categories imposed—led us to label African leaders as communist when often they simply and reasonably wanted to rid themselves of European exploitation and pursue a more independent path. As Stephen Walt has opined regarding Middle East policy: “The playbook we’ve been using since the 1940s isn’t going to cut it anymore. We still seem to think the Middle East can be managed if we curry favor with local autocrats, back Israel to the hilt, constantly reiterate the need for US ‘leadership,’ and when all else fails, blow some stuff up.”<sup>38</sup>

Such a playbook needs an overhaul when engaging Africa as well, especially if we want to build credibility in the long term, particularly for a continent awash in cell phones and cameras, wielded by younger populations with other aspirations who can surveil the state back and connect to global protest movements. If one tends to view the continent through the lens of chaos, any protest or unrest will simply confirm these biases more than right-size the negative phenomena and results vis-à-vis those more positive or productive aspects of instability that may be threatening in the short term but that ultimately produce a more durable peace and a more just system. We seek stability via the status quo when the status quo is not as stable as it seems; even if these more autocratic models of governance were more stable in the past, they sowed the seeds of contemporary unrest. If the status quo does not serve people, it will not hold. The power of incumbency is just not quite what it used to be, which, while making the once-comfortable now uncomfortable, nevertheless must be reckoned with, as is the need to be nimbler and more responsive to a rapidly changing world. American strategists are understandably wary about the promotion of democracy—especially if we see elections as signifying it—but the issue was less democracy than it was democracy at gun-

point, with foreign intervention and models of governance. But in addition to the promotion of democratic, representative governance and the protection of human rights being the right thing to do, it also should disempower the autocratic model upon which China relies.

From a report written nearly a decade ago, with warnings we may have heeded:

By 2050, one in every four humans will be African. At the end of the century, nearly 40 percent of the world's population will be African. Yet, instead of preparing to build a relationship that can grow with the continent, based upon diplomatic cooperation, the United States is doubling down on more than a decade of reliance on its military as the primary vehicle of engaging with Africa. The consequences, as one might expect, are overwhelmingly negative.<sup>39</sup>

The military instrument will be necessary, but the question really is what manner of military engagement, and what our and partner militaries will be doing. Training special operations forces or advising and assisting 19-year-old infantrymen to shoot and move in a predominant counterterrorism frame is a quite different proposition and posture versus supporting United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief within a broader human security frame, as is establishing professional military educational institutions and exchanges for members ranging from junior NCOs to senior officers throughout their careers. While easier to measure bad guys killed in action in short deployment cycles, this kind of longer-term relationship and institutional development will be more productive.

And as I contend, beyond just greater or lesser use of the military, the real need is to reimagine just how the military is used and to monitor the mentality we have in these engagements. The continued drumbeat of partnership, interoperability, and dialogue is best practice,<sup>40</sup> and I have witnessed numerous instances where these exchanges invoke profound moments of listening, learning, and the development of mutual respect—just as I have witnessed and heard from too many African officers who have been disrespected and marginalized and who remember such experiences over a decade later. We must continue to be vigilant against our own paternalism, as it clearly does not build durable partnerships and strengthen alliances.<sup>41</sup> The larger question for me, beyond whether US policy toward Africa is too militarized, is whether Africa is simply underprioritized; regardless of which 3D or DIME-C variable is relatively larger—they are all too small.

Currently I fear we are like the frustrated bull fixated on the waving red flag, ignoring neighbors in Central and South America and all potential partners across the Atlantic. Undoing the negative effects of neo/colonialism and moving beyond an imperial imagination for GPC will make us more secure. The path to

more democratic and representative governance will be bumpy in the short term but more durable in the long term.<sup>42</sup> Autocrats have appeal in times of instability—times that they often generate.<sup>43</sup> And an American-style electoral democracy will not work for all—one could argue about its effectiveness for us at times—but most people around the world do not want corrupt kleptocracies and dysfunctional systems, which are neither responsive to nor protective of them. And they will agitate, as perhaps they should. In short, most generally want what we claim to champion—and for all the faults that we must admit, including gerrymandering, conflict over voter access, and just the sheer monetary expense of campaigning, we have the edge in democratic credentials compared to China and Russia. The key is to champion our values without being self-righteous and without imposing our models wholesale. A winner-take-all two-party system may not actually be the best or the most functional, anyway; depending upon the case, a multiparty system that forces compromise and coalition-building across diverse constituencies may be better suited for African politics. Recognize Somaliland, for example, which found a way to incorporate clan-based politics into state governance in spite of—and perhaps rather because of—relatively little outside involvement and no formal recognition from the international community.<sup>44</sup>

Again, this article is not to suggest detailed lists of particular policy prescriptions but rather to examine how these worldviews (particularly a go-it-alone attitude, with a self-image we presume most others to have of us, as well as a technological superiority complex that covers for our lack of strategic and political imagination) affect policy-making—and how cleaning our windshield and identifying blind spots may help us build more productive and enduring partnerships in Africa. Put simply: acknowledging where we have gone wrong to build credibility to promote where we want to go right. Currently—and this may never be the best approach if emphasized—calling out detrimental Chinese activities rings hollow. What can the United States point to in terms of what it offers not just to political elites but to average citizens?

Often African partners' criticism of democracy is not so much against democracy itself or against some form of electoral or representative governance—which has majority support—but is more a reaction to democracy or election evangelism combined with finger-wagging from the Western-led international community, particularly if it is hypocritical, disingenuous, and/or certain powers have intervened or meddled in decidedly undemocratic ways in the past or are perceived to currently. Promoting democratic principles without interfering can be a bit of a tightrope walk, but better to make missteps with our diplomacy than with our military. As Ochonu reminds us:

Democratic failures do not discredit democracy as a generic set of ideas connoting accountability and representation, nor do they call for the abandonment of democracy altogether. What is required is a reimagining of democracy and, along with this reimagining, a willingness to redesign and redefine it to take into account and respond to each country's peculiar socioeconomic and demographic circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

Joseph Siegle, director of research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, has called this “a time of testing” for African democracies and good governance. Others warn of “democratic backsliding.” I would agree and further argue that this is true not only for Africa but also for the rest of the world's more democratic governments, the United States included. After all, we are just months removed from an event that, if it occurred in Africa, would likely have been perceived and breathlessly reported as an “ethnic [or even ‘tribal’?!] militia attack on the National Assembly” as it attempted to certify an election. Furthermore, while the institutions held, much of the dynamics and threats remain with one party of essentially a two-party system still loyal to a would-be autocrat and his cult of personality. If the United States is to lead, it should do so with humility: less with a sense of a civilizing mission we are preordained and called to carry out, and more with acts of solidarity with those vast majorities yearning to breathe free and stumble however unevenly toward more perfect unions and representative systems of governance—and improvements to their socioeconomic conditions, with states more supportive and functional than abusive and corrupt. Speak frankly, acknowledge error, and reconcile toward progress. Let China proceed with hubris and a template for empire that will no longer win the world in any sustained way.

We simply cannot make progress with an ethno/Eurocentric worldview, which has been the hallmark of Western grand strategy (such as it has been) for centuries. Global security will not be improved with neo-imperialism, Western, Chinese, or otherwise. Whoever has the imagination for a world order more broadly beneficial wins; self-centeredness makes us all less secure, particularly when many of the most impactful, actual, material threats are posed by global pandemics and climate change—issues that require, if I may redefine the GPC acronym, global partner cooperation. Or maybe the winner is whoever fields the most tanks and ships and develops the most AI-infused drone swarms, space lasers, and nukes and pours more of its national treasure into conventional military capabilities.

Perhaps the most fundamental worldview shift we require is to move away from a forever war mentality, or the assumed realism that war is inevitable and that we need to dominate every inch of the globe and remake it in our image. Instead of getting caught in tit-for-tat cycles of mutual demonization, whether with terrorist groups or China, we should reflect more and recognize self-fulfilling

prophecies when we see them; to see the world for its opportunities instead of mostly reacting to its threats, looking to shore up social, political, and economic solidarity in Latin America and Africa. Moreover, the West should be wary of giving in to its own economically powerful interest groups in ways that exploit and reinforce a tiered world and that empower globalizing oligarchies and authoritarian states to which they are connected. Even as we must maintain vigilance and hold China accountable, do not let China become a fetish; work on building back better regardless. If we repair the relationship between the Global North and South, with humility and recognition of our faults, acting according to the rules we claim to uphold, we will be fine. That would be a world-winning strategy.

Let us not plan and act from an odd mixture of trauma-driven anxiety and power-projecting hubris and make up for decades of strategically misguided GWOT by comfortably planning for—and perhaps triggering—a conventional high-end fight. Pay more attention to the information environment. Learn languages and understand societies—not just so we too can deceive and divide people but so we can communicate and engage them for the better and together develop stronger immunity from and protection against misinformation campaigns. What hope do we have to win this great power or strategic competition, or to have lasting influence for the betterment of our own national and global security, if we cannot see things from multiple perspectives, whether allied, adversarial, and/or ambiguous? Hopefully the upcoming Summit for Democracy becomes more of a laboratory to do just this sort of critical perspective taking and less of a series of lectures.<sup>46</sup>

The conclusion to the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* includes a promising recognition:

This moment is an inflection point. We are in the midst of a fundamental debate about the future direction of our world. . . . Amid rapid change and mounting crisis, the system's flaws and inequities have become apparent, and gridlock and inter-state rivalry have caused many around the world—including many Americans—to question its continued relevance. The United States cannot return to business as usual, and the past order cannot simply be restored.<sup>47</sup>

Every state seeks to protect its own interests. The argument here is that it is in our national interest to not just consider our interests. The questions I am left with: Do we have to compete with Chinese expansionism and imperialism with our own? Or does our national security, and the global security it depends on, require a different sort of order altogether? ❀



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