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Wielding Influence

in the Age of Coronavirus

How the Chinese Communist Party Shapes Narratives
and Builds Influence in Africa

Tom Bayes

www.kas.de

Imprint

Published by:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2021, Berlin

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Cover page image: © getty Images/Tafadzwa Ufumeli

Design and typesetting: yellow too Pasiek Horntrich GbR

The print edition of this publication was climate-neutrally printed by

Druckerei Kern GmbH, Bexbach, on FSC certified paper.

Printed with financial support from the German Federal Government.



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ISBN 978-3-95721-977-0

Wielding Influence in the Age of Coronavirus

How the Chinese
Communist Party Shapes
Narratives and Builds
Influence in Africa

Tom Bayes

At a Glance

- › The geopolitical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has dislocated global life, shaken economies and caused over 4 million deaths, continue to play out. For China's ruling Communist Party (CCP), China's status as the virus' origin posed political risks, heightened by international speculation about the disease's origins and criticism of Chinese authorities' early handling of the outbreak. But with the virus relatively quickly brought largely under control at home, the pandemic has also offered the CCP political opportunities. With Xi Jinping (General Secretary since 2012) determined to reinvigorate Party rule and lead China to the centre of the world stage in what he has dubbed a 'New Era', Beijing has acted decisively both to mitigate the risks and seize the strategic opportunities created by the pandemic.
- › Africa has been an important target. Beijing has long recognised the international political importance of Africa's nations, totalling a quarter of UN members. Crucially, even as its messaging towards the industrialised democracies harshens, China still offers an appealing, aspirational message to Africa, centred on the possibility of emulating China's economic transformation. China's leaders argue the two are united in a 'China-Africa Community of Common Destiny', sharing historical experiences and present interests. They have also repeatedly set the goal that Sino-African relations should emerge positively strengthened by the pandemic.
- › In Africa, Beijing has positioned itself as the solution to the virus, rather than its origin. It has provided medical supplies in a broad-based, ongoing campaign; donors include not only government entities but also Chinese companies and diaspora groups. Chinese medics with experience of treating the Coronavirus have been mobilised to share expertise with African counterparts. China has provided upwards of 16 million doses of Chinese produced vaccines to 31 African countries, often as donations (including as 'samples' ahead of potential sales). The delivery of this support has been designed for maximum visibility, with high-level handover ceremonies and media coverage used by Chinese ambassadors to promote CCP talking points.
- › Just as importantly, Beijing has sought to shape narratives, speaking through a multifaceted messaging apparatus developed in Africa in recent years to 'tell China's stories' to African audiences, both elite and popular. Africa was the first step in a major global expansion of Chinese Party-State media, with Africa-focused television, radio and text output. State media are increasingly joined by Africa-based diplomats taking to social media such as Twitter and Facebook – where some have adopted the strident voice of China's so-called 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy'.
- › China's messaging apparatus has promoted several core Coronavirus narratives: that China – according to one narrative – responded swiftly and transparently to the outbreak and bought the world time; that according to another its response has been exemplary and superior to other nations', notably the United States; that its success allegedly demonstrates the advantages of the CCP's system, which would be worthy of emulation; and that China – according to their account – has shown great solidarity with Africa, demonstrating the 'Community of Common Destiny'.

- › Despite considerable investment, state media's direct audience penetration in Africa remains limited. But indirect channels enhance Beijing's reach. Stories produced by Xinhua, the Party-State's news agency, are widely reproduced in African media, often with their origins in the CCP's propaganda apparatus unclear. Beijing has been wooing African journalists and media organisations, seeking more sympathetic coverage. China offers extensive training programmes intended to give an 'accurate' image of China, showcase the benefits of managed media, and rally African journalists to jointly resist 'biased' Western reporting of China and Africa.
- › To wield influence and shape narratives during the pandemic, the CCP has flexed its ties with African political parties – including mobilising 230 worldwide parties to sign an open letter backing Beijing's pandemic response. Xi has reinvigorated the CCP's 'party diplomacy', making it more purposeful in its efforts to promote CCP thinking – within a broader campaign to expand China's influence in the global realm of ideas. The CCP provides training to African political parties, showcasing the success of the CCP model in delivering economic development – and now its efficiency in tackling the Coronavirus. Throughout its training, the CCP seeks to build up the international prestige and validity of the CCP model, offering it as an alternative to liberal democracy for developing nations.
- › Though the full geopolitical repercussions of the pandemic are yet to play out, thanks to Beijing's efforts to shape Coronavirus narratives in Africa, its stated goal that China-Africa ties should emerge actively strengthened by the pandemic remains plausibly in sight.

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Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France Presse
ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
APC	All Progressives Congress (Nigeria)
APC	All People's Congress (Sierra Leone)
APR	Alliance pour la république (Senegal)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BDP	Botswana Democratic Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCM	Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Tanzania)
CCP (or CPC)	Chinese Communist Party (or Communist Party of China)
CCTV	China Central Television
CDB	China Development Bank
CDC (Africa CDC)	Centre for Disease Control
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CIDCA	China International Development Cooperation Agency
COVAX	Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access
CMT	Chinese Medical Team
CNN	Cable News Network
CNDD-FDD	Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (Burundi)
CRI	China Radio International
DSSI	Debt Service Suspension Initiative
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale (Algeria)
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique)
ILD (or IDCPC)	International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party

MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOFCOM	Ministry of Commerce
MPD	Movimento para a Democracia (Cape Verde)
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
MPP	Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès (Burkina Faso)
MPS	Mouvement patriotique du salut (Chad)
NCP	National Congress Party (Sudan)
NDC	National Democratic Congress (Ghana)
NPP	New Patriotic Party (Ghana)
NRM	National Resistance Movement (Uganda)
PAICV	Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde
PBSC	Politburo Standing Committee (CCP)
PCT	Parti congolais du travail (Republic of the Congo)
PDP	People's Democratic Party (Nigeria)
PNDS	Parti Nigerien pour la Democratie et le Socialisme (Niger)
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PPRD	Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
PRC	People's Republic of China
RDPC	Rassemblement démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (Cameroon)
RFI	Radio France Internationale
RND	Rassemblement National Démocratique (Algeria)
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
SACP	South African Communist Party
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement (South Sudan)
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation (Namibia)
UDPS	Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
UN	United Nations
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe Africa National Union – Popular Front

影响力

在非洲塑造叙事和建立

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Foreword of Konrad-Adenauer- Stiftung

发挥影响力：

在新冠病毒时代

When reports of the first cases of a novel viral disease in China first circulated in December 2019, no one could have foreseen how it would change the world in the months and years to come. Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only affected our personal daily lives but has developed a noticeable impact on the global political stage as well. It challenges existing power relations and serves as an accelerator of political change. Furthermore, it offered some global players the opportunity to push their own agendas in the wake of the virus – sometimes openly visible to the eyes of the world, sometimes in secret.

Against this backdrop, the fight against the pandemic is not only a fight against a potentially deadly disease. At the same time, it should be understood as part of a global competition in which different narratives contest each other. China with its political and economic influence – or rather: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – seems to play a special role in trying to use the Covid-19 pandemic to boost its image in the world and particularly also in Africa. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, also spoke of a battle of narratives. He emphasised the geopolitical component of the pandemic, which includes the strive for more influence through a “policy of generosity”.

The strategic approach of the CCP in Africa in this context does however not end with the so-called mask and vaccination diplomacy, which has been implemented with a high public profile. As this study is showing, the instruments also include the expansion of media and journalist networks, an intensified and partly readjusted cooperation with political parties, debt relief, the increased use of social media for addressing target groups, the promotion of the overall CCP's governance system and elite network building.

This study has set itself the goal of highlighting and analysing these very diverse and complex processes. To go beyond the pure description, it also identifies possible options and proposals for action based on concrete policy recommendations. In this context, my special thanks go out to the study's author Mr Tom Bayes. He has taken on the great challenge of doing extensive and in-depth research on this most interesting and relevant topic and managed to provide an extremely interesting and thought-provoking result.

I hope that it finds many readers – it certainly deserves it!

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Executive Summary

The global spread from China of the Covid-19 virus presented the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) both grave international political challenges and, latterly, opportunities, once the virus was brought under control at home. In Africa, as elsewhere, Chinese authorities have faced criticism for their early handling of the outbreak. A wave of anger in April 2020 at racial discrimination against Africans within virus control measures in southern China deepened the political risk for Beijing. To respond to the strategic threats and opportunities alike, Beijing has deployed resources and used tools developed over the last decade to shape narratives and wield influence in Africa. It has sought to position itself as a solution to the pandemic, rather than its source, and as a reliable partner to Africa in times of crisis. More than this, it has used its apparently successful management of the virus at home to present the CCP's model of governance as effective, efficient and worthy of emulation.

This effort chimes with changes already underway in Xi Jinping's China. In 2017, Xi declared a 'New Era' in which a reinvigorated CCP would reassert its dominance at home and lead China to the 'centre of the world stage' to offer 'Chinese solutions' to the world's problems – and particularly an alternative to liberal democracy that would deliver rapid economic development. For Xi and other CCP leaders, their contrasting performances during the pandemic seemed to confirm that 'the East is rising, the West declining'.

Africa is an important target of this effort to enhance the CCP's global prestige and China's global status. If the key advantage of CCP-style rule is rapid economic development, Africa's developing nations are a natural audience for Beijing's outreach. Beijing

argues that, as a fellow developing country, China and Africa are united in a 'Community of Common Destiny', victims of colonialism in the past and united by common interests now and in the future. In the immediate term, Africa's 54 internationally recognised nations are a valuable caucus that Beijing calls upon to support it in international politics – including by defending its human rights record within the UN system. As such, Beijing has explicitly looked to use the pandemic to actively strengthen China-Africa relations.

Building a 'Health Silk Road' to a 'Community of Health for All': China's Response to the Coronavirus in Africa

Once the virus was under control at home, China had the capacity to support African nations in their own fight against the pandemic – both materially and with expertise. Beginning in March 2020, Beijing began a campaign of donations and sales of medical supplies to Africa, including PPE, masks, testing kits, and disinfectant. Recipients ranged from governments and ministries, to local companies, and religious communities.

Chinese donors were also strikingly diverse. Alongside donations directly from the Chinese government, donations have been made by the CCP, state-owned and private companies, and Chinese business and diaspora associations in African countries. Beijing's messaging has highlighted this diversity, presenting it as evidence of the broad-based solidarity between China and Africa.

Beijing has repackaged its long-standing 'Chinese Medical Team' (CMT) programme (in which teams of around a dozen Chinese medics are despatched to African countries for stays ranging from a fortnight to a year) by including doctors with experience of the Coronavirus treatment. Alongside this, Chinese medics have conducted webinars with African counterparts to share experience of responding to the pandemic.

For Africa, as elsewhere, the pandemic is an economic as well as a public health crisis. The disruption to economic life and international trade has exacerbated a debt crisis already growing in several countries before the pandemic. As a leading creditor to the continent, China is closely implicated in responding to this challenge. During the pandemic, it has gone further than previously in joining international efforts, by participating in the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative, which has suspended debt payments for the worst affected countries. Beijing has nonetheless limited its lenders' coordination with international creditors, preferring to negotiate debt restructurings bilaterally with African governments.

Beijing has actively promoted Chinese-developed Covid-19 vaccines to African governments and has made a series of donations across the continent. Typically made up of 200,000 doses, these donations are more symbolic than having a substantial impact on recipients' overall vaccine requirements; Chinese companies have made deliveries totalling 16.4 million doses to 31 African countries (as of 11 July 2021), including both sales and donations.

Beijing has publicised its support to Africa and presented it as a testimony of solidarity between them. It has instigated handover ceremonies, with recipient dignitaries greeting consignments at the airport, alongside the resident Chinese ambassador. These occasions have been used to promote Beijing's narratives on the pandemic, such as pushing back on criticism of China's handling of the virus' outbreak. The donations,

and surrounding publicity, have been clothed in key CCP slogans – above all that they are part of a ‘Community of Health for All’, tying the effort to Beijing’s strategic goal of uniting China and Africa in a ‘Community of Common Destiny’.

The Party’s Messaging Apparatus in Africa

The efforts to publicise China’s Coronavirus support to Africa and shape narratives around the pandemic have been aided by a multifaceted messaging apparatus Beijing has developed in recent years, featuring both direct and indirect influencing of the African media environment.

Directly, an expansion of state media over the last decade allows the Party-State to project its voice into Africa. With the creation of the television channel CGTN Africa (launched in Nairobi in 2012), the expansion of CRI radio broadcasts in multiple African languages, and Africa-focused publications including *ChinAfrica* magazine and African editions of *China Daily*, Beijing has created a multichannel messaging machine that is steered to promote the Party-State’s preferred narratives – and has done so concerning the Coronavirus.

While these outlets do not publish full viewership and circulation figures, evidence gathered to date suggests their penetration lags other international media organisations in Africa, such as the BBC and RFI. But Beijing’s messaging apparatus’ reach is substantially boosted by syndication and reproduction in local publications and news websites. This is especially the case with Xinhua copy – China’s leading news agency, closely associated with the highest levels of the Party-State – whose stories on the Coronavirus have been widely reproduced in African outlets. Their origins in Beijing’s propaganda apparatus are often obscure.

In recent years, Beijing has also acted to expand its indirect influence in African media by wooing African media organisations and journalists, attempting to rally them to jointly resist alleged misrepresentation of their countries by internationally influential Western media. A key component of this outreach is training tours to China, focussed principally on shaping perceptions of China but also sharing the CCP’s approach to media, news, and journalism.

The Party-State has promoted a series of key narratives on the Coronavirus to African audiences, including the claims that China responded swiftly and transparently to the outbreak – and bought the world time: its response has been exemplary – and demonstrates the advantages of the CCP’s system; Xi Jinping was personally at the heart of China’s successful Coronavirus fight; and China has shown great solidarity with Africa. An important narrative is that China is not responsible for Covid-19 (for instance through a lab accident). State media increasingly push the idea that the pandemic began outside China or was created by the US military. These narratives have been further disseminated through reproduction of state media copy and creation of indirect channels to encourage the spread of such narratives through African media’s own reporting.

The CCP's Party Diplomacy in Africa

To shape narratives and wield influence in Africa during the Coronavirus, the CCP has pulled on an often overlooked but increasingly important tool: 'party diplomacy', conducted by the CCP in its own right, in addition to PRC state diplomacy. As part of Xi's programme to reinvigorate CCP rule, the Party's outreach to overseas political parties has been strengthened and diversified, including in Africa.

The CCP uses its party diplomacy as an additional diplomatic channel to pursue Beijing's foreign policy goals; for network building among African political elites; to win praise and legitimacy for CCP rule, to be replayed to domestic audiences; to build its international 'discourse power' to refashion global norms in its favour; and to promote the CCP's governance system.

The CCP's 'external work' is undertaken by its 'International Liaison Department' (ILD). The ILD focuses overwhelmingly on Africa's ruling parties (ideological affinity is a marginal factor); the party-channel is clearly intended to shape state policy. Under Xi, its activities have become more purposefully focussed on disseminating CCP thinking, promoting the CCP's model, and rallying international support for its actions. It does this through 'briefing tours' on key developments in CCP policy; training for Africa political parties on how to build a powerful, long-lived party like the CCP; and large, multiparty fora encouraging participants to sign on to Beijing's foreign policy priorities.

Party diplomacy has been retooled and deployed for the pandemic era. Early in the pandemic, the ILD mobilised overseas parties to sign onto a CCP-penned joint open letter from world political parties on the Coronavirus which defended Beijing's Coronavirus record and promoted CCP rhetoric. ILD training has shifted online and been refocused on the Coronavirus – above all how the CCP is managing China's economic recovery. The CCP has also made a series of donations of medical equipment to its African interlocutor parties – building on an existing habit of material and financial donations. Party diplomacy during the pandemic is strongly focused on reinforcing the CCP's international legitimacy and serving the strategic ideological goal of promoting its model of rule as efficient, effective, and worthy of emulation.

By providing Covid-19 assistance and drawing on its messaging apparatus and the CCP's party diplomacy to shape narratives and wield influence in Africa, Beijing has ensured that its stated goal of leaving China-African relations strengthened by the pandemic is credibly in reach.

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发挥影响力：
在新冠病毒时代

Introduction

When the Covid-19 virus went from Wuhan to the world in early 2020, the political risks for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increased sharply. Not only had Chinese citizens' anger at suspected bungling and coverups seemed to menace the Party's rule at home, now Beijing faced global reproach, amidst questions of how the virus had emerged and been allowed to spread beyond China. However, as Beijing brought its mobilizational strengths to bear and the virus under control – even as nations elsewhere struggled, most importantly the country against which the CCP benchmarks itself the most, the United States – Beijing sensed an opportunity. By exporting medical supplies and expertise, it could shift the narrative to reposition China as a solution to the virus – not merely its source. More sweepingly, the pandemic could be used to show the superiority of the CCP's governance system and demonstrate China's emergence as a 'responsible great power' willing and able to assert leadership and provide global public goods. In the Party's assessment, the pandemic had accelerated 'profound changes unseen in a century' – since the transition from British to American global primacy between the world wars – and cemented a 'profound adjustment in the international balance of power'.¹ The pandemic was, to the Party's leadership, proof that 'the East is rising, the West is declining'.²

For the Party's supporters, this came at a propitious time. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP since 2012, had already declared the dawn of a 'New Era' in which a 'rejuvenated' China would 'move closer to centre stage and make greater contributions to mankind' by offering 'Chinese solutions' to the world's problems.³ Since coming to power, Xi has gathered to himself more power than any of his immediate predecessors.

sors. He has moved decisively away from their 'collective leadership' and established himself as the undisputed 'core' of the CCP. Amidst a gathering personality cult, his 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' has been written into the Party and State constitutions as a guiding ideology. Xi's 'New Era' has been officially identified as an 'epoch-making' (划时代的) turning point for China on a par with the 1978 end of Maoism and the start of Reform and Opening Up.⁴ Fearing the Soviet Communist Party's fate, it is an era that reasserts the primacy of politics, ending a decade of ideological drift in which the Party focused on business and seemed, perhaps, to be managing a slow move towards political liberalisation. Political control and indoctrination have been redoubled to reinvigorate the Party's sense of purpose and reassert its leadership of all aspects of Chinese society. Cadres must be ideologically armed to guard Party rule against the 'Western anti-China forces' that seek to 'gouge an opening through which to infiltrate our ideology' and infect China with the 'malignant virus' of 'Western-style liberal democracy'.⁵

To ward off this threat, Xi says, the Party and its cadres should radiate confidence, both at home and on the world stage. They should be confident in the CCP's political system and the advantages it holds over democracy. The pandemic, Xi declares, has demonstrated the system's 'formidable life force and clear superiority' – and that it is China's 'contribution to the advancement of human civilisation' that should now be shared with the world.⁶ The time has come to overthrow liberal democracy's post-Cold War monopoly on validity as the most prestigious form of government in the international arena and prove to the world that the CCP has charted a path to modernity at least equal, perhaps superior, to democracy.⁷

Africa is central to Beijing's aspirations. If it is to reshape global norms and win acceptance as a leading power without democratising, it will need the support of Africa's 54 internationally recognised nations – a quarter of UN members. The CCP calculates that developing nations will be most receptive to its message that CCP-style rule brings stability and rapid economic transformation. Having long emphasised its solidarity with Africa as a fellow developing nation, under Xi, Beijing promotes the idea that the two are tied in a 'China-Africa Community of Common Destiny' (中非命运共同体), united by 'common historical experiences, common development tasks, and common strategic interests'.⁸ Even as Beijing's messaging towards Europe and the other industrialised democracies hardens, in Africa it continues to seek more positive appeal. To the developing world, China presents an aspirational message as an example of successful, dramatic economic transformation. And it promises to boost Africa's own economic development directly, as its companies open factories on the continent and build the infrastructure African citizens, economies and nations need. More than this, Beijing increasingly argues that it has a model that African governments can emulate to match its own economic success.

Confident that Covid-19 marks an inflection point in world history and its place in it, the CCP has nonetheless not left things to chance. It has seized the opportunity to build influence and shape narratives in Africa. Beijing has mobilised resources to provide medical equipment, expertise, and now vaccines to Africa, to demonstrate the solidarity it says animates the Community of Common Destiny. More than this, the CCP has wielded tools forged in the last decade to enable it to tell its stories to African populations and political elites. These tools will be examined in this report. Through an expansion of its state media into Africa, a new foray by Chinese officialdom onto social media, and cultivation of ties with African journalists and media organisations, the Party-State has built a messaging apparatus that propagates its preferred narratives on the continent. Meanwhile, in an often-overlooked development, the CCP has

stepped up its own 'party diplomacy' in Africa, building relations with African political parties and training their officials in the CCP way of governing. With these tools, the CCP has enhanced its ability to shape perceptions in Africa and ensure that China-Africa ties will emerge stronger from the Covid-19 pandemic. These tools are not deployed only in Africa, but the continent has proved an important priority and testing ground that points to how Beijing looks to push its narratives and interests elsewhere in the developing world.

- 1 'Full text: Keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against Covid-19', *Xinhua*, 18 June 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/18/c_139147084.htm; '中国共产党第十九届中央委员会第五次全体会议公报' ['Communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China'], *Xinhua*, 29 October 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-10/29/c_1126674147.htm [last accessed 24 August 2021].
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- 4 Thomas, N., 'Party All The Time: Xi Jinping's Governance Reform Agenda After the Fourth Plenum', *Macro Polo*, 14 November 2019. <https://macropolo.org/analysis/xi-jinping-ccp-china-governance-reforms-the-fourth-plenum/> [last accessed 24 August 2021].
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- 6 '中共中央召开党外人士座谈会 习近平主持并发表重要讲话', 新华网, ['The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held a symposium for non-party figures; Xi Jinping hosted and delivered an important speech', *Xinhua*], 8 May 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-05/08/c_1125958977.htm [last accessed 24 August 2021].
- 7 '中共中央召开党外人士座谈会 习近平主持并发表重要讲话', 新华网, ['The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held a symposium for non-party figures; Xi Jinping hosted and delivered an important speech', *Xinhua*], 8 May 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-05/08/c_1125958977.htm [last accessed 24 August 2021].
- 8 '第三届中非政党理论研讨会在北京开幕奏响中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会 "序曲"', 人民网 ['The 3rd China-Africa Political Party Theory Seminar opened in Beijing. Play the 'Overture' of the High-level Dialogue between the Communist Party of China and World Political Parties', *People's Daily Online*], 29 November 2017. <http://www.lfxw.com/guoneigign/2584139.html> [last accessed 24 August 2021].

Figure 1: Timeline: Covid in China-Africa relations



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发挥影响力：
在新冠病毒病毒时代

Building a 'Health Silk Road' to a 'Community of Health for All': China's Response to the Coronavirus in Africa

Once the worst of the outbreak was under control in China, beginning in March 2020 Beijing took action to change the global narrative on the Coronavirus. By sending medical equipment, personnel and, now, vaccines around the world, China is looking to establish itself in global perceptions as the solution to the virus – not its source. More than this, in Africa it is looking to prove that China and Africa are united in the 'brotherhood' of a 'Community of Common Destiny', and even that Sino-African ties will emerge strengthened by the pandemic.

China's well-publicised provision of masks, ventilators, and other medical equipment – not just to Africa but throughout the world – rapidly attracted considerable attention, as well as the label 'mask diplomacy'. This label, with its implication of political motives beyond selfless solidarity, soon rankled with Beijing and state media dub it 'a tool to bash China'; 'no matter what good China does, anti-China hawks will just interpret things the other way round'.⁹ While the phenomenon is on one level simply a reflection of China's emergence as a 'great power' with the capacity to provide global public goods – especially of the mass-producible variety – the state-driven provision of such aid is an inherently political act. All the more so when, as here, it has been heavily publicised by Beijing's messaging apparatus and so explicitly adorned with the Party's favoured slogans and officially endorsed rhetoric.

Beijing has identified its overseas medical assistance during the pandemic as part of a 'Health Silk Road', a health-focused facet of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy campaign. Prior to the pandemic, China had already

presented its health cooperation in Africa as part of both the BRI and the FOCAC process. However, despite some early appearances in Chinese state media, in reality the 'Health Silk Road' branding has been largely absent from China's own messaging in Africa (it has been used rather by overseas analysts). Instead, the central framing of the Coronavirus assistance used by Beijing, especially in Africa, is that it is constructing a 'Community of Health for All'. Beijing's preference for the 'Community of Health for All' terminology reflects its emphasising of solidarity between China and Africa, a major theme of its messaging on the continent during the pandemic. The term also clearly echoes the wider strategic concept that Beijing says defines China's relationship with Africa, the 'Community of Common Destiny' – of which the 'Community of Health for All' is something of a building block and exemplar. The 'Health Silk Road', on the other hand, may appear too closely tied to Chinese economic interests in the shape of the BRI, and simply be too abstruse to have much emotive resonance. (The two concepts of the BRI and the Community of Common Destiny are nonetheless closely linked; the BRI is identified as both an expression and a foundation of a Community of Common Destiny.)

1.1

The Coronavirus in Africa and the Challenge for China

Africa recorded its first Covid-19 case on 14 February 2020, in a person in Egypt. Since then, the continent has suffered 5.9 million confirmed cases and 151,175 recorded deaths (as of 11 July 2021).¹⁰ With 2.7 per cent of cases ending in fatality across the continent as a whole, Africa has had the highest continental case death rate in the world. But at 86 deaths per million, Africa has on the other hand seen proportionally the second lowest total fatalities of any continent.¹¹ Thanks to decisive action by African governments (and seemingly aided by latent factors including climate and youthful population), Covid-19 has – clinically – hit Africa less severely than initially feared; it has nonetheless exposed the frailty of public healthcare systems in many countries, with items such as ventilators in short supply.¹² Moreover, the pandemic continues to have a severe impact on African economies – in the case of resource exporters exacerbating the damage already done by a downturn in commodities prices.

The spread of the pandemic from China damaged African perceptions of the country, especially at the outset. As a leading Nigerian newspaper observed, 'the fact that the deadly disease originated from the Asian country is a stigma that has remained'.¹³ Like others around the world, many Africans doubted China's initial response to the virus. Ghanaian researcher Nathaniel Ocquaye reports that, in Ghana, 'many young people were engaged in heated discussions about China's failure to tell the world about such a deadly virus from the very beginning'.¹⁴ Prominent Nigerian televangelist Apostle Johnson Suleman complained: 'China allowed people who contracted the virus to leave their country ... now they ban entry [of foreigners into China]'.¹⁵ Criticism of its Coronavirus response intermingled with other controversies around China's activities in Africa. Prominent Africans, from the President of the Mining Forum of South Africa to

Box 1

a former Kenyan vice-president argued that China had 'a moral obligation' to cancel African debts as 'a sign of remorse ... for causing the deaths of our innocent citizens'.¹⁶ The spread of the virus in Africa also led to popular Sinophobia, including verbal abuse, mockery of supposed Chinese eating habits, and physical attacks.¹⁷

China thus faced a major threat to its standing in Africa, a situation that dramatically escalated when news spread of discrimination against Africans in China (see Box 1). Beijing has been under pressure to react, to change and reshape narratives, and avoid damage to its relations with African nations.

The Guangzhou Crisis

In April 2020, Beijing faced the greatest setback to Sino-African relations in recent memory. It came as news spread of discrimination against Africans in Guangzhou, the city with China's largest African population.¹⁸ Following unfounded rumours that Guangzhou's African residents were exposing the city to a new wave of the Coronavirus, many were summarily evicted from their residences and refused access to hotels, shops, and other facilities. Videos of Africans forced to leave their homes to sleep on the streets and being turned away from restaurants – including one of staff at a McDonald's restaurant wielding a sign informing customers that 'from now on black people are not allowed to enter the restaurant' – spread widely online and were reported in African media.¹⁹ The situation was exacerbated by the spread, alongside these genuine videos, of videos showing ethnic Asians attacking people of African ethnicities falsely identified as having been filmed in Guangzhou.²⁰

A Wave of Anger

A wave of anger and condemnation erupted in Africa. Hashtags including #DeportRacistChinese and #ChinaMustExplain trended on Twitter throughout the continent.²¹ African netizens demanded action from their governments. The backlash was not limited to social media. An editorial in Kenya's largest-circulation newspaper declared 'Kenya and the rest of Africa feel deeply betrayed by China'.²² A letter to the *Daily Monitor* in Uganda stated 'the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the truth of racism in China that had been overshadowed for years by the hyperactive business dealings with the African continent'. Given 'the basic truth that the relationship between China and Africa is purely monetary, not emotional or moral ... Africans, both at home and abroad, should vote with their pockets. We should boycott Chinese goods'.²³

Africa's Official Reaction

African governments also responded – and in a more forceful, public manner than seen before. A group of African ambassadors in Beijing lodged a complaint with the Foreign Ministry, arguing that the targeting of Africans 'has no scientific or logical basis and amounts to racism'.²⁴ The Nigerian Foreign Affairs Minister twice summoned China's ambassador in Abuja to express the government's 'extreme concern' at the treatment of Nigerians in China. In the Kenyan parliament, one representative called for Chinese to be expelled from Kenya, while the Nigerian House of Representatives unanimously passed a motion censuring Beijing and calling for an audit of the immigration status of all Chinese citizens in Nigeria.²⁵ Femi Gbajabamila, Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representatives, published a video showing him taking the Chinese ambassador to task.²⁶

Beijing's Response to the Crisis

The fallout from the situation in Guangzhou was not the first time that instances of racial insensitivity and discrimination by Chinese citizens and institutions have caused hurt and anger in Africa.²⁷ But the scale of the anger amongst citizens across the whole continent set it apart. And the robust response from African officialdom was also troublingly new, breaking with the habit of addressing frictions behind closed doors. Given the premium placed by Beijing on winning the support of African elites, this was particularly worrying. The affair directly undermined Beijing's rhetoric of 'brotherhood' with Africa and state media's growing campaign to exploit problems of racism in Europe and America as a flattering foil to its own South-South solidarity.

Beijing struggled to produce a coherent response that dealt with the underlying problems to defuse the situation. Denial was the instinctive, initial response. State media ran articles asking 'who is behind the fake news of 'discrimination' against Africans in China?' and claiming it was merely 'groundless rumours'.²⁸ Chinese officials in Africa joined in. China's embassy in South Africa stated 'there is no such thing as the so-called 'discrimination against Africans in Guangdong province' and their colleagues in Ghana released a statement accusing media of 'exaggerating the situation and driving a wedge between China and Africa'.²⁹ The embassy in Botswana went as far as opining that 'African residents in Guangzhou usually live in groups and like gathering, and are generally reluctant to take protective measures such as wearing masks. Frankly speaking, their lifestyle has brought a lot of panic in the neighbouring Chinese communities'.³⁰ China's ambassador to the AU claimed that the situation had been 'taken advantage of by people with ulterior motives' and that as 'China had been oppressed by Western colonisers for a long time ... there has never been a gene of racial discrimination in its DNA'.³¹

Guangzhou authorities responded more constructively. At a video conference for African journalists, Lou Jun, Deputy Director-General of Guangdong Foreign Affairs Office, said the incidents reflected neither the general situation in Guangzhou nor the local government's policy but nonetheless 'I won't hide the problem of denying Africans access to vital services'.³² The city government created a special taskforce to meet with African consulates and citizens to address problems and took measures to ensure equitable provision of quarantine accommodation and medical treatment. The provincial government issued an open letter informing the public on how to avoid discriminatory behaviour. These measures were publicised by Chinese embassies in Africa.³³ Central authorities also adopted a more conciliatory tone, with the MOFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian recognising that 'there might be some misunderstandings in the implementation of measures' resulting in 'the African side's reasonable concerns and legitimate appeals'.³⁴ Chinese social media also closed accounts for inciting discrimination.³⁵

African officials responded positively to these conciliatory moves and – at an official level at least – relations stabilised.³⁶ What the lasting impact of the episode will be, especially at a popular level, remains to be seen. The fallout from the situation in Guangzhou gave new impetus to Beijing's 'mask diplomacy' and much of its Coronavirus support can be seen as an effort to prevent lasting damage to the relationship from this episode.

1.2

'Mask Diplomacy': Donations of Medical Equipment

1.2.1 A Multilevel Donation Campaign

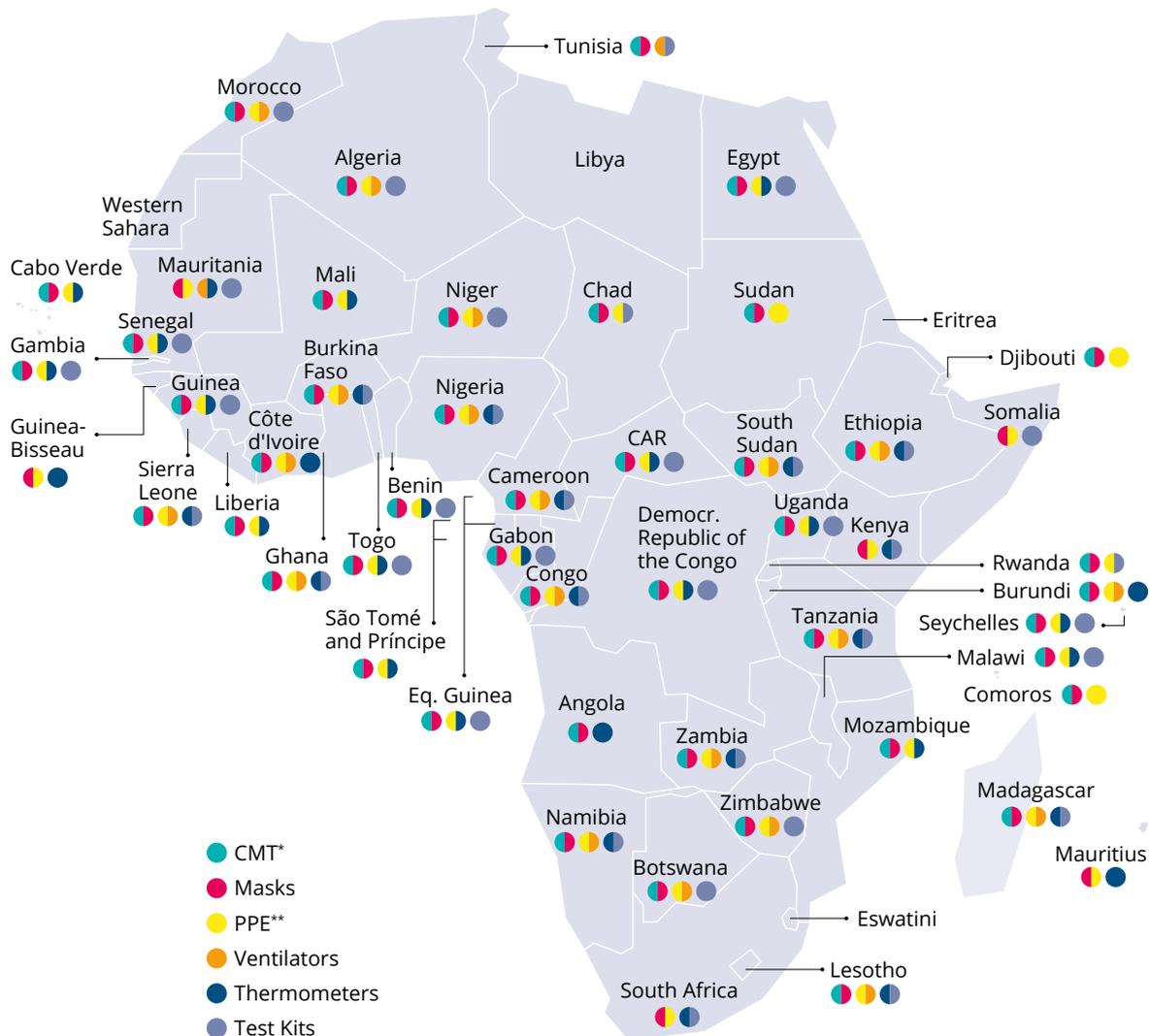
In early March 2020, China began shipping medical supplies to Africa (and elsewhere worldwide), often as donations, though the campaign has been accused of being opaque about the relative balance of donations and exports for payment. It has sustained a steady beat of donations that has continued into 2021.³⁷ With the pandemic largely under control at home, Beijing was able to draw on China's vast industrial capacity and centrality to existing supply chains to charter otherwise grounded aircraft and deliver medical supplies across Africa. Every country on the continent – barring Eswatini, which recognises Taiwan – has received repeated donations, including medical masks, personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitiser, thermometers, and ventilators. The beneficiaries have been diverse: governments, ministries, political parties, local authorities, individual hospitals, community leaders (such as the National Chief Imam of Ghana), and many others.³⁸ Some donations have been coordinated through international organisations, such as medical supplies for 17 West African countries delivered to the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot in Accra.³⁹ Other donations followed a request from the Organisation of African First Ladies for Development to Peng Liyuan, wife of Xi Jinping.⁴⁰

However, this campaign of donations has not been limited to the Chinese government. Strikingly, Chinese companies and private citizens have also participated. Private companies ranging from telecoms giant Huawei to footwear manufacturer Huajian International (a major employer in Ethiopia) donated cash, medical supplies, and testing kits to local governments.⁴¹ The Jack Ma Foundation, created by Alibaba's founder, donated 1,000 protective suits, 20,000 test kits and 100,000 masks to each African country, and has made further donations, as has the related Alibaba Foundation.

Major State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have donated too – frequently to African ministries, agencies and businesses with which they interact and do business. China Airport Construction Group donated 100,000 medical masks to Togo, where it is modernising Lomé international airport.⁴² Cosco Shipping donated 10,000 medical masks and 200 bottles of sanitiser to Transnet, which runs South Africa's ports.⁴³ The construction and engineering SOE Jiangxi International Economic and Technical Cooperation Co. gave 10,000 masks to Ghana's Ministry of Roads and Highways.⁴⁴

Chinese communities resident in Africa have also made donations, large and small. Across the continent, Chinese business and community associations play an important, semi-official role, and these groups have been active in the donation campaign. The Chinese community in Ghana donated 15 ventilators and 20,000 medical masks to the Greater Accra Regional Hospital.⁴⁵ In Niger, the Association of Chinese Entrepreneurs donated 10,000 surgical masks and XOF 10 million (EUR 15,000) to the Nigerien government.⁴⁶ In Kitwe City in Zambia, where the presence of Chinese small traders

Figure 2: China's Coronavirus medical aid to Africa



* Chinese Medical Team: teams of doctors and other medical practitioners sent to African countries to practice medicine for a period of 2 weeks – 1 year

** Personal Protective Equipment (may include masks)

is a recurring source of tension, the Chinese Business Association gave 860 masks and 50 bottles of hand sanitiser to the City Council, and the Copperbelt Chapter of the Zambia Chinese Association donated masks and sanitiser to Kitwe journalists and media organisations.⁴⁷

Strikingly, Chinese state media have highlighted these non-governmental donations. According to Xinhua, 'Africa is not only impressed by responses from the Chinese government but also Chinese private sector players like Alibaba and mobile phone manufacturer Tecno Mobile among others'.⁴⁸ The diverse participants in the donation campaign suggests the kind of people-to-people bonds of which the Community of

Common Destiny is supposed to consist. However, Chinese embassies have played a significant role in mobilising, overseeing and delivering many of the donations – including making the official handovers.⁴⁹ For example, the Ghanaian donation mentioned above was ‘donated through a partnership between the Chinese Embassy and the Chinese Community’.⁵⁰ Similarly, the USD 500,000 raised by the Chinese business community in Zimbabwe for the redevelopment of a hospital was a joint effort together with the local embassy.⁵¹ The campaign can thus be seen as a ‘whole of society’ mobilisation of the diverse players in China’s African presence, with the Party-State playing an important mobilising role.

1.2.2 Problems, Controversies and Pushback

The donation campaign has nonetheless faced a number of challenges and controversies in Africa. Some of this was political, drawing on recipients’ doubts as to possible ulterior motives – as when prominent Ghanaian actress Yvonne Nelson tweeted to her 1.6 million followers ‘the aid Africa is getting [from China] isn’t for free ... we will pay for it later ... they will come and mine and mine and mine and leave us hollow! For now, give way to our new colonial masters to save the day!’.⁵²

A greater challenge has come from doubts over the quality of Chinese supplies. Such doubts feed on the widespread, long-held view among many African consumers that Chinese goods are of inferior quality – and that Chinese companies habitually export their lowest quality products to Africa, reserving the higher quality items for Europe and America.⁵³ After reports that Chinese testing kits imported to Europe were found to be faulty, one prominent Kenyan lawyer’s response was typical: ‘China normally sends its highest quality products to Europe & US then its inferior ones to Africa ... The Covid-19 Test Kits it sent to Europe have been found 80% defective & Europe has returned them ... So, what does it say about the kit Jack Ma gave us? 100% or 120% defective?’.⁵⁴ In Ghana, Nigeria and elsewhere, concerns extended to conspiracy theories that supplies were even deliberately contaminated with the virus.⁵⁵ In Ghana, ‘a section of the public doubt[ed] the genuineness of the items and urged the government to examine it well before use’, leading John Boadu, General Secretary of the governing party to declare: ‘we should check all of them, we will collect them but we will also make sure it’s suitable to be used’.⁵⁶ Chinese donations were thereafter examined on arrival by the Ghanaian Customs Division and the Food and Drugs Authority ‘to ensure the medical supplies were in good condition’.⁵⁷

Typical of its presentation of African publics as easily manipulated by Western media, rather than forming their own views, the CCP tabloid *Global Times* claimed ‘the real reason behind the opposition to China’s medical support is that the Western media is launching a public opinion war against China. By spreading false information, they are trying to make people doubt the quality of medical kits and face masks and suspect the real purpose behind China’s donations of epidemic prevention materials’.⁵⁸ Chinese authorities nonetheless responded swiftly to the negative reports of faulty goods and instituted more stringent pre-export inspections – something Chinese embassies in Africa emphasised to local publics to allay their concerns.⁵⁹

1.2.3 Building Goodwill, Pushing CCP Narratives

China’s ‘mask diplomacy’ has not changed Africans’ often negative perceptions of Chinese goods. But there is every possibility that the steady flow of donations will leave a legacy of goodwill – especially when accompanied by such positive headlines as

'China rescues Ghana in coronavirus fight'.⁶⁰ Prospects of this have been boosted by the way Beijing has stage-managed and publicised its donations. Unlike the mostly financial support offered by Europe, the US and others, China's donations were mostly physical – and thus better suited to capturing public attention, particularly at a time when African governments struggled to compete on the suddenly competitive global market for medical supplies.⁶¹ In sharp contrast to requests that its own international benefactors not publicise their donations to China earlier in the pandemic – and instructions to Chinese media to downplay the role of foreign donations – Beijing has requested donations be met on arrival by senior political figures, including ministers, first ladies, and presidents.⁶² Handover ceremonies with Chinese ambassadors have been organised – and televised.⁶³ Chinese state media have given extensive coverage to donations and handover ceremonies [see media section]. The publicity generated has been used to promote Beijing's rhetoric and narratives, such as the 'Community of Common Destiny' slogan. For example, Wang Shiting, PRC ambassador to Ghana, used his speech at a handover ceremony in March 2020 to state that although the outbreak of Covid-19 was first identified in China, 'it does not mean that the origin of the virus is China', and to emphasise that 'under President Xi Jinping's leadership, the whole nation of China fought an all-out people's war against the epidemic'.⁶⁴

1.3

Chinese Medical Teams & Sharing Expertise

As Chinese leaders and state media emphasise, China's generosity has not been limited to the provision of medical equipment; it has also sent medical personnel and expertise to aid Africa's Coronavirus fight.⁶⁵ A further side benefit of having mostly controlled the virus at home with full lockdowns was that China could more readily spare clinicians with direct experience of Covid-19 for deployment abroad. During the pandemic, China has despatched numerous teams of doctors (generally around a dozen strong, though some over 20) to provide treatment in African hospitals and share their Coronavirus experience with African counterparts, during stays ranging from one week to one year.

Despite the new emphasis on them during the pandemic, these Chinese deployments are not new. On the one hand, state media describe them as a reprise of comparable efforts during the 2014–16 Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa.⁶⁶ But the deployment of Chinese Medical Teams (CMTs) (中国医疗队) to Africa is in fact China's longest running cooperation programme with the continent. The Chinese government estimates that since 1963 more than 22,000 Chinese medics have been sent to Africa, where they have treated approximately 220 million patients.⁶⁷ In many countries, the programme consists of continuous, rolling one-year deployments, dating back decades (Uganda, for example, has received 21 such teams since 1983⁶⁸). These are frequently provided on a partnership basis between a Chinese province and a given African nation, such as Liaoning and Gambia, and Guangxi and Niger.⁶⁹ The presence of

CMTs, together with China Friendship Hospitals in multiple African countries, has created a substantial legacy of goodwill. Under Xi Jinping, Beijing presents CMTs as part of a Health Silk Road and an important component of healthcare cooperation under FOCAC, boosting China's status as a healthcare partner. It also uses the programme to build Chinese cultural prestige and add a further element to the provision of purported 'Chinese solutions' to world problems: increasingly, the CMTs promote the use of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) amongst African populations (teams almost always include at least one TCM practitioner; some teams are made up almost entirely of TCM therapists⁷⁰).

Beijing has nonetheless repackaged the CMT programme and refocused it on the Coronavirus. During the pandemic, it has increased the number of short-term missions and included personnel with Covid-19 experience, and repurposed and extended CMT deployments already present in Africa.⁷¹ Teams have been despatched on tours of multiple short-term visits to more than one country.⁷² CMTs such as that sent to Angola in October 2020 reportedly included members 'who worked on the front line of the fight against Covid-19 in Wuhan', sent 'to exchange experience with local professionals'.⁷³ While CMTs deployed on longer missions continue to provide direct medical care (ranging well beyond treating Covid-19), shorter missions include full itineraries of briefings to a range of public health institutions. The team sent to Ethiopia in May 2020, for example, took in the Ethiopian Public Health Institute, quarantine centres, Covid-19 designated hospitals, the Ethiopian Ministry of Health, Africa CDC and the local WHO office.⁷⁴ During two weeks in Burkina Faso, a further team made 'four field visits, held eight training workshops, 14 interdisciplinary meetings, and 40 technical sessions'.⁷⁵ Both in conjunction with CMTs and beyond the programme, Chinese physicians have also held online training sessions for African counterparts on Covid-19 response. Many of these video conferences were bilateral, while in March 2020 a mass session was held for 300 doctors from the Africa CDC and 24 African countries.⁷⁶

China has substantially stepped up publicity around the CMTs during the pandemic. Members of a team sent to Algeria and Sudan produced a vlog of their journey and activities in partnership with the international branch of the state broadcaster, CGTN, which also produced a glossy short documentary about the deployment – both of which were duly shared on social media.⁷⁷ These, too, promote CCP narratives, with Chinese medics in them highlighting their deployment as a demonstration of the Community of Common Destiny. The arrival of a further CMT in Nigeria nonetheless caused controversy, with the Nigerian Medical Association complaining it was 'unnecessary' and 'demoralising to the country's frontline healthcare professionals' to bring in Chinese medics.⁷⁸ However, this incident remained localised and connected above all to Nigerian domestic politics – though this did not stop the *Global Times* once again imagining a conspiracy by 'Western forces who are trying to smear and belittle China's efforts in Africa'.⁷⁹

Overall, while the practical added value from the perspective of African healthcare professionals requires further, targeted research, the deployment of CMTs to Africa during the pandemic is likely to leave a positive legacy for Sino-African ties – and to be used as such in Beijing's messaging. Moreover, the establishment of partnerships between localities, even between specific hospitals,⁸⁰ leaves a template for future Sino-Africa disaster response, potentially mirroring the domestic 对口支援 'pairing assistance' system which couples different localities for emergency deployment of personnel and resources across the country and was prominent in China's domestic pandemic response.

1.4

The Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against Covid-19

In an assertion of leadership on Covid-19, in June 2020, Beijing organised the (online) Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against Covid-19. Hosted by Xi Jinping, the Summit attracted 13 African leaders, as well as António Guterres, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and Moussa Faki Mahamat, the heads of the UN, the WHO, and the AU Commission respectively. According to Xi's keynote speech, the Summit's purpose was 'to discuss our joint response to Covid-19 and to renew the fraternity between China and Africa'.⁸¹ State media pointed out that this was the 'only summit with the whole of Africa organised by any of the great powers' during the pandemic.⁸²

Xi used his speech to set out the Chinese assistance offered to Africa during the pandemic, presented firmly as reciprocal solidarity: 'China and Africa have offered mutual support and fought shoulder to shoulder ... China shall always remember the invaluable support Africa gave us at the height of our battle with the coronavirus. In return, when Africa was struck by the virus, China was the first to rush in with assistance and has since stood firm with the African people.'⁸³ Xi promised continuing provision of medical equipment and CMTs; the expedited construction of new headquarters for Africa CDC and of more hospitals in Africa; and mitigation of debt burdens. He also pledged that 'once the development and deployment of Covid-19 vaccine is completed in China, African countries will be among the first to benefit'. In his speech, Xi further argued that 'to cushion the impact of Covid-19, it is important to strengthen Belt and Road cooperation'.⁸⁴ In return, African leaders such as President Kenyatta of Kenya used the occasion to call on Beijing to 'further deepen debt relief measures and to consider trade concessions, to provide African countries with the breathing room they need for economic recovery' and to support the development African countries' own pharmaceutical and medical equipment manufacturing capacities.⁸⁵

The summit was also an opportunity to promote Beijing's political goals. Xi stated: 'we oppose politicisation and stigmatisation of Covid-19, and we oppose racial discrimination and ideological bias.'⁸⁶ Beijing has used the repeated refrain to resist 'politicisation' of the virus in response to Donald Trump's crass attempts to label Covid-19 'the China Virus' – but also to push back on wider calls for a thorough investigation of how the virus spread, including possible missteps by Chinese officialdom. Similarly, the proposed rejection of 'ideological bias' is an attempt to parry suggestions that any such missteps are inherently tied to the limitations of the CCP's governance system. The Joint Declaration signed by summit participants was also used to crystallise African support for Beijing's core Coronavirus narratives:

Africa commends the decisive measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the spread of the virus and its timely sharing of information with WHO and relevant countries in an open, transparent and responsible manner, which bought precious time for the rest of the world ... African countries express profound gratitude and appreciation to the Chinese institutions and companies that have provided medical supplies and material assistance in the effort to combat the Covid pandemic.

But the political messages were not limited to issues connected with the pandemic; tellingly the Joint Statement restated Africa's support to 'China's position on Taiwan and Hong Kong and supports China's efforts to safeguard national security in Hong Kong in accordance with law'. The summit thus demonstrated Beijing's demonstration to use the pandemic to 'take [the China-Africa] comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership to greater heights'.⁸⁷

1.5

Debt Relief

For Africa as elsewhere, Covid-19 has had economic as well as medical impacts. The pandemic has tipped Africa into its first recession in 25 years and exacerbated a debt crisis already brewing before Covid-19, thanks in part to a fall in commodities prices. The number of African countries categorised by the IMF as being either at high risk of or already in debt distress has risen to 21, and in November 2020, Zambia became the first African sovereign to default in a decade.⁸⁸ African governments generally spend more on debt servicing than on healthcare; with fiscal space tightening during the pandemic, leaders such as Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed faced the stark choice of whether to 'continue to pay toward debt or redirect resources to save lives and livelihoods'.⁸⁹ As Africa's largest bilateral creditor – it holds at least 21 per cent of Africa's debt as a whole but an even more preponderant share in several individual countries, including Angola, Zambia, and Kenya – China plays a central role in managing this challenge.

Despite initial reticence based on its long-standing policy of standing apart from multilateral debt restructuring processes (including coordination with the Paris Club), during the pandemic Beijing has for the first time joined an international debt management effort. In April 2020, following sustained pressure from African governments, China joined the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI).⁹⁰ The DSSI grants a moratorium on bilateral loan repayments due to G20 members and their policy banks from 73 of the world's poorest countries – initially to the end of 2020 but subsequently extended. China has in fact become the largest single contributor to the DSSI (having suspended USD 1.9 billion of repayments due in 2020), in part due to the much higher total of payments due to it.⁹¹ By March 2021, China had provided payment suspensions to 16 African countries through the DSSI, a fact highlighted by Chinese state media.⁹² China's participation does have important limitations though – much as the DSSI itself is a limited tool, focused only on improving liquidity by delaying payments, rather than addressing the underlying question of solvency, including through debt forgiveness. China has designated only two of its lenders, China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) and China Exim Bank, as official lenders covered by DSSI. It has excluded the many other Chinese financial institutions also involved in lending to Africa, notably the China Development Bank (CDB).

China and its lenders have also provided debt assistance beyond DSSI – but in a piecemeal, often opaque fashion. In line with a pledge made by Xi at the Extraordinary Summit, Beijing has reportedly cancelled interest-free loan debts due to mature at the

end of 2020 for 15 African countries (those cancellations disclosed by beneficiaries total at least USD 80.7 million).⁹³ More importantly, Chinese lenders have also reached bilateral restructuring agreements with some African countries, away from the structure and transparency of the DSSI. CDB and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) reached an IMF-backed agreement worth USD 6.2 billion with Angola, Africa's largest recipient of Chinese credit.⁹⁴ In Zambia, too, Exim Bank and CDB deferred and suspended payments.⁹⁵ Negotiations have begun with other borrowers.

Such agreements are part of an established pattern – and one that goes against the 'debt trap diplomacy' narrative that has taken hold in recent years.⁹⁶ This idea, drawing on a case in Sri Lanka, asserts that Beijing has deliberately saddled its debtors with unmanageable loans as a means to secure political influence and wrest control of strategic assets (such as ports). In reality, research by the China-Africa Research Institute has shown that, over the last decade, 'China has played a significant role in helping African countries to manage their debt' by agreeing to restructure around USD 15 billion of loans, and Chinese lenders have been 'more lenient' than private creditors and not pursued lawsuits and seized assets in cases of default.⁹⁷

Nonetheless, Chinese lending is often problematic – even if not in the coordinated, deliberate way portrayed by the 'debt trap' caricature. As a rule, contracts are opaque. Loans often have high interest rates and short maturities, when compared to multilateral development bank lending.⁹⁸ Tanzania's late president, John Magufuli, once complained 'only a drunkard' would accept the terms of a USD 10 billion Chinese project.⁹⁹ While recent research has shown much of China's investment in Africa to have 'significant and persistently positive' long-term economic effects, its lending for infrastructure has also led to numerous deeply uneconomical projects, including some of the world's most expensive roads.¹⁰⁰ Rather than a deliberate 'debt trap' set by lenders tightly controlled by Beijing, African nations rather face risks resulting from the export of China's own problems of free-flowing credit and economically doubtful megaprojects by a patchwork of competing companies and financial institutions.

China's lending in Africa has, however, fallen in recent years, and evidence suggests its lenders are becoming more commercially minded and cautious in their project selection.¹⁰¹ With other international lenders largely failing to provide funding for the infrastructure Africa urgently needs, Chinese credit will remain a valuable option. But the large stock of likely unmanageable debt already accrued presents a major challenge, during the pandemic and beyond. Although Chinese lenders have been more accommodating than commonly recognised, their lack of transparency, both in their initial loans, and in their approach to restructuring erodes trust – and has real perception costs for China. As Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, now director general of the WTO, complained, 'what we need from China is not a case-by-case examination, but an across-the-board agreement.'¹⁰² Given the complexity of different players involved, this will likely remain elusive. Not least as China is not the only powerful new lender in Africa – with the rise of Eurobonds on the continent in recent years, private bondholders have a greater share of African liabilities than ever before, and during the pandemic they have proved less accommodating than Chinese lenders.

1.6

Building the Africa CDC

At June's Extraordinary Summit, Xi pledged that China would 'start ahead of schedule the construction of the Africa CDC headquarters this year'.¹⁰³ China's construction of Africa CDC's new campus in Addis Ababa has been repeatedly touted by China's leaders and state media as an important landmark of China's Coronavirus support to Africa, and Sino-African health cooperation more generally.

This expedited construction was not, however, without controversy. Africa CDC had been officially launched in 2017, notably spurred by the West African Ebola outbreak and with substantial US support.* To date, Africa CDC, which has played an important role in mobilising and coordinating African governments in taking swift and largely effective action against the spread of Covid-19, has been temporarily housed in the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. At the outset of the pandemic, no formal decision had been taken by the AU's members regarding its long-term location, with other cities on the continent competing to host it.

Chinese construction of the Africa CDC headquarters had been mooted since 2015 (creation of a CDC for the continent had been under discussion since 2013) and was the subject of an agreement with the AU in June 2019.¹⁰⁴ As China hastened to start works in 2020, South African media reported consternation amongst some African governments that the project was being pushed forward without following AU processes and even, reportedly, against the wishes of Africa CDC Director Dr John Nkengasong.¹⁰⁵

The *Financial Times* reported that the US Trump administration was seeking to block China's construction of the campus, citing earlier alleged Chinese spying on the Chinese-constructed AU headquarters. A US official was quoted as stating that 'if the Chinese build the headquarters, the US will have nothing to do with Africa CDC'.¹⁰⁶ In view of this opposition, Beijing reportedly attempted to force the pace of a groundbreaking ceremony to create a *fait accompli*, while also pushing to have facilities named after Chinese scientists.¹⁰⁷ A ceremony was duly held in December 2020, with Xinhua reporting it was 'part of the ever-growing Sino-Africa cooperation in the public health sector'.¹⁰⁸

* Washington gave USD 14 million to fund the organisation's first year of operation and continues to pay its director's salary, together with those of senior medical staff seconded from the US CDC.

1.7

China's 'Vaccine Diplomacy'

Xi Jinping's pledge at the June 2020 Extraordinary Summit that China would give Africa preferential access to its vaccines once developed has been frequently repeated by Chinese officials and state media. And since early 2021 China has indeed begun a campaign of vaccine donations in Africa, and has exported a greater share of its production than the UK or US (though comparable to the EU's and India's exports). Following the same pattern as its earlier donation campaign, this has been dubbed 'vaccine diplomacy' – and the term duly rejected by state media.

Beijing has pushed considerable resources into the Covid-19 vaccine development, clearly, like other countries, seeing it as a matter of national pride (though unlike most others it has also tightly controlled narratives and perceptions around its vaccines). More than a matter of pride, vaccine development is also of strategic economic importance to Beijing. The government aims to make China the largest pharmaceutical player globally within a decade, and the sector was included in its 'Made in China 2025' strategy.¹⁰⁹ Beijing gave funding to at least 22 institutes and companies to develop 17 vaccine projects.¹¹⁰ Results have been mixed. The leading candidates, produced by Sinopharm and Sinovac, are based on traditional inactivated virus technology. In Phase III trials in a variety of countries, they have demonstrated efficacy ranging from 50.7 to 86 per cent, which is substantially lower than other leading Covid-19 vaccines. Moreover, both companies have released only limited data, reducing international confidence – a situation not improved by comments by the head of China's CDC that Chinese vaccines 'don't have very high protection rates' (the comments were promptly suppressed).¹¹¹ An advantage in both cases is that they can be transported at refrigerated, rather than sub-zero temperatures, significantly reducing supply chain costs. This, together with difficulty accessing alternatives, has increased their appeal for many developing countries.

In October 2020, China announced it would join the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access initiative, or 'Covax', which was created by the WHO and GAVI and principally funded by the EU and its members and, later, the United States to support equitable distribution of vaccines to lower income countries – and is to date African countries' principal source of vaccines.¹¹² Beijing's participation came after the Trump administration's refusal to join (a position reversed by Biden's government) – with the MOFA spokesperson pointedly calling on 'more capable countries' to also join Covax.¹¹³ In February 2021, Beijing pledged a small donation of 10 million doses to Covax.¹¹⁴ China remains a small player within Covax, which notably does not yet distribute any Chinese vaccines, and has not provided funding to the scheme.

1.7.1 China's Vaccine Donations to Africa

Instead, as in so many other areas, Beijing has focused on bilateral cooperation. As well as frequently emphasising the pledge of preferential access, Beijing has strongly promoted its vaccines to African governments. In October, Beijing-based ambassadors from 50 African countries were taken on a tour of Sinopharm's vaccine pro-

duction facility by the company's chairman.¹¹⁵ Sinovac has prepared the ground for manufacturing its vaccine locally in Egypt and both it and Sinopharm are exploring local production elsewhere.¹¹⁶ In December, Alibaba announced an agreement with Ethiopian Airlines to establish a cold-chain logistics network to distribute Chinese vaccines in Africa.¹¹⁷ On 10 February 2021, the first Chinese vaccines arrived in Africa, when a donation of 100,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine was delivered to Equatorial Guinea.¹¹⁸ Since then, China has sustained a steady flow of donations and has, to date, delivered 12.85 million doses to 26 countries (see Figure 3). Donated batches typically consist of 200,000 doses, a small quantity relative to the total populations of recipient countries and well below the quantities delivered by Covax. China's donations appear closely connected to promoting Chinese vaccines for sale, and Beijing has never claimed that its provision of vaccines to Africa would consist principally of donations. Beyond these donations, Chinese companies have agreed only a handful of purchase agreements with African countries. The prices behind these deals have not all been disclosed. However, the details of the first sale, made to Senegal in February 2021, suggest Chinese vaccines may be relatively expensive. Senegal reportedly paid almost USD 19 per dose – which compares unfavourably to the USD 3 per AstraZeneca dose charged by India's Serum Institute.¹¹⁹

Chinese media and officials have nonetheless celebrated and publicised China's vaccine donations in much the same way as its earlier medical donations. Vaccine donations, too, have been sent on specially chartered flights and greeted by senior dignitaries.¹²⁰ China's foreign ministry described them as 'a vivid manifestation of China-Africa friendship' and Xinhua reported that they demonstrate 'China's honouring of its commitment to making Chinese Covid-19 vaccines a 'global public good' accessible and affordable to people around the world ... It has walked the talk indeed'.¹²¹ *China Daily* has highlighted the contrast with the US and UK, which have exported none of the doses they have produced.¹²² (Troublingly, state media have engaged in a campaign to undermine trust in non-Chinese vaccines, amplifying and even misrepresenting reports on safety concerns about the AstraZeneca vaccine.¹²³ State media have described the novel mRNA technology of the BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna vaccines as risky – and beyond the capabilities of African medics to respond to potential problems.¹²⁴)

China has to date provided a comparatively small portion of Africa's vaccines – Covax delivered nearly 15 million shots to 22 African countries in its first 10 days.¹²⁵ However, as its pharmaceutical companies overcome initial production delays and perhaps begin manufacturing in Africa, they may come to play a greater role – not least as Covax is intended to provide Africa approximately 600 million doses (or enough for only around 20 per cent of the continent's population), meaning other sources will be needed for the at least 1 billion further doses needed to achieve herd immunity. While China's donations have generated positive press in Africa, a major roadblock will remain the limited trial data on Chinese vaccines and related doubts about their efficacy.¹²⁶ It is telling that an article in Uganda's *Daily Monitor* welcoming Chinese vaccines as 'a mark of close fraternal ties' that broadened the country's options nonetheless saw them as inferior options for Kampala to turn to as it could not compete with 'better-resourced nations for higher-grade vaccines'.¹²⁷ Thanks to such perceptions and Chinese vaccines' high prices, donations have not translated smoothly into purchase orders.¹²⁸

Through these efforts, Beijing has sought to demonstrate that China and Africa are bound in a Community of Common Destiny. To drive home this message and shape perceptions in Africa, Beijing has pushed key Coronavirus narratives through a messaging apparatus developed in Africa in recent years.

Figure 3: Covid vaccine donations to Africa: China & COVAX*



*As at 10/08/2021

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影响力

在非洲塑造叙事和建立

中国共产党如何

2

发挥影响力：

在新冠病毒时代

The Party's Messaging Apparatus in Africa

2.1

China Seeks to Shape the Covid-19 Narrative in Africa

A crucial element of the Party's response to the Covid-19 outbreak was censorship at home and wide-reaching efforts to manipulate Chinese citizens' perceptions of the situation. But the effort to determine perceptions of Beijing's virus response did not stop at China's borders. In his first publicised speech on the virus, delivered to the PBSC on 3 February, Xi Jinping noted that the world was watching and urged the Party to 'take the initiative and effectively influence international public opinion' on China's Covid fight and 'win the understanding and support of the international community'.¹²⁹ This command to control the global narrative passed down to all levels of the Party-State's opinion management apparatus. Directives from the Zhejiang branch of the Cyberspace Administration of China exhorted cadres not only to 'resolutely control anything that seriously damages party and government credibility and attacks the political system' at home but also seek to 'actively influence international opinion'.¹³⁰

This effort to shape global opinion, including in Africa, has remained central throughout the pandemic. In Africa, Beijing has pulled on three key mechanisms for expanding the reach of its narratives, developed over the last decade: the expansion of state media to project the Party-State's voice into the continent; the arrival of Party-State officials on social media to speak directly to African publics; and direct outreach to African journalists and media organisations to secure the support of the continent's opinion formers.

2.1.1 A Growing Struggle for China Narratives Around the World

The Coronavirus spread in a context where, in Xi Jinping's 'New Era', the CCP believes itself to be in an ever deepening 'public opinion war' (舆论战), facing off against hostile, 'anti-China forces' from the West. (Discussion of both 'public opinion war' and the related 'public opinion struggle' (舆论斗争) in the *People's Daily* has shot up since Xi Jinping came to power.¹³¹) In this struggle, the CCP believes it faces a global public opinion environment stacked against it. According to *Qiushi* (the Party's leading theory journal and thus an authoritative indicator of official CCP thinking) 'a small number of Western media have managed to dominate the international news and information order, masking the truth [and] disseminating prejudices'.¹³² There is a widespread perception in the Party and amongst its supporters that China is the victim of biased, unjustly critical reporting by international media. This is particularly the case on the subject of China-Africa relations, where 'many European and American media are keen to ridicule and stigmatise China, generating countless negative and false news, which will also affect public opinion in Africa' – as the coverage of China's 'mask diplomacy' again demonstrated.¹³³

Beijing's response has been to assert its 'image sovereignty' (形象主权), build its 'discourse power' (话语权) and attempt to operate internationally the 'opinion guidance' (舆论引导) it pursues with the Chinese public. This has led to an increasingly aggressive fight for narratives on the issues that matter most to the Party, seen for example in its attacks on foreign companies that fail to identify Taiwan as part of China.¹³⁴ This represents a shift from shielding the domestic information environment through censorship, to focusing on policing expression overseas. The proactive side of this effort has been termed by a leading Chinese scholar a 'charm defensive', necessary to balance out allegedly biased international reporting.¹³⁵ Xi has called on the Party to 'improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China' and enhance Beijing's influence.¹³⁶ The phrase 'tell China's story well' (讲好中国的故事) (and the closely related 'tell the Party's story well') has become one of the most important watchwords of Xi's 'New Era'. Through a series of reforms and expanded budgets, Xi has reinforced the Party's propaganda apparatus, both domestically and internationally, to forge a 'more disciplined and reliable messaging machine' serving the Party with 'more creative content'.¹³⁷

Importantly, Africa is seen by Beijing both as an important 'battleground' in the Party's 'opinion war' and a 'natural' ally in the struggle. Africa is politically valuable to Beijing. Yet, as the Guangzhou affair demonstrated, it faces setbacks that are allegedly stirred up or exploited by Western media, which retain considerable influence in Africa. Beijing stresses, not entirely unfairly, that these same media present in Africa in an unfairly one-sided, negative way. As such, it presents its own quest for 'discourse power' as a fight on behalf of the developing world, together with Africa.

2.1.2 China's Key Covid Narratives

During the Coronavirus pandemic, Beijing has promoted several key narratives about its response at home and abroad. Some of these narratives have been used worldwide (and domestically), while others have been more strongly emphasised in Africa.

Beijing's core narratives are:

China responded swiftly and transparently to the outbreak – and bought the world time: Faced with allegations – both within China and abroad (including in Africa) – that the initial outbreak was covered up and countermeasures delayed, enabling the virus to spread, Beijing has stressed that the Party-State responded swiftly and decisively, and was prompt to share information with the international community. The urgency of this narrative was boosted by international attention on the case of Li Wenliang, a Wuhan doctor who was reprimanded by authorities for warning acquaintances about the then undisclosed outbreak via private messages and himself subsequently died of Covid-19, causing an outcry in China. Beijing's claimed swiftness and transparency was central to *Fighting Covid 19: China in Action*, a White Paper issued in June 2020 laying down Beijing's official narrative of the outbreak, which set the score for much of the Party-State's subsequent messaging, including statements by Chinese embassies in Africa.¹³⁸ It also contrasts with admissions early in the outbreak. Before his resignation, the then mayor of Wuhan admitted in January 2020 that city authorities had 'not disclosed information in a timely manner' as they were not permitted to share more without permission from further up the hierarchy. Subsequent investigative reporting on the early stages of the outbreak suggests local health and municipal authorities hesitated to report the situation and take coordinated action to arrest the virus' spread.¹³⁹ The former mayor's candour has not been repeated; instead, across all channels at its disposal, Beijing has emphasised that 'as soon as cases ... were identified ... China acted immediately', 'and promptly reported the situation [and] informed the WHO and other countries, including the US, of the developing situation'.¹⁴⁰ The large number of deaths worldwide, together with research suggesting that many lives would have been saved by an earlier response (an estimated 95 per cent smaller spread with action three weeks earlier) have reinforced the impetus to suppress any claim the initial response had been delayed by fear, indecision and opacity.¹⁴¹ Beijing's messaging has, moreover, emphasised that its swift, effective reaction and its transparency bought the rest of the world time to prepare for the spread of the virus.¹⁴²

China's response has been exemplary – and demonstrates the advantages of the CCP's system: The message that China's political system has given it advantages in fighting the virus that other systems lack has been central to Beijing's domestic propaganda.¹⁴³ But it has also featured in its international messaging, including in Africa.¹⁴⁴ Beijing and its officials in Africa have produced articles, exhibitions and social media posts showcasing the rapidity and effectiveness of China's response and its ability to swiftly and comprehensively mobilise the Chinese population to fight the virus. Conversely, state media have highlighted the failings of European and – especially – American governments in arresting the virus' spread. The chaotic response under Donald Trump has been particularly highlighted to suggest the limitations of American democracy – including in the sardonic short animation 'Once upon a Virus', produced by state media and widely shared on social media, where an increasingly irate Statue of Liberty Lego figure criticises China's lockdowns as 'violating human rights' and disregards the warnings of a Terracotta Warrior figure representing China that the virus is dangerous.¹⁴⁵ Elsewhere, an article described a Chinese '12-year-old who used to look up to the US, assuming that the US always outperforms China, [but] realized for the

first time there's no need to envy others', after seeing the US' Coronavirus response. This is typical of a growing effort by state media to popularise the view that young Chinese no longer admire Western democracy and instead prefer the PRC's system of governance.¹⁴⁶ In Africa, the message that China's system boasts specific strengths is ascribed to African political figures cited in Chinese state media, such as John Boadu, General Secretary of Ghana's governing New Patriotic Party, who was reported as stating 'that China has made full use of its institutional advantages to achieve a sustained progress in epidemic prevention and control'.¹⁴⁷ The narrative plays up the Chinese 'miracle of speed', China's calling card in Africa where it emphasises its rapid construction of infrastructure.¹⁴⁸ This narrative emphasises not only that 'China was able to handle the pandemic better than the West due to its powerful and efficient political system with strong mobilization capability' but that its efforts vindicate the 'people-centred' development concept put forward by Xi Jinping and strongly promoted in Africa.¹⁴⁹

Xi Jinping was personally at the heart of China's successful Coronavirus fight:

Much of Beijing's messaging suggests that a key advantage of the PRC's system is Xi Jinping himself. The growing cult of personality around Xi has an international dimension, including, for example, the promotion of his books on governing China. According to the CCP journal *Qiushi*, 'the leadership of the CCP with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core is the fundamental reason why China has achieved remarkable results in the fight against the epidemic'.¹⁵⁰ Xinhua declared that Xi's leadership during the pandemic reflects his 'commitment to the people, his sense of mission, his far-reaching strategic vision and outstanding leadership'.¹⁵¹

China has shown solidarity with Africa in a Community of Common Destiny: Beijing has widely publicised its Coronavirus support to Africa, consistently framing it as an act of solidarity befitting a China-Africa Community of Common Destiny. While in domestic messaging it has presented its support to Africa and the world as a demonstration that China is a responsible great power, to African audiences China has strikingly portrayed its assistance as reciprocal. In showcasing its donations to Africa, Beijing has highlighted the material and moral support first given by African nations in the early stages of the pandemic. For example, state media emphasised that Chinese donations to the Comoros were a reciprocation of a symbolic EUR 100 donation to China early in the pandemic.¹⁵² This framing is consistent with China's long-standing framing of Sino-African relations as a meeting of equals engaging in win-win, South-South cooperation. Beijing has nonetheless emphasised the scale of its generosity and explicitly contrasted this with Africa's other international partners. It has also consistently underlined China's selflessness: 'China, despite being ravaged by the virus then, rushed forward to help its African brothers by unreservedly providing medical supplies'.¹⁵³

Pushing conspiracy theories to muddy the waters on Covid-19's origins. The Covid-19 outbreak was first detected in Wuhan, in the centre of China, strongly suggesting the pandemic's origins lie within China's borders. The presence of bat populations carrying pools of Coronaviruses, notably in caves in Yunnan province, encourages this view – and the expansion of human populations in proximity to jungle and similar environments has been recognised for a number of years as increasing the risk of such a natural disaster. The presence of sensitive virology laboratories in Wuhan, understood to be conducting research into highly infectious viruses including Coronaviruses, has, however, raised the possibility that the outbreak may not have been entirely natural. In March 2021, the Director-General of the WHO stated that the possibility of a lab leak origin should be explored further. Beijing strongly resisted calls for an independent international investigation into the outbreak's origins, even placing trade restrictions on Australian goods in response to the Australian government's calls

for such an investigation.¹⁵⁴ In early 2021, it permitted a WHO investigative team to visit sites in Wuhan under closely managed circumstances. The resulting report has been criticised for its limitations.

Disturbingly, Beijing has promoted alternative explanations of the virus' origins, outside of China, with weak scientific evidence, including conspiracy theories that the virus was deliberately brought to China by the US military. Such claims have been particularly pushed by the MOFA's controversial spokespeople, including on social media, especially following Donald Trump's attempts to distract from his own administration's pandemic failings by amplifying doubts around virus' origins. Where state media initially reported that the outbreak emerged in Wuhan, such references were subsequently scrubbed from online articles.¹⁵⁵ Chinese ambassadors have participated in this effort to suggest the virus emerged outside of China. For example, then PRC Ambassador to South Africa Lin Songtian tweeted on 7 March 2020 that 'although the epidemic first broke out in China, it [does] not necessarily mean that the virus [...] originated from China, let alone [was] 'made in China''.¹⁵⁶ He then asserted the same at a specially held press briefing, stating that 'some people in the West with hidden agenda accused China of being the 'origin of novel coronavirus' or 'made in China'.¹⁵⁷ Other Chinese ambassadors across the continent have made similar statements in press interactions and on social media.

To promote these narratives, China has pulled on a series of levers developed in recent years to enhance its ability to shape African views: the promotion of China's official voice through an expansion of state media on the continent; carrying that voice onto social media; and reaching out directly to African media organisations and journalists.

2.2

Amplifying the Voice of China: The Expansion of Chinese State Media in Africa

2.2.1 The Party's Media

To project its voice and compete for 'discourse power', Beijing has pushed its state media to expand in Africa. It has created a well-resourced, multiplatform media presence on the continent that has dedicated, Africa-centric print, radio, and television outlets, all of which have embraced the new opportunities of social media. All have actively promoted Beijing's core Coronavirus narratives.

'State media' is the standard terminology, and it is retained here. However, these could justifiably be termed 'Party media'. Xi Jinping himself has directed that Chinese state media 'must bear the surname 'Party''.¹⁵⁸ The Party has ultimately controlled

all media in China since the founding of the PRC (indeed, it itself issues some publications directly, notably the *People's Daily*), and it has always taken a Leninist view of the role of the media: they are the 'eyes, ears, tongue and throat of the Communist party' (党的耳目喉舌), tasked with disseminating its thoughts and deeds, not holding it accountable.¹⁵⁹ But Xi has redoubled the Party's mastery over the media. He has insisted that 'all the work of the news media must reflect the Party's will, reflect the Party's ideas, safeguard the Party's central authority, safeguard the Party's unity, and love the Party, protect the Party, and serve the Party'.¹⁶⁰ Xi has not only exhorted the media to be animated by a sense of loyalty to the Party's mission. He has also enacted bureaucratic reforms to bring more of the media more directly under the management of the Party, rather than the State.¹⁶¹ In Xi's 'New Era', budgets for propaganda work have increased – and its output become more sophisticated.

As Dani Madrid-Morales sets out in the recent report *It is about their Story: How China, Turkey and Russia Influence the Media in Africa* by the KAS Sub-Saharan Africa Media Programme, China's state media have been in Africa since the Mao era.¹⁶² But Africa became the first target of a vast campaign to expand Chinese state media's international influence begun in 2009 by Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao.¹⁶³ Africa remains a priority and a key testing ground for the development of state media capabilities. The inauguration in Nairobi in April 2021 of the new African headquarters of China Media Group, also known as The Voice of China, the holding company created in 2018 to regroup several of the key outlets, underscores Beijing's determination to build out its media's influence in Africa.¹⁶⁴

2.2.2 China's Key State Media in Africa

China's key state media in Africa are:

China Radio International (CRI): CRI's FM, AM and shortwave broadcasts reportedly cover over ten million listeners in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶⁵ For African audiences, CRI broadcasts content in Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Hausa and Swahili. It produces textual content in these languages published on dedicated websites and actively promotes its content, including videos, on social media such as Facebook and YouTube.¹⁶⁶ In addition to its direct broadcasts, CRI has pursued an important strategy of partnering with local African stations to broadcast its content within their programming.

China Global Television Network (CGTN) Africa: Now part of China Media Group, the international branch of China Central Television (CCTV) launched its Africa channel in 2012. (Until a rebranding in 2017, CGTN Africa was known as CCTV Africa.) CGTN Africa's headquarters in Nairobi were CCTV's first broadcasting hub outside of China (it has now been joined by hubs in London and Washington, D.C.) and it maintains bureaux across Africa. Its Nairobi production centre employs 120 to 150 people, the majority of whom are Kenyan. However, the management and editorial staff are Chinese.¹⁶⁷ In addition to a variety of Africa-focused news content, including African sport and business, CGTN Africa broadcasts *Talk Africa*, a weekly talk show hosted by prominent Kenyan anchor Beatrice Marshall covering diverse topics, and *Faces of Africa*, a documentary with engaging stories of the lives of individual Africans. In addition to CGTN Africa's English-language content, CGTN Français, its sister channel targeting the francophone world, produces French-language, partially Africa-focused coverage. CGTN Africa gives extensive – naturally positive – coverage of Sino-African relations, including of events such as the June 2020 China-Africa Extraordinary Summit on Covid-19.¹⁶⁸

China Daily: *China Daily*, the English-language newspaper produced by the CCP's Propaganda Department, produces an African edition and in 2012 launched its *Africa Weekly* supplement. Free copies are distributed by Chinese embassies throughout Africa, notably to local newsrooms, companies, and government agencies. It claimed a circulation of 20,000 in 2014.¹⁶⁹ *China Daily's* Nairobi office produces Africa-focused content for *China Daily's* publications, as well as contributing to *Africa Weekly*. *China Daily* frequently engages African commentators to pen articles praising various aspects of Beijing's Africa policy and tout China as a model for Africa.¹⁷⁰ According to Shi Anbin, a prominent Chinese media scholar, *China Daily's* target audience is 'local power elites, the urban middle class and opinion leaders in Africa'.¹⁷¹

ChinAfrica & Chinafrique: In 2012, *Beijing Review*, an English-language news magazine owned by the CCP, established a subsidiary in Johannesburg. It publishes the English-language *ChinAfrica* and its French sister publication *Chinafrique*, both monthly publications focused on Sino-African relations. Both are subscription based and claim a circulation of 30,000. *Beijing Review* states that *ChinAfrica* targets 'high-end' readers including 'government officials, major political parties and business executives in Africa, international organizations for African affairs, Chinese and African academics and media workers'.¹⁷²

Xinhua: Xinhua News Agency is the PRC's primary press agency. It is the largest and most influential media organisation in China; as a ministerial-level agency it sits alongside the *People's Daily* at the top of the hierarchy of state media outlets. It is 'the Party's first take on history', the most authoritative statement of the Party's orthodoxy in response to current events, from which other organs of state media take their cue.¹⁷³ It is also one of the most flexible and effective tools for promoting CCP narratives in Africa. Its African headquarters are in Nairobi, and it maintains around 30 bureaux in Africa.¹⁷⁴ Its reach is magnified by the reproduction of its copy in newspapers and on popular news websites across the continent. While, like other news agencies, it sells stories to other outlets, approximately 40 per cent of its costs are directly subsidised by the Chinese government, enabling it to offer steep discounts to African publications.¹⁷⁵

Examples abound of Xinhua stories – including on bilateral or Sino-African relations – being reproduced in the African press, at times with unclear or no identification of Xinhua as the source – or indeed of its status as Chinese state media.¹⁷⁶ This has been evident during the Coronavirus pandemic, where, for example, the popular Ivorian news site Abidjan.net (the most visited news site in the country¹⁷⁷) published a series of Xinhua articles regarding the origins of Covid-19,¹⁷⁸ vaunting China's Covid response,¹⁷⁹ and highlighting US failings in the pandemic.¹⁸⁰ The multidimensional reach of Xinhua copy in Africa is demonstrated by the journey of a lengthy piece outlining the ways 'China-Africa cooperation prospers against Coronavirus'. Published on the Xinhua website, the article was then placed in Ghanaian media by the Chinese Embassy in Accra under its own name, while also being syndicated in local media from Namibia¹⁸¹ to Rwanda¹⁸² to the Seychelles,¹⁸³ with these outlets finally also sharing the article on their Facebook pages.¹⁸⁴

2.2.3 A New Perspective on Africa?

China's state media are backed by considerable resources, giving them plenty of potential clout and, increasingly, putting them at an advantage over other international media organisations facing budget cuts. As Madrid-Morales observes, their 'material capabilities ... are among the best of all international media: funding for continental travel is available, newsrooms are well-staffed, and there is a willingness to cover the continent extensively'.¹⁸⁵ These capabilities have enabled Chinese state media to hire numerous African journalists – in turn contributing to Chinese state media's key selling point in Africa: that they offer a new – and African – perspective.

CGTN's slogan 'see the difference' promises a perspective not offered by global media's incumbents. It, and other Chinese media, is presented to African audiences as an example of the global South telling its own stories.¹⁸⁶ With international media from outside Africa continuing to dominate reporting on the continent – and all too frequently framing it negatively – there is substantial appetite for recentred coverage, delivered by African media. As Assane Diagne, editor-in-chief of the website *Africa-check.org*, has commented, when African citizens seek news about developments elsewhere on the continent, 'we have to fall back on the media outlets of former colonisers ... this trend must be reversed'.¹⁸⁷

State media's hiring of African journalists, including as on-camera presenters on CGTN Africa, seems to back the claim of Africans telling African stories through Chinese state media. However, evidence from within CGTN suggests that non-Chinese staff have limited editorial control, especially with regards to more sensitive areas of news reporting. According to a former CGTN editor, quoted in a recent study, 'Kenyan journalists working for CGTN have no say whatsoever on content development or editorial matters ... that's the prerogative of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party'.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Kevin Otiende, another former CGTN employee, has stated: 'I felt personally, there was no freedom of expression ... everything had to be nice. And anything that was not perceived to be [*politically*] correct was immediately killed'.¹⁸⁹ CGTN Africa reportedly conducts two editorial meetings, one for all staff and another only for Chinese editors, to coordinate messaging with Beijing.¹⁹⁰ In Madrid-Morales' assessment, 'oversight editorial procedures are standard [in media organisations] ... but the very clear division of roles based on nationality is unique to Chinese media'.¹⁹¹

This is unsurprising, given the established practices of Chinese state media, and their explicit political purpose in Africa. Traditionally, the Party-State's media are intended to publicise the Party-State's actions, necessarily in a positive light. Chinese media theorists increasingly rationalise this as 'positive journalism' (积极新闻) and 'constructive journalism' (建设性新闻), attempting to tie it to an international concept that prizes reporting focused on solutions, rather than just their corresponding problems. The most common formulation offered by Chinese officials is that media should contribute to 'social development' and support the government's goals.¹⁹² This boosterism is carried into the international domain, including Africa, where state media avoid negatively reporting the problems of local governments. The gap in this approach is that it fails to account for how problems can be identified by a critical media in the first place – a gap to some extent closed domestically by state media preparing more unvarnished 'internal reports' (内参) for the eyes of senior officials only. Chinese media are thus entirely absent from the kind of critical, public-service investigations conducted in Africa for example by the BBC.¹⁹³

Moreover, the stated purpose of state media's expansion into Africa ensures their messages are narrowly defined. At CGTN Africa's official launch, the then PRC ambassador to Kenya told the new channel's staff that they had three missions: to show Chinese and global audiences 'a colourful Africa'; to introduce African audiences to 'the successful experiences of China's economic development' and its rich culture; and to 'tell the world a good story of China-Africa friendship'.¹⁹⁴ This has a palpable impact on how state media report African news, as Vivien Marsh's analysis of CGTN Africa's reporting of the 2014 Ebola outbreak shows; 17 per cent of the channel's Ebola stories mentioned China and its support to efforts to contain the virus.¹⁹⁵ This has continued during Covid-19, where much state media coverage focuses on similar themes.

2.2.4 State Media's New Methods

Heeding Xi's call to 'tell China's story well' and aided by expanded propaganda budgets, state media have updated their methods. In 2019, Xi called the 'integration of traditional media with new media an urgent task' and state media have expanded their presence on international social media platforms – and sought to produce content better suited to this environment. All the major state media outlets have created accounts across Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other leading social media platforms, which are widely used in Africa. This includes dedicated profiles for Africa-focused outlets, such as *ChinAfrica*, CGTN Africa, and *China Daily Africa*.

Some of these profiles are well followed – though as Figure 4 shows, generally well behind more established international outlets. Follower counts do not tell the whole picture, not least as they can be manipulated by bots and fake accounts. CGTN Africa's YouTube channel's subscriber count of 589,000 is comparable to BBC News Africa's 650,000 – but whereas the latter's videos frequently have hundreds of thousands of views, consistent with its subscriber count, CGTN's view counts are much smaller, in the low thousands or hundreds.

State media are investing to improve this situation – including through extensive paid promotion of their content on Facebook.¹⁹⁶ In an effort to exploit the potential of social media for reaching new audiences, state media are appropriating the language and values of independent media to present themselves as upstarts challenging incumbents. Xinhua boldly claims on its social media accounts that 'We never end our quest for facts and truth ... We don't pursue corporate interests, nor will we ever yield to the pressure of ideological stigmatization and political bias'.¹⁹⁷ It omits its relationship with the CCP and Chinese government. State media are also producing more social-media-ready content, particularly short videos, and animations in an 'explainer' style – for example explaining the CCP and China's political system.¹⁹⁸ In recent months they have also appropriated the visual language of fact-checking to investigate and identify as 'false' or 'fake' reports by leading international media in an attempt to undermine their credibility.¹⁹⁹

Figure 4: Chinese and international outlets' social media impact*

	CGTN Africa	Followers
	 Youtube	655,000
	 Twitter	144,600
	 Facebook	4,594,817
	ChinAfrica Magazine	Followers
	 Twitter	14,900
	 Facebook	232,398
	China Daily Africa	Followers
	 Twitter	1,794
	 Facebook	1,021
	BBC News Africa	Followers
	 Youtube	723,000
	 Twitter	3,300,000
	 Facebook	7,033,627
	RFI	Followers
	 Youtube	583,000
	 Twitter	1,600,000
	 Facebook	1,180,586
	CNN Africa	Followers
	 Twitter	1,300,000
	 Facebook	1,082,890
	VOA Africa	Followers
	 Youtube	73,700
	 Twitter	322,000
	 Facebook	5,449

*As at 12/08/2021

Despite these efforts to expand China's state media into Africa, evidence to date suggests they continue to trail other international outlets in their reach and standing on the continent. Survey data gathered in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa in 2017 indicated that direct exposure to the key state media outlets listed above was 'marginal' – especially compared to established players such as the BBC.²⁰⁰ CGTN Africa and other key state media do not release audience data; taking their social media engagement statistics as an indicator suggests low penetration. Further survey evidence, for example of journalism students in 2018, suggests China's state media are not seen as 'credible or trustworthy'.²⁰¹ As Bonface Otieno, a Kenyan journalist whose newsroom is issued copies of *China Daily* commented, 'I don't think I've ever seen a single negative story in that crazy paper. I would bring it home for my friends to wrap meat with.'²⁰² The appeal of their output is limited by the fact that many state media journalists have 'little experience of the international news arena' and are uncertain 'what counts as internationally newsworthy', while their organisations are better equipped for China's controlled domestic information environment than for an open international sphere.²⁰³ In the words of one analyst, 'Chinese media, leaving the comfort of operating in the opposition-free domestic realm, face difficulties in establishing a form of credibility that doesn't come from a central authority'.²⁰⁴ Far from the 'dominance' of Chinese media in Africa implausibly claimed in some reporting,²⁰⁵ the more downbeat assessment of one Kenya-based *China Daily* journalist is that 'the only real change I see right now is that there was no Chinese media before, but there are some now. But we are not nearly as influential as the Western ones such as the BBC'.²⁰⁶

However, Beijing's media do have some advantages. Though they have yet to match the influence of a few well established, legacy broadcasters (especially the BBC and Radio France Internationale Afrique), such players are few in number. Compared to many other media organisations, Chinese state media have greater reach and resources – and where this generates more extensive coverage of Africa, it may attract larger audiences.²⁰⁷ This is notably the case in comparison to American organisations and it is with these that Beijing is most intent on competing, according to former CGTN Africa staff.²⁰⁸ Crucially, Chinese media produce extensive Africa-focused content delivered through dedicated channels explicitly aimed at Africa, in a way that few others are. The former CGTN Africa employee notes that CNN, for example, lacks such a focus.²⁰⁹ In addition, specific elements of Chinese media's Africa reporting have begun to attract a positive reputation, notably their reporting on African business (which complements Beijing's framing of China-Africa relations as equals engaging in win-win business deals).

Moreover, what Beijing seeks most through state media is the ability to amplify key narratives. And here, the strongly coordinated state media have some strengths, for example pumping out reporting on China's Coronavirus donations. Importantly, not all of this work is done explicitly under state media brands. Xinhua and the placing of its output directly into African newspapers and news-sites and, similarly, the broadcast of CRI content by local African stations offer important routes for seeding Party-State narratives. Increasingly, too, partnership with ostensibly private media companies offers a subtler route for disseminating key narratives. The key exemplars are TV company StarTimes, and a Chinese state-owned consortium's stake in South Africa's Independent Media Group. StarTimes is a private Chinese television content and infrastructure provider that, with the help of considerable Chinese state support (both political and financial) has built a presence in dozens of African countries. The company's founder and CEO has explicitly echoed state media's language of needing to counter 'exaggerated and biased reports' by Western media.²¹⁰ Meanwhile, the move by China International Television Corporation and the China Africa Develop-

ment Fund to cofinance the acquisition by Iqbal Survé, a politically connected South African businessman, of the Independent Media Group, which owns the second most visited news site in the country, and themselves acquire 20 per cent of the company, offers a further model.²¹¹ Since the deal, the company carries content by Xinhua and other Chinese publications, Survé has prominently espoused key Beijing narratives, and credible allegations of censorship of the company's China coverage have emerged.²¹² Through such indirect avenues, Beijing has created an effective tool for promoting its key messages in Africa.

2.3

Speaking Directly to African Audiences: Chinese Officialdom Comes to Social Media

Since 2019, Chinese state media have been joined on Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms by Chinese officialdom in ever greater numbers, as the Party-State seeks to tell its stories directly to African audiences. Drawing on state media's output as well as posting their own content, Chinese diplomats in Africa have formed an information ecosystem alongside state media that amplifies key narratives on the Coronavirus and other issues important to Beijing. The arrival of China's Africa diplomats on social media complements a related trend. Starting around the time Xi's rule began, Chinese ambassadors have begun to 'tell China's story' directly to and through African media, by giving press briefings, penning op-eds published in African newspapers, and placing state media content directly in African publications under their embassy's names. The move onto social media is a continuation of this trend and directly heeds Xi's call to seize the opportunities of 'new media'.²¹³

Just as for other governments, brands, and individuals the world over, social media offers Chinese officials a powerful new tool for reaching African audiences. Facebook reportedly has 255.4 million subscribers in Africa.²¹⁴ Data for other platforms for the whole continent are less readily available, though national-level data show substantial social media usage, for example YouTube saw 25.6 million monthly visits from Nigeria in September 2020, while Twitter has 3.05 million users in Nigeria and 7.7 million in South Africa.²¹⁵

A total of 43 Chinese embassies, ambassadors and other diplomats are present on Twitter and 20 on Facebook in Africa. Twenty-five of the Twitter accounts are in the name of the diplomatic mission itself, while 13 are personal to the ambassador, and 5 are other diplomats. Beijing's diplomatic representation in 34 countries is present on either Twitter or Facebook. The figure also shows the surges of Chinese officials joining Twitter in late 2019 and again in early 2020. The first wave is understood to have been a response to growing international criticism of Beijing's policies in Hong Kong, while the second coincided with Covid-19's spread, with the new joiners soon posting about the pandemic.

Figure 5, Element One: China’s most followed diplomatic Twitter accounts in Africa*

Rank	Identity	Followers	Link
1	PRC Ambassador to South Africa	13300	twitter.com/AmbCHENXiaodong
2	PRC Ambassador to Zimbabwe	12300	twitter.com/China_Amb_Zim
3	PRC Ambassador to Namibia	11500	twitter.com/Amb_Yiming
4	PRC Ambassador to Egypt	11100	twitter.com/AmbLiaoLiqiang
5	PRC Embassy in Tanzania	8978	twitter.com/ChineseEmbTZ
6	PRC Embassy in Zimbabwe	8606	twitter.com/ChineseZimbabwe
7	PRC Embassy in DRC	7939	twitter.com/AmbCHINEenRDC
8	PRC Embassy in Kenya	7610	twitter.com/ChineseEmbKenya
9	PRC Ambassador to Mali	7537	twitter.com/LiyingZHU1
10	PRC Embassy in Somalia	6584	twitter.com/ChineseSomalia

*As at 24/07/2021

Figure 5, Element Two: Hong Kong protests and Covid-19 pull Chinese diplomats onto Twitter

Number of Chinese Africa diplomats' Twitter accounts

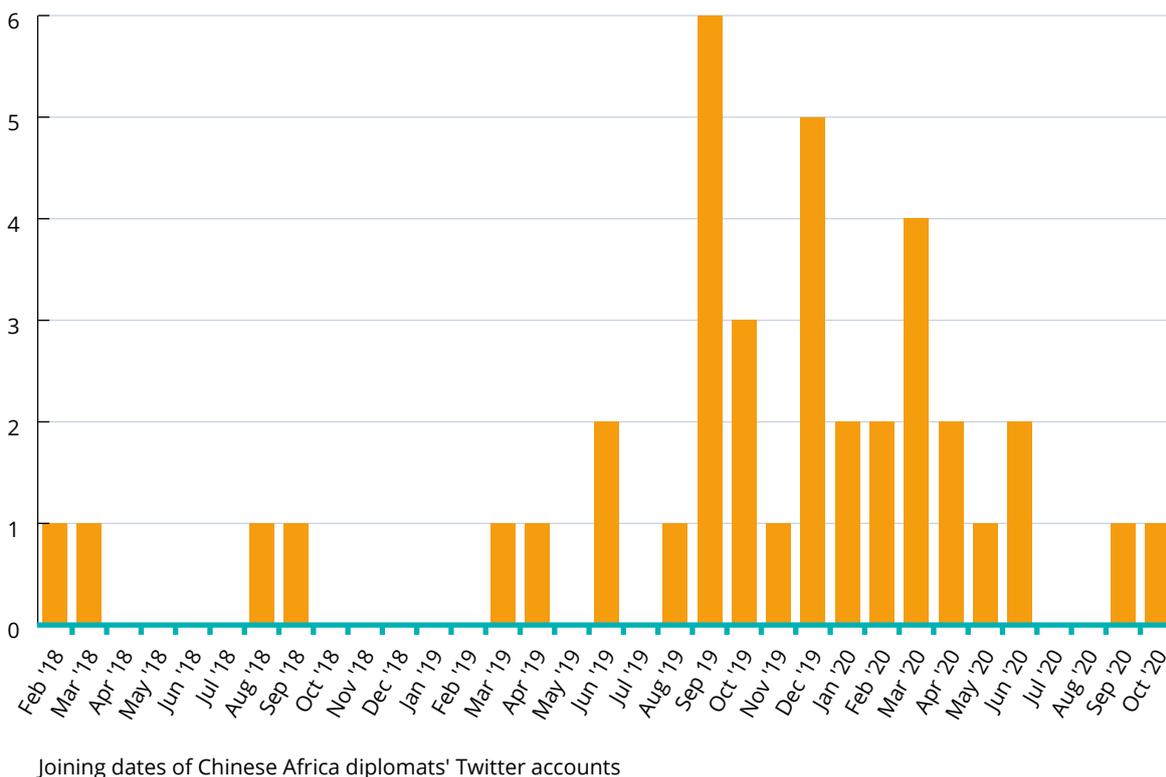


Figure 5, Element Three: Not just Covid: What the Chinese Embassy in Ghana tweets about

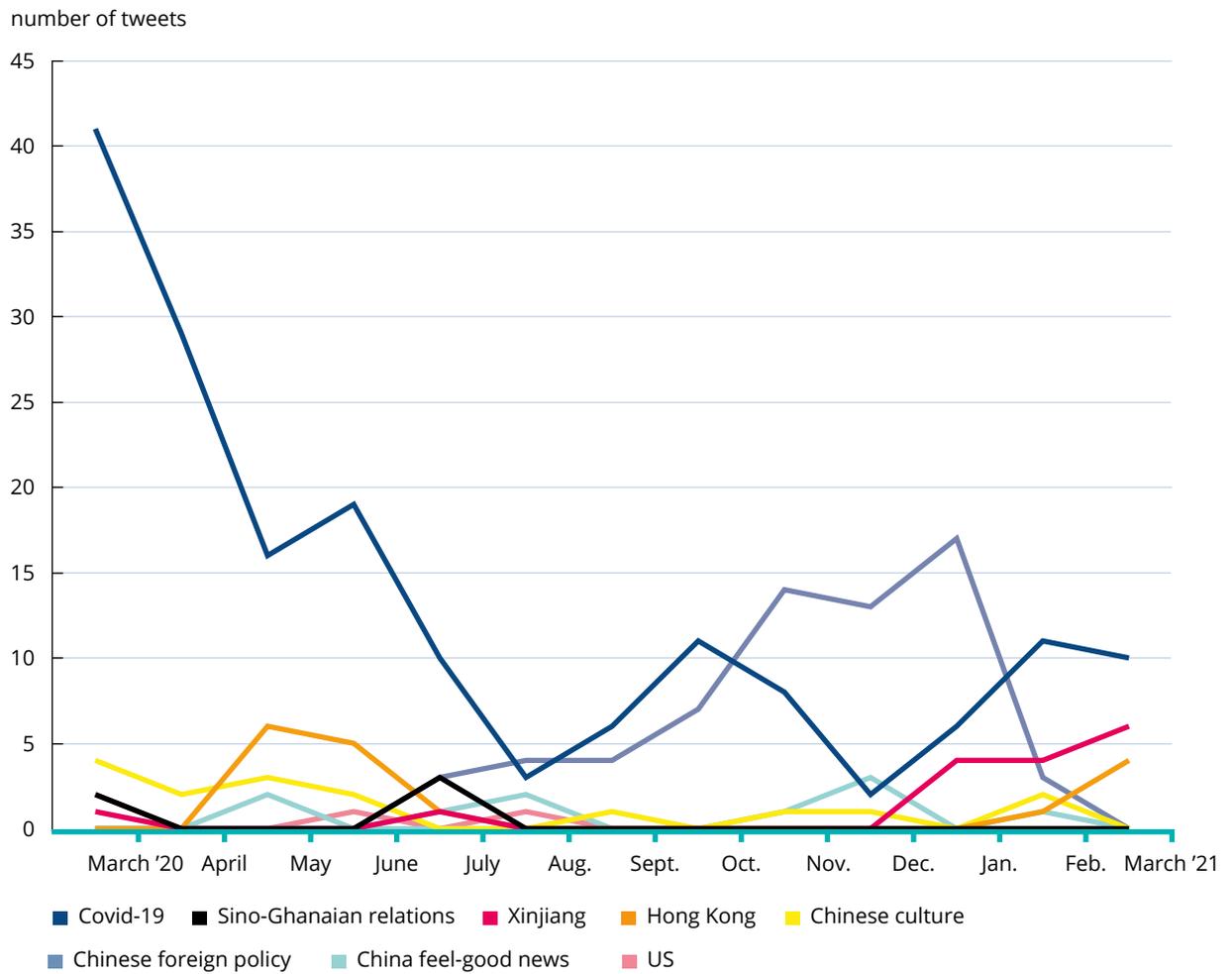


Figure 5, Element Four: Chinese and international diplomatic accounts' footprint in Africa*

		Followers
Nigeria		
China Embassy	twitter.com/china_emb_ng	2,414
US Embassy	twitter.com/usinnigeria	374,800
UK High Commission	twitter.com/ukinnigeria	153,100
UK High Commissioner	twitter.com/catrionalaing1	59,000
France Embassy	twitter.com/franceabuja	16,700
Germany Embassy	twitter.com/gerinnigeria	1,913
EU Delegation	twitter.com/euinnigeria	52,400
South Africa		Followers
China Ambassador	twitter.com/ambchenxiaodong	13,300
US Embassy	twitter.com/usembassysa	58,900
UK High Commission	twitter.com/ukinsouthafrica	22,900
France Embassy	twitter.com/frenchembassyza	9,400
Germany Embassy	twitter.com/germanembassysa	12,100
EU Delegation	twitter.com/euinsa	5,207
Kenya		Followers
China Embassy	twitter.com/chineseembkenya	7,610
US Embassy	twitter.com/usembassykenya	381,400
UK High Commission	twitter.com/ukinkenya	54,800
France Embassy	twitter.com/franceinkenya	13,300
Germany Embassy	twitter.com/germanyinkenya	27,300
EU Delegation	twitter.com/euinkenya	27,100
DR Congo		Followers
China Embassy	twitter.com/ambchineenrdc	7,939
US Embassy	twitter.com/usembkinshasa	305,600
UK Embassy	twitter.com/ukindrc	29,800
France Embassy	twitter.com/ambafrancerdc	7,062
EU Delegation	twitter.com/ueenrdc	50,000

*As at 12.08.2021

2.3.1 China's Social Media Strategies in Africa

Analysis of the activity of one of these new joiners – the PRC's embassy in Ghana – sheds light on some typical behaviours of Chinese diplomacy on Twitter in Africa (see Figure 5, Element 3) Since its creation on 4 March 2020, the account has tweeted 367 times, averaging 28.2 tweets per month. Of those tweets, only 14 per cent were 'self' tweets, i. e. posts made directly by the embassy itself. Fully 86 per cent were retweets of posts made by other users – above all by other parts of Chinese officialdom (35 per cent of all tweets), and state media (47 per cent). Of the state media retweets, 41 per cent were of Xinhua content, followed by CGTN (28 per cent) and *People's Daily* (8.6 per cent). Embassies' Facebook pages are similarly dominated by state media content. A defining characteristic of China's diplomatic social media accounts in Africa is their mutual amplification of Party-State voices and dependence on state media content, especially from the most authoritative outlets. The result is a largely enclosed information ecosystem with strong message discipline, focused on selected, centrally sanctioned narratives and talking points. With few exceptions, these accounts do not engage with other users, for example by entering into discussions or responding to comments on their posts. Use of the '@' function to tag other users – such as officials in their host governments, or other organisations with which they interact in the course of their work – to actively bring them into discussion is also comparatively rare.

Nonetheless, some of Beijing's social-media diplomats in Africa post more personally and creatively, diversifying the form, if not the message. While most videos shared are state media-produced, some embassies have begun to create and share their own video content. Early in the pandemic, China's embassy in Angola shared footage of Angolan students attending the local Confucius Institute chanting encouragement to China ('中国加油!'), while more recently the embassy in Liberia has begun producing short vlogs of the ambassador's activities.²¹⁶ Accounts elsewhere have experimented with other forms to communicate key narratives, for example a week-long virtual photo exhibition relating China's Coronavirus fight created by the embassy in Cameroon.²¹⁷ Beijing's social media outreach is not limited to Facebook and Twitter. In November 2020 MOFA's Department of African Affairs joined YouTube, posting 'Dream Chasers', a series of engaging short films about everyday connections between China and Africa.²¹⁸

Coronavirus has dominated Chinese diplomatic accounts' posts – but decreasingly so across the course of the pandemic and with a shifting focus on different Covid-19 narratives. The Ghana Embassy account is typical of those accounts started at the time of Covid-19's global spread, in that it was most active in the first months of the pandemic and focused almost exclusively on the Coronavirus during that time. In March 2020, 41 posts related to the virus (76 per cent of all posts) and this remained a major preoccupation before falling away in summer 2020. Initially, these posts highlighted China's domestic success in fighting the pandemic, before focusing more on Beijing's assistance to Africa and elsewhere – this topic rose again in early 2021 in the context of Beijing's vaccine exports. In the early months of the pandemic, posts also dwelt on the 'politicisation' of the virus, either accusing the US of politicising the situation or highlighting the US' poor pandemic performance at that time. The account also shared conspiracy theories and alternative explanations of the virus' origins. China's tweeting diplomats in Africa have faithfully amplified the core Coronavirus narratives set out above, from the 'open, transparent and responsible spirit' with which Beijing shared information on the outbreak,²¹⁹ to denying or downplaying the situation in Guangzhou in April 2020.²²⁰ A major focus has been publicising Chinese donations and the arrival of CMTs in their host countries. Frequently, Chinese official accounts retweet

state media coverage of the departure of donations from China followed by state media coverage of their arrival, in addition to posting their own material of handover ceremonies, including videos.²²¹

Coronavirus has not been these accounts' exclusive focus and the share of posts focusing on the pandemic has declined. From autumn 2020, the Ghana Embassy account – along with China's other Africa diplomatic Twitter users – shifted to tweeting more about China's foreign policy more generally, and about Xinjiang and Hong Kong, as these became the topic of more negative international attention. Meanwhile, more marginal but also present have been tweets about Chinese culture, the beauty of the country, its economic achievements, and an earlier mainstay of Chinese online public diplomacy: pandas. Many accounts in Africa have focused considerable attention on China's antipoverty drive and the victory declared in 2020, while others attempt to make China's political system more appealing to African audiences, rebranding it a 'consultative democracy'.²²²

2.3.2 Wolf Warrior' Diplomats in Africa?

The element of China's social media diplomacy that attracts most attention is its so-called 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' – a pattern of highly combative rhetoric named after a brace of jingoistic Chinese action films. Originally most closely associated with a small number of Chinese diplomats on Twitter, the trend is increasingly visible elsewhere in Chinese diplomatic communication and state media. In November 2019, China's foreign minister called on Beijing's diplomats to display 'fighting spirit'.²²³ One of the earliest foot-soldiers of the Wolf-Warrior approach, Zhao Lijian, was promoted to become MOFA spokesperson, signalling to colleagues the career advantages of participating. The industrialised democracies are the target, especially the US, and Chinese diplomats state it is a conscious strategy to respond assertively to Western media criticism of the worsening political environment in China.²²⁴ A key tactic is 'whataboutism', responding to criticism of human rights abuses in China by pointing to injustices in Western countries – including suggesting the Trump administration's failure to tackle Covid-19 represented a disregard for human rights, arguing the EU should sanction itself, rather than China, for the Holocaust and colonial era crimes, and posting a doctored image of an Australian soldier murdering an Afghan child.²²⁵ 'Wolf warriors' have posted extensively about the Coronavirus, ranging from suggesting the US should be held accountable for Aids (and not China for Covid-19) to claiming France had abandoned its elderly to die in care homes.²²⁶ This undiplomatic mode of communication increasingly provokes pushback from Western host governments and, in the most egregious cases, social media platforms. Responding to criticism of the practice, CCP tabloid *Global Times* stated 'the world and Chinese diplomats have changed ... this seemingly has made the West feel challenged ... what's behind China's perceived 'Wolf Warrior' style diplomacy is the changing strengths of China and the West'.²²⁷

Some Africa-based diplomats have joined in – with notable frontrunners including Lin Jing and Lin Songtian in South Africa and Zhao Yanbo in Botswana. As elsewhere, the target is the US and the West, rather than their African hosts – for example tweeting 'aggressive America, who's more like the Nazis?' and 'China has pledged time and again to make the vaccine a global public good ... we suggest [the] US government make a similar promise instead of plotting dirty agendas'.²²⁸ A particular tactic, apparently designed to undermine Western countries in the eyes of African audiences, is highlighting examples of (anti-black) racism in those countries, such as sharing footage of the murder of George Floyd with the message 'Sad! Racist! Brutal! Condemn!'.²²⁹ Tellingly, many of China's Africa diplomats on social media prefer to share and retweet

'Wolf Warrior' content produced by others in the Party-State system, rather than directly posting themselves. Retweeted posts by MOFA spokespeople Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian, two of the most prominent 'Wolf Warriors', make up 16 per cent of all posts by the Ghana Embassy account. While Africa-based 'Wolf Warriors' focus overwhelmingly on the West, the Guangzhou episode saw some instances of turning this rebarbative approach on Africans, whom former PRC ambassador in South Africa Lin Songtian accused of fabricating and sharing videos of the situation in Guangzhou to undermine China-Africa relations.²³⁰

2.3.3 Chinese Officialdom's Limited Social Media Reach

While Chinese officialdom's arrival on social media in Africa has attracted researchers' attention, the impact on African audiences is less apparent. Chinese officials' accounts are mostly not well followed, though for many of them it is early days and follower counts are climbing. Only four Twitter accounts break 10,000 followers (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Egypt). In most of Africa, Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter have a fraction of the followers of US, British and other European accounts, as shown in Figure 5, element 4'. For example, in Nigeria, China's embassy Twitter account has 2,414 followers, whereas the US, UK and EU missions have 374,800, 153,100 and 52,400 followers respectively. Similarly, these accounts' posts on Facebook and Twitter generate minimal user engagement in terms of likes, comments, and shares.

The evidence therefore suggests that African audiences are not greatly interested in what Chinese accounts are producing – though the gap between Chinese accounts' penetration and that of UK, US and other missions may also point to relative levels of latent 'soft power' relevance and attraction. The focus on attacking the US and its partners rather than appealing to local populations does not seem to be generating much interest – and indeed risks implying China is more interested in competing with the West in Africa than building relations with African nations. (It should nonetheless not be ignored that some parts of African audiences may welcome the sight of the US and the Global North being taken down a peg or two.) When compared to the social media output of other, more successful diplomatic profiles in Africa (and elsewhere), it is striking how little Chinese missions post about their day-to-day cooperation activities in country [... charisma]. While Beijing invests substantially in training in local African languages, including for current and future diplomats, this is not much in evidence on social media. Moreover, while American, British, and other European missions habitually hire local employees, notably for communications roles, Chinese missions do not do so, leaving their communications less well adapted to local audiences. With many African politicians, government departments and officials present on social media, Chinese missions may nonetheless be satisfied that their social media approach is enough to communicate Beijing's priorities clearly to African political elites. Moreover, the 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy trend suggests many Chinese diplomats are as interested in signalling to audiences in Beijing as in their host countries – a point underscored by the habit of some Chinese diplomatic accounts in Africa of posting political messages in Chinese, rather than local languages.

2.4

China's Outreach to African Journalists and Media Organisations

2.4.1 Building Relations with African Media

Beijing's propagation of its core Coronavirus narratives has been facilitated by a wide-ranging effort in recent years to reach out directly to African media organisations and journalists. This relationship building takes place at different levels and involves a plethora of organisations. Media exchanges are encouraged from the highest levels of the China-Africa relationship; they have featured in FOCAC Action Plans since 2006.²³¹ These Action Plans are clear that such cooperation is intended to 'foster favourable public opinion for China-Africa cooperation'.²³² This message remains explicit throughout Beijing's outreach; meeting with the Chadian press agency in 2019, a Party official stated 'the CCP attaches great importance to exchanges with African media and is willing to strengthen pragmatic cooperation with media friends to promote the building of a stronger China-Africa community with a shared future'.²³³

As with its other priorities in Sino-African relations, Beijing has institutionalised media exchanges within the FOCAC framework. In 2012, the Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation was launched. Held every two years, the 2018 edition attracted around 400 government officials, heads of media organisations, and senior journalists from 44 African countries.²³⁴ These meetings are the occasion for signing cooperation agreements, for example with national broadcasters, or with the African Union of Broadcasting, and for helping to 'further implement media sector tasks' laid down by FOCAC Action Plans.²³⁵ Through events such as the Forum, African media organisations are brought into contact with the key agencies in China's media and propaganda apparatus, including outlets and regulators, as well as private-sector media companies.

Chinese embassies are also increasingly active in building connections with African media. In addition to authoring op-eds and holding press briefings, Chinese ambassadors organise exchanges between Chinese and local journalists, and identify journalists to attend training and exchanges in China.²³⁶ Ambassadors such as Ren Yisheng in Liberia cultivate ties with local journalists' associations, for example donating computers and other equipment and providing scholarships to the Press Union of Liberia (PUL).²³⁷ Ren used his March 2021 speech to the PUL's Annual Excellence Awards not only to emphasise the standard PRC view of journalism ('the media shoulder the role and responsibility of supporting and promoting social development') but also to rally Liberian journalists to 'distinguish right from wrong and avoid being deceived' by 'some Western media [that] have fabricated a lot of fake news about China and China-Africa cooperation' and to further 'support the public diplomacy work of the Chinese Embassy'.²³⁸ Others of Ren's colleagues incentivise positive reporting more directly. Since 2017, the Chinese Embassy in Côte d'Ivoire has awarded the annual 'Chine à mes yeux' ('China in my Eyes') prizes, which includes a cash reward, to Ivorian journalists for the 'best' coverage of China. At the awards ceremony, journalists

are also given 'encouragement prizes' to 'urge them to write more articles presenting the attractions of the Chinese state [and] above all correct the false and bad image of China created by Western media'.²³⁹

2.4.2 China's Training of African Journalists

The core of China's outreach to African journalists is a vast programme of training and study trips to China. In the 2015 FOCAC Action Plan, Beijing pledged to train '1,000 African media professionals each year'.²⁴⁰ China invites journalists, editors, press officers, television and radio technicians, and other media professionals from a wide spectrum of media organisations across the continent to participate in seminars, courses, and tours in China, ranging in length from one week to a year. The range of training providers is similarly wide, including leading state media broadcasters and publications, China's most prestigious universities, and organisations such as China International Publishing Group, the CCP's foreign-language publisher.²⁴¹ Participants are nominated by their media houses but local Chinese embassies also play a role in their selection.²⁴² The Chinese government also awards scholarships for African journalists to study for media and journalism degrees at Chinese universities. Some programmes are delivered to groups of journalists from one country, while many are for multinational groups, often organised by language. The apex programme is the China-Africa Press Centre (CAPC), an annual programme lasting 10 months delivered by the China Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA), a not-for-profit agency established in 2013 as an alliance of state agencies and companies to promote Beijing's public diplomacy. Each annual class comprises around 30 journalists and is based in Beijing, where they are housed in the Jianguomenwai diplomatic quarter and receive monthly stipends. In addition to attending classes, the groups tour China and undertake internships at China's principal state media organisations.

Showing the 'True' China

A major aim of the training is to show participants China. The CAPC is a veritable China crash course. Classes attend lectures on Chinese politics, society, culture, economics, history and language, and journalism at Renmin University, and have an active cultural programme. Though based in Beijing, in their ten months in China, CAPC journalists tour the country extensively, visiting more than a dozen provinces, including tourist sites, government agencies and major enterprises. Shorter programmes similarly include lectures on Chinese politics, history and economics, and tours to different regions; typically, groups visit Beijing and an additional province. Chinese organisers say the programmes give participants an 'objective', 'accurate' view of China – unmediated by allegedly biased Western reporting.

Naturally the image of China presented is curated by the Party-State and supports its favoured narratives in Africa. The account of China's history emphasises its status as a victim of colonialism – in common with African nations.²⁴³ Similarly, while participants see first-hand China's economic modernisation, tours also take in less developed regions, including rural areas. As one participant commented, the aim was clearly to demonstrate that China 'was still a developing country, just like us'.²⁴⁴ The Party's central role in China's 'Rejuvenation' is emphasised, as are China's determination to chart its own developmental and political course, 'without being dictated by external forces'.²⁴⁵ Lectures and teaching materials underscore the 'autonomy' of ethnic minority regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang and China's 'multiparty cooperation' political system. As one participant commented, the hosts 'left nothing to chance to present us with China's best and brightest face'.²⁴⁶ CAPC journalists have reporting assignments

and opportunities to interview officials – but according to some participants, the conduct of these sessions highlights the limits to the programme's openness. As one commented: 'the moment you ask them hard questions they feel offended', further relating that a colleague who frequently asked critical questions began to be given less time to speak during discussions.²⁴⁷

Teaching the CCP's Idea of Journalism, Rallying African Journalists as Allies

China's media training seminars also promote the Party-State's view of journalism and its role. As discussed above, under Xi, this view is uncompromising: journalists should be 'disseminators of the Party's policies' and the media 'firmly controlled by someone who maintains an identical ideology with the Party's Central Committee under General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership'.²⁴⁸ In contrast, 'the ultimate goal of advocating the West's view of the media is to hawk the principle of abstract and absolute freedom of press, oppose the Party's leadership in the media, and gouge an opening through which to infiltrate our ideology',²⁴⁹ China's media are among the least free in the world, ranking 177 out of 180 in 2021.²⁵⁰ Beijing and its media are nonetheless increasingly willing to promote its approach as a valid, alternative model. For example, in 2017 Xinhua published a series of videos featuring its journalists rejecting press freedom, stating 'I think many of the practitioners are brainwashed by this [sic] Western values of journalism', 'we have to take responsibility for what we report. If that's being considered as censorship, I think it's good censorship'.²⁵¹ In promoting these views to African journalists, two key arguments are made: an independent, watchdog press is Western-imposed and alien to Africa; an obedient media contributes responsibly to economic development by supporting the government's policies.²⁵² As one group of African journalists was told, 'the theories used in Western countries are not valid in China and Africa'.²⁵³ To encourage acquiescence to this view, Chinese trainers rally African journalists to form a united front against negative Western reporting: 'China and Africa, at most times, are portrayed by western media as the environments that only represent diseases, natural disaster, conflicts and other negative characteristics, and as such, it is now time that the two stand together'.²⁵⁴ As the head of the All China Journalists Association told African counterparts in 2020, 'Africa and China need to jointly resist smear reports of Western media by telling their own stories'.²⁵⁵ The first step, according to the vice-president of the CPDA, was for them to 'tell stories that would foster goodwill'²⁵⁶ between China and Africa, rather than critical reporting on the relationship.

The response to Chinese training has been mixed – unsurprisingly, given the scale of the programme and the diversity of participants from across the continent. One participant said they 'learned that a state-owned government media is one of the most effective means of journalism. The media in China is still working well and people here appreciate their work'.²⁵⁷ Another declared the experience had helped them shed misconceptions imposed by Western 'propaganda'.²⁵⁸ A Liberian participant has written that China has set 'an example of how the media can be deployed within the larger political and economic strategies of developing states, moving beyond the democratisation paradigm promoted in the West'.²⁵⁹ A number of participants point to the role of positive media highlighting solutions and contributing to development as an important lesson.²⁶⁰ With popular support for media freedom declining in Africa, China's model may present a threat to the continent's often independent, vibrant media.²⁶¹

However, evidence of resistance to the Party-State's media principles is at least as prevalent among participants and African journalists more broadly. As one participant commented: 'If the Chinese brought me to Beijing to influence my journalism, they failed'.²⁶² As Liberian journalist and CAPC participant Alpha Daffae Senkpeni told researcher Andrew McCormick:

*'It was interesting seeing how their media works, but it was also difficult, because in Liberia democracy is real and journalists do what we like to do ... I became a journalist because I stand for democracy. I don't call myself a big fanatic of the West, but I believe in freedom ... I am not going to trade my principles for some Chinese belief about journalism.'*²⁶³

As Senkpeni's view suggests, a free media is not necessarily seen as a Western imposition, or belief in it a sign of subjugation to the West. An Ivorian participant stated that while the insight into Chinese media practices was illuminating, 'the principle of what is factual that is taught in journalism schools in Abidjan, Paris, Lille and elsewhere is not in any doubt'.²⁶⁴ Evidence elsewhere indicates that participants are adamant that Chinese support should have no impact on African media's editorial choices.²⁶⁵

China's training of African media personnel is unlikely to motivate a whole-sale import of China's approach to journalism. It can nonetheless shape African perceptions of the country. China is insufficiently known and understood in Africa, as in most parts of the world. No African media maintain a permanent presence in China. This hampers development of independent African perspectives on China. It is entirely reasonable for China to want African journalists to see the country for themselves – and the experience is valuable on this basis for African participants. As Bonface Otieno, a Kenyan CAPC participant, observed, 'the trip did change my perception. I got to know some Chinese people and understand things about them ... as a journalist you cannot write well about something you do not understand. And today I do feel I am in a better position to write about China'.²⁶⁶ But the Party-State's role in determining participants' experience of China and the narratives by the tours and seminars cannot be overlooked.

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3

影响力

在非洲塑造叙事和建立

中国共产党如何

发挥影响力：

在新冠病毒时代

The CCP's Party Diplomacy in Africa

In April 2020, the CCP orchestrated a joint open letter on Covid-19 from world political parties, signed, it claimed, by over 230 parties from more than 100 countries, including in Africa. The letter underscored the threat of the virus and called on governments to take forceful action against it. But it was also shot through with CCP rhetoric, narratives and talking points. The letter called on countries to 'enhance their consciousness of a community with a shared future for mankind'. It praised China's response to the virus, which 'bought time and offered experience to the rest of the international community'. And it commended China for 'adopting an open, transparent and responsible attitude to disclosing related information'.²⁶⁷

Since then, the CCP has held training sessions for African political parties on how to respond to Covid-19. It has donated masks and other medical supplies to African parties. Senior figures of African political parties have been prominently quoted in China's state media praising Beijing's response to the Coronavirus – and its political system more generally.

These activities have shone a light on the increasingly important diplomatic role played by the CCP in its own right, and its relationship building with African political parties. Party diplomacy, or the CCP's 'external work', undertaken by the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee (ILD), the Party's in-house 'diplomatic service', has grown in stature in Xi's 'New Era'. Under Xi, the Party is not just to be confident and in the ascendant at home. It should also project its conviction and sense of mission around the world. Reaching out directly to African political elites, party diplomacy has

become an important avenue for shaping narratives and wielding influence – as the Coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated. With the CCP training African parties, the Party's 'external work' has also attracted attention as a forum for promoting the Party-State's model of governance.²⁶⁸

3.1

The International Liaison Department of the CCP: Overview & History

The ILD largely remains 'an important and yet often overlooked organ of the Party's power and influence'.²⁶⁹ Even in its own publicity aimed at Chinese audiences, the Department admits it is 'a rather mysterious' entity that requires 'decryption'.²⁷⁰ Created in 1951, the ILD is a ministerial-level agency and one of five departments directly under the CCP's Central Committee. The Department has eight geographic bureaux; Bureau IV (African Affairs) is responsible for Sub-Saharan Africa, with North Africa included in Bureau III, West Asia, and North Africa. The ILD claims ties with more than 600 organisations in over 160 countries.²⁷¹ It interacts principally with overseas political parties but also think tanks and universities, and with ambassadors posted in Beijing. As a Party organisation, its budget is entirely opaque.

Initially, the ILD existed to interact with fellow ruling Communist parties; a legacy of this is its ongoing importance in ties with North Korea. During Africa's liberation struggles, the ILD built the Maoist CCP's ties with (socialist-leaning) liberation movements, providing material and political support as well as training. The moral and ideological legacy this bequeathed remains valuable to the ILD's African outreach today. Julia Lovell writes in her history of Maoism's global role that during this period the ILD was one of 'the two most important organisations handling the export of Chinese revolutionary theory and practice',²⁷² alongside military intelligence. It was also highly secretive.

With the dawn of the post-1978 Reform Era, the ILD's purpose changed. Now the aim was to 'set the tone for 'peaceful development' and stop 'exporting revolution''.²⁷³ In the 1980s, the ILD continued to nurture relationships with Africa's post-independence political parties, even as Africa's overall diplomatic importance to Beijing receded. By 1988, the CCP had established relations with over 40 African parties.²⁷⁴ The wave of democratisation that swept Africa in the 1990s was, however, a setback for the Party. According to a senior ILD official, democratisation had a 'negative impact' as, 'after years of sustained communications, many of the long-reigning parties with which China had invested much time and energy ... were replaced'.²⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the 2000s saw renewed expansion of the CCP's party diplomacy in Africa as Sino-African ties as a whole grew and deepened dramatically.

Box 2

Which African Political Parties Does the CCP Engage With?

The ILD is keen to advertise the CCP's large international 'circle of friends'. As such, it publishes on its website bulletins (in Chinese and English) detailing its interactions with overseas political parties. Analysis of the 460 bulletins relating to interactions with African parties between 2010 and 2020 sheds light on which parties the CCP interacts with on the continent, and which are its most frequent interlocutors. These bulletins show the CCP engaged a total of 86 African parties during this period; the identities of these parties point to how the CCP uses the party diplomacy channel to further its aims.

The CCP interacts overwhelmingly with African **ruling parties**. Whereas the ILD's original focus was fellow socialist and communist parties, since Reform and Opening Up, it has become more pragmatic, seeking out parties in power (and thus able to shape policy), explicitly guided by the axiom 'seek common ground while reserving differences' (求同存异). Being a party of government is essentially a prerequisite and sufficient cause for the CCP to engage: of the 462 interactions, fully 455 occurred whilst the relevant party was in government. In 28 of the 49 countries where the ILD is active in Africa, it engages with only one party – the ruling party; added to this are a further five countries where multiple parties are engaged as part of a ruling coalition. Of the remaining 16 countries where the ILD interacted with more than one party between

Analysis by Hackenesch and Bader has shown that the ILD's activity increased substantially between 2002 and 2017 – but that the coming to power of Xi Jinping marked the real turning point.²⁷⁶ Within his broader reinvigoration of the CCP, Xi has placed renewed emphasis on the Party's external work. For Song Tao, the current head of the ILD since 2015, the Party's 'confidence is obvious'. 'China is approaching the centre of the world stage as never before, and the CCP is approaching the centre of the world's political party stage as never before'.²⁷⁷ Xi 'attaches great importance to, carefully guides and personally participates in the party's foreign work'.²⁷⁸

Party diplomacy is thus neither new, nor indeed unique, to the CCP. But in Xi's 'New Era', it is a tool rediscovered, and the scale, scope, and ambitions of the ILD's activities set it apart from the international relationship building of other political parties around the world. Its relationship to the PRC state and its foreign policy also makes the CCP's 'external work' different from the international relations of political parties elsewhere. The existence of the ILD alongside the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is typical of the duplication of administrative structures throughout the Party-State. Whilst noting that the ILD's status as 'the Central Committee's own "Ministry of Foreign Affairs"' confuses some, current head of the ILD Song Tao assures that there are 'close ties and a clear division of labour' between the Department and the Ministry.²⁷⁹ Staff frequently rotate between the two entities; indeed, as a former ambassador and long-time MOFA official, Song Tao himself is an example of this. Ultimately, he argues, both have the same mission: to 'jointly serve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'.²⁸⁰

Moreover, unlike political parties in democratic systems engaging in international relations, in the PRC, power ultimately and unshiftingly lies with the CCP. As a Party body, the ILD's interlocutors know it speaks with authority – and the potential to mobilise China's considerable resources. As Xi reemphasises the Party's centrality and dominance throughout Chinese politics and society, its importance in foreign affairs is also being underscored. As China's most senior foreign policy official, Yang Jiechi, stated unequivocally in *Qiushi*: 'We must insist that diplomatic power lies with the Party Central Committee'.²⁸¹

2010 and 2020, the interactions occurred overwhelmingly whilst the relevant party was in government – which is to say in a democratic state where a transition of power occurred during this period.

Although many parties with which the CCP interacts are of the left, ideological affinity in the shape of communism or Maoist socialism has all but disappeared as an active basis for relations. A notable exception is the South African Communist Party, which as the table below indicates is one of the CCP's most frequent interlocutors. Other forms of **ideology** nonetheless form a basis for interactions – including as an explanatory factor for frequency of contact. The CCP's earlier political, material and financial support for African liberation movements provides an important moral legacy undergirding connections with liberation movements and their successor parties. This is notably the case in southern Africa, where six parties provide a core caucus of CCP allies: the ANC (South Africa); SWAPO (Namibia); FRELIMO (Mozambique); CCM (Tanzania); ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe); and the MPLA (Angola), which all feature prominently in the table below. Meanwhile, a looser definition of 'ideological affinity' helps explain other important party relationships in Africa. Ethiopia's erstwhile EPRDF (reconfigured as the Prosperity Party in 2019) shares the CCP's predilection for economic development coupled with political restrictions and de facto one-party rule, and is the CCP's second most frequent interlocutor in Africa.

Elsewhere amongst the CCP's principal interlocutors, **pragmatism** remains the rule of the day – perhaps nowhere more so than with its most frequent partner in the period: Sudan's NCP. Prior to the Sudanese Revolution and the party's banning, the Bashir regime's relative international isolation and China's thirst for Sudanese oil produced a particularly actively consummated marriage of convenience; the total of 29 interactions recorded in the bulletin dataset includes the institutionalised 'China-Sudan Ruling Parties' High-Level Dialogue', held annually from 2012.

The then head of the ILD in 2015 emphasised that the CCP was happy to engage any friendly party, be it 'a ruling party or a participating party or an opposition party', and previous analyses have claimed that the CCP 'frequently hosts and invites members of **opposition parties**'. However, analysis of the bulletin database shows that this is rarely the case. Guided by pragmatism, the CCP has no motive to woo parties without any realistic, near-term prospect of entering government. In many countries the CCP therefore does not engage opposition parties, regardless of any ideological affinity. In multiparty democracies, however, where a transition of power is likely or plausible, the CCP has interacted with opposition parties. This is above all in instances where erstwhile parties of government with which the CCP had built a relationship before they had lost power. Here the CCP keeps channels open but largely 'downgrades' interactions to the ambassadorial level. This has been the case with both the NDC in Ghana and the PPRD in the DRC, which have interacted with the resident PRC ambassador rather than being invited to Beijing since losing power. These lower-level interactions are likely sufficient for keeping doors open ahead of potential future transitions. As the ILD's website observes: 'Relations with the parties not in power will keep the state relations stable and continue if the political situation changes.'

The CCP's non-ideological, pragmatic pursuit of ruling parties sets it apart from most other political parties in their international outreach, which typically focuses on counterparts with a common political agenda. The CCP's 'no permanent friends' approach is at times ruthless – as in its 2016 move to engage Sierra Leone's newly-elected New Patriotic Party in place of its defeated long-term partner the All People's Congress, with which its ties dated to the 1960s. Whether such fickleness will have any political costs in the medium term remains to be seen.

Figure 6: The CCP's most frequent interlocutors in Africa

Rank	Party (initials)	Party (name)	Country	Total meetings*	Annual average**
1	NCP	National Congress Party	Sudan	29	2,64
2	EPRDF	Prosperity Party/Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front	Ethiopia	26	2,36
3	ANC	African National Congress	South Africa	22	2,00
4	SACP	South African Communist Party	South Africa	21	1,91
5	CCM	Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Party of the Revolution)	Tanzania	19	1,73
6	SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation	Namibia	18	1,64
7	FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique	Mozambique	17	1,55
8	RDR/RHDP	Rassemblement des Républicains	Côte d'Ivoire	9	1,50
9	SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement	South Sudan	16	1,45
10	ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front	Zimbabwe	16	1,45
11		Jubilee Party	Kenya	8	1,14
12	PNDS	Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme	Niger	12	1,09
13	RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front	Rwanda	11	1,00
14	FLN	Front de Libération Nationale	Algeria	10	0,91
15	MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola	Angola	10	0,91
16	CNDD-FDD	Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie	Burundi	10	0,91
17	RPP	Rassemblement populaire pour le Progrès	Djibouti	10	0,91
18	APR	Alliance pour la république	Senegal	8	0,89
19	BDP	Botswana Democratic Party	Botswana	8	0,73
20	PCT	Parti congolais du travail	Congo B	8	0,73

*2010–2020

**Adjusted for year of party foundation and establishment of relations with the CCP

3.2

The Purposes of the CCP's Party Diplomacy

Song Tao stated in a 2019 interview that 'no political party in any country attaches greater importance to its external work than the CCP'.²⁸² This claim is perhaps not unfounded; party diplomacy serves a number of valuable purposes for Beijing: it gives it an additional diplomatic channel, helps it build relations with African elites, and increasingly enables it to promote its system of rule. All have proved valuable during the pandemic.

3.2.1 An Additional Diplomatic Channel to Promote China's Foreign Policy Interests

First and foremost, party diplomacy gives Beijing an additional channel to pursue its foreign policy goals – including in cases where official, state-to-state relations do not exist. As Song Tao put it in 2016, 'the external work of the Communist Party of China is an important part of the country's overall diplomacy'.²⁸³ Party diplomacy is additional and supplementary to state diplomacy – but directly supportive of it. This is evident in ILD statements on its interactions with individual African political parties, such as SWAPO: 'As ruling parties of both countries, the long-lasting cooperation between the two parties plays an irreplaceable role in promoting China-Namibia relations'.²⁸⁴ As the ILD's website states, 'as the governing party, the interests of the [CCP] are identical with those of the state'.²⁸⁵

Concretely, interactions with African political parties increasingly yield statements of support on Beijing's foreign policy priorities. For example, in an ostensibly Covid-focused online training seminar for cadres of Burkina Faso's MPP, the ILD's representative 'introduced China's position on such issues as the national security legislation for Hong Kong and the South China Sea' and was told by MPP counterparts 'that Burkina Faso adheres to the One China policy, supports China's position on issues related to Hong Kong ... and opposes interference by countries outside the region in South China Sea affairs'.²⁸⁶ In February 2021, ZANU-PF released a statement praising Beijing's policies in Xinjiang, arguing that 'the chaotic response to the Covid-19 pandemic by the United States Administration and the chaos that followed their presidential elections totally disqualifies its officials from attempts to occupy [the] moral high ground on issues relating to Democracy and Human Rights'.²⁸⁷ In a January 2021 speech on party diplomacy, Xi Jinping celebrated the fact that 'on China-related issues, political parties from various countries also frequently collectively speak out for China and stand firmly on the right side of history with the [CCP]'.²⁸⁸ More widely, promotion of a 'Sino-African Community of Common Destiny' is a stated priority for the ILD's African work.²⁸⁹

3.2.2 Elite Network Building

Party diplomacy is a prime venue for elite network building. For Song Tao, the attraction is clear: 'As a fundamental organisation in the political life of a country, political parties stand at the head of millions of people. By dealing with foreign political parties, we can indirectly engage foreign populations. By influencing the source of policy [i. e. party leaderships] we influence [whole] political parties and at the same time ... guide foreign masses' opinion of our Party and country.' Party diplomacy thus has special 'advantages', opening up 'unique channels and network resources', enabling the ILD to 'guide foreign political party elites'.²⁹⁰

Song Tao also notes that 'most national governance in the world is carried out in the form of party politics. Political parties are the source of the country's internal and external policies'.²⁹¹ The CCP's party diplomacy in Africa focuses overwhelmingly on ruling parties (see Box 2, above) and many of the ILD's elite interlocutors also hold government posts. As such, 'guiding party elites' is also a chance to directly shape national policy. Indeed, even where senior party officials engaged by the ILD do not simultaneously hold government office, this represents a further advantage of party diplomacy, as it allows the CCP to reach behind-the-scenes figures perhaps not otherwise reached by state-to-state diplomacy.

Party diplomacy's elite network building can also be an investment that pays off in future influence, as established ILD interlocutors progress to senior government office. In numerous cases, party diplomacy has enabled the Party-State to build relationships with individuals that have gone on to become national presidents. Mohamed Bazoum, Cyril Ramphosa, and Évariste Ndayishimiye, the current presidents of Niger, South Africa, and Burundi, respectively, all earlier visited China, including for training, whilst serving as their party's chairman or secretary general.²⁹² As the ILD's website notes: 'Many state leaders, before they assume office, had already been China's friends. After they assume office, they have made active efforts in advancing friendship with China'.²⁹³

The logical extension of this investment in future influence is the ILD's sustained engagement of African parties' youth movements. In 2011, the ILD co-organised with Namibia's SWAPO the first Africa-China Young Leaders Forum. Three further fora have been held since, alternating between China and Africa on a three-year cycle (matching FOACAC).²⁹⁴ The most recent, in Shenzhen in 2018, attracted 70 representatives from around 40 countries.²⁹⁵ The ILD also engages African parties' youth leaders outside the Forum, notably with multi-party training seminars for young party leaders, generally grouped by language.²⁹⁶ As the ILD's website notes: 'By contacts with young political figures, the [CCP] has laid foundations for future state-to-state relations'.²⁹⁷

In the here-and-now, the ILD's elite network building serves a further purpose: filling an address-book of influential political figures who can be tapped up to praise the CCP, providing on-message copy for state media. This purpose has come to the fore during the Coronavirus pandemic, where state media have leant on such individuals' pronouncements to deflect criticism of the Party-State and magnify Beijing's core narratives. Raphael Tuju, Secretary General of Kenya's Jubilee Party, is a prime example of such figures. After numerous interactions with the ILD over a period of years, Tuju is frequently quoted in state media, for example telling *Xinhua* in 2020 that 'China has really stood with Africa during this time of crisis and that China's domestic virus response was 'impressive and amazing'.²⁹⁸

3.2.3 Winning Praise and Legitimacy for CCP Rule and Contributing to Xi's Cult of Personality

The Party uses its external work to win international praise and generate domestic legitimacy. In its domestic-facing propaganda, the ILD talks of the Party's 'ever growing circle of friends'²⁹⁹ around the world. A numbers game is often present in the CCP's reporting of its international relations, from its reported 400 active partnerships, to the attendance of almost 300 political organisations from over 120 states at a Beijing forum in 2017.³⁰⁰ The message is clear: rather than one of the few Leninist regimes to have survived the twentieth century, the CCP is not isolated but part of the global mainstream.

While racking up a large number of partners appears an end in itself, more valuable still is the praise of foreign political parties for the CCP and its system of government. The *China Daily* headline 'Global chorus of praise for party leadership' is commendably transparent in its intent.³⁰¹ The content, too, is typical of the genre: a simple rollcall of party leaders from around the world praising the 19th National Congress and its key outputs. The *People's Daily* reported in 2018 that 'the eyes of the world are focused on China and the CCP ... 'Why is China able to ...?', 'Why does the Chinese Communist Party work?' have become the new 'questions of the world'.³⁰² State media articles such as 'Developing countries learn from the CCP's governance experience' clearly position the CCP system as an admired source of inspiration (and it too comprises quotations from foreign politicians praising CCP policies).³⁰³

Generating international approval and broadcasting it to domestic audiences has been central to the CCP's party diplomacy during the pandemic. Striking is the alacrity with which the ILD relayed this praise to the Chinese population, according to its own account of events. In a major article summarising its contribution to the Coronavirus fight in *Qiushi*, the Party's preeminent theoretical journal, the ILD reported that 'the solidarity and support of foreign parties and political organisations was passed on to the masses as soon as possible. The *People's Daily*, *Xinhua* and other mainstream media published more than 100 related reports ... arousing enthusiastic responses at home and abroad, and actively creating a positive public opinion atmosphere'.³⁰⁴ The Party's hunger for additional sources of domestic legitimacy should not be underestimated, especially at a moment as threatening as the early stages of the pandemic.

More specifically, the ILD's *Qiushi* article also highlights its contribution to the growing personality cult around Xi Jinping. The article enumerates the key messages foreign parties have taken away from the CCP's pandemic party diplomacy; first among them is that 'everyone generally believes that the leadership of the CCP with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core is the fundamental reason why China has achieved remarkable results in the fight against the epidemic'. It continues to quote foreign party leaders as saying Xi 'personally decided policy, personally deployed, personally commanded', and praising his 'profound feelings for the people, superb political wisdom, and outstanding leadership'.³⁰⁵ Raphael Tuju told *Xinhua*: 'We admire the resolve of President Xi and see him as one of the greatest modern leaders of China whose philosophy will be a subject of studies many more years to come'.³⁰⁶

ILD officials highlight the importance to their work of publicising Xi Jinping Thought, and state media report that 'lying on the desks of many political party leaders around the world is a certain book: Xi Jinping's *The Governance of China*'.³⁰⁷ Copies of the successive volumes of this work (three to date) are indeed frequently presented as gifts by ILD delegations in Africa.³⁰⁸ Addressing the ILD's cadres in 2021, Song Tao not

only stressed that Xi had given the Party's external work important guidance but also 'upholding General Secretary Xi Jinping's core position' was a central purpose of the Department.³⁰⁹

3.2.4 Building Discourse Power to Refashion the Global System

The CCP's ambitions are not limited to reaping international praise for broadcast to a domestic audience. As Yang Jiechi, the Party-State's most senior foreign policy official, wrote in *Qiushi* in 2018: 'global governance has increasingly become the frontier and key issue of our country's foreign work'.³¹⁰ Party diplomacy contributes to a broader effort to reshape the international system and – crucially – the principles and norms that underpin it. In this, African parties are seen as key allies.

In the first instance, the CCP seeks understanding and acceptance of its governance system from the international community. Many ILD activities are therefore framed as explaining the Party-State to overseas political parties. As Wang Huning, one of the Party's most senior theoretical leaders, told cadres in 2021, the aim is to 'tell the story of the CCP well, and enhance the international community's understanding, approval and endorsement of our party'.³¹¹ For Song Tao, this means the ILD must provide 'political guidance to the world'; it must 'guide parties, politicians and political organisations in various countries to understand, respect, and agree with our party's values, principles and policies'.³¹²

One dimension of this is pushing the normalisation of the Party's terminology and slogans. The ILD consciously uses the party channel to familiarise foreign political elites with the Party's latest policy concepts and encourage their adoption in international discourse – as seen in the ubiquity of the 'Community of Shared Future', 'People-Centred Development', 'Chinese Dream' and other key slogans in ILD activities.³¹³ The hope is that 'through the exchange of ideas and spiritual communication, we cultivate a common language' – and a common way of thinking.³¹⁴ The Coronavirus pandemic has provided ample opportunity to publicise the Party's slogans in Africa. Not only have donations of medical equipment suggested the substance of solidarity in a 'China-Africa Community of Common Destiny', handover ceremonies and related publicity have been used explicitly to promote the Party's rhetoric.

This is in part defensive. The CCP sees itself operating in a global environment where the ideological 'discourse power' of the West is stacked against it. This means party diplomacy must help strengthen Beijing's discourse power and 'create favourable external conditions' for the CCP's regime.³¹⁵ The then head of the ILD stated in 2015 that the Department's role was to 'guard and struggle against the plots of Westernisation'.³¹⁶ During the pandemic, when critical voices at home and abroad criticised the Party-State's early handling of the outbreak, suggesting that such missteps were an inherent risk of such a form of government, party diplomacy helped push back against this. Through its 'letter diplomacy', the ILD mobilised 'many political parties and politicians in many countries [to] strongly oppose the despicable actions of individual political forces stigmatising China and politicising the epidemic'.³¹⁷

But a CCP convinced that 'the East is rising, the West declining' is also seeking more actively to reshape the global order and the norms that underpin it. Party diplomacy is an important channel for mobilising the support of African countries, seen by Beijing as natural partners in an effort to excise the pre-eminence of liberal democratic and universal human rights norms that the CCP sees as merely a Western imposition – and

an impediment to the interests of developing countries. Party theorists are explicit that the context of a 'rising East, declining West' and resulting great power competition demands prioritisation of diplomacy targeting developing countries.³¹⁸ As Naoko Eto argues, under Xi, Beijing 'has been attempting to create a more advantageous rhetorical space for China by diversifying the standards of value in the international community'.³¹⁹ Through party diplomacy, the CCP promotes its standards, values and vision of a reformed global order directly to influential African political leaders.

3.2.5 Promoting the CCP's Governance System

The ILD's party diplomacy is increasingly about promoting the CCP's governance system as a model to be emulated, above all by developing countries. In his speech heralding the dawn of a 'New Era' at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping declared that China was 'blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernisation' and offered 'a new option ... to speed up their development while preserving their independence'. Xi promised to share 'Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind'.³²⁰ At the FOCAC Summit a year later, Xi invited Africa 'aboard the express train of China's development'.³²¹ In Xi's 'New Era', a key task of the CCP's party diplomacy in Africa is to promote CCP-style governance as a valid, legitimate and viable form of government, one that is at least equal to liberal democracy – even superior to it for developing nations seeking a path to rapid economic development.

Xi has denied that the Party seeks to export and impose on others a 'China model'.³²² This is true – insofar as, unlike in the Mao era, the Party is not promoting world revolution to install a more-or-less comprehensive and well defined ideological 'model'. Beijing is not looking to destroy democracy around the world per se. Rather, through party diplomacy and other channels, Xi hopes to overthrow democracy's perceived post-Cold War dominance as the most valid, legitimate and prestigious form of government – ultimately to prevent the Chinese people sharing this perception. The Party sees developing nations in Africa and elsewhere as the natural constituency for this effort and their potential emulation of elements of the CCP's mode of governance – in place of further consolidating democracy – will directly enhance the Party-State's legitimacy on the world stage. As a result, the Party wants African political parties to 'learn from China's experience and the CCP's wisdom',³²³ to understand the Party's 'ruling code' and how it 'led the people out of poverty' – or, as Xi put it in a January 2021 speech, to 'come to China to 'learn the classics'' (来华“取经”), a phrase meaning to learn from the experience of others, originally referring to the journey to study and acquire Buddhist scripture in India.³²⁴

3.3

Retooling Party Diplomacy for the Coronavirus Era

3.3.1 The ILD's Evolving Activities in Xi's 'New Era'

The ILD and its party diplomacy have been pulled on by Beijing to face off the dangers and pursue the opportunities presented by Covid-19. During the pandemic, the ILD has both leveraged its new prominence under Xi and adapted its methods to the Coronavirus context.

Party diplomacy has not only increased in importance in Xi's 'New Era'; the forms it takes have also shifted. As then head of the ILD Wang Jiarui stated in 2014: 'Under the new situation, we must continue to enrich the content and innovate the forms of exchanges'.³²⁵ (Figure 7 outlines the ILD's core activities.) Under Xi, ILD activities have become more purposeful in their promotion of the CCP's ideas and how it goes about its business. As data analysed in Box 2 shows, the ILD maintains an active flow of mutual visits between China and countries across Africa. However, the share of exchanges identified simply as 'goodwill visits' has waned in Xi's 'New Era'. In their place, training, study tours, and 'briefing delegations' have risen up, heeding Xi's call for the Party to show its confidence in promoting its message abroad.

Since 2013, the ILD has despatched 'briefing delegations' (宣介团) around the world to spread the 'spirit' (精神) of major moments in the life of the CCP (such as National Congresses or the launch of a new five-year plan).³²⁶ Modelled on the domestic 'central propaganda and explanation teams' (中央宣讲团) Beijing uses to disseminate the latest Party orthodoxy to provincial party committees, the multi-country briefing delegations that have toured Africa since 2013 are somewhere between an album tour and an investment roadshow. Delegations typically include senior, often province-level, Party leaders as well as Party theoreticians, sometimes those directly involved in drafting the policies being promoted. The briefings are intended to bestow an unmediated – and so 'authoritative, comprehensive and accurate' – understanding of the Party's 'new ideas, concepts and strategies'.³²⁷ More than that, the briefers outline in detail 'the unique advantages'³²⁸ of the CCP's governance system. The *People's Daily* reckons that with every briefing the Party has 'won more endorsers, supporters, and fellow travellers' around the world.³²⁹ During the pandemic, these briefing activities have shifted online, enabling economies of scale, for example with an online briefing on the Fifth Plenum for 43 parties across sub-Saharan Africa in November 2020.³³⁰

Meanwhile, the aspect of the CCP's African outreach that has begun to attract most attention in recent years is its growing programme of training for African party officials. In 2017, Xi pledged that 15,000 foreign party officials would be invited to China in the next five years.³³¹ While the CCP talks of mutual 'exchange of governance experience', the traffic is rather one way. Some training takes place in African countries, delivered by delegations of CCP theorists, typically from provincial CCP schools.³³² Much more commonly, groups of African party members, generally 20 to 30 strong, travel to China, usually for around 10 days, where they visit a variety of cities and

provinces (not necessarily including Beijing). Classroom teaching is delivered by the Party's network of schools; some of China's most prestigious universities, such as Renmin University; and government-affiliated think tanks including the China Centre for International Economic Exchanges. Alongside cultural programmes and sightseeing, fieldtrips take participants to experience Party governance first-hand, for example witnessing local Party meetings. (Box 3 outlines the core topics covered by CCP training.)

A further development under Xi is the growing use of multilateral fora for Party diplomacy, evidently intended to generate greater publicity through their scale. The ILD has organised a series of 'CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties' meetings, the largest being the High-Level Meeting held in Beijing in 2017. This was reportedly attended by almost 300 political organisations from over 120 states (including multiple African parties), and was addressed by Xi Jinping himself. Though called 'dialogues', these are clearly a further opportunity for the CCP to 'tell its story'. Much as the FOCAC has sub-fora, the World Dialogue is conceived as the apex of a structure of regional dialogues – in Africa's case, the series of 'Theoretical Seminars for African Political Parties'. The ILD also engages less institutionalised groupings of African parties, for example grouped along linguistic lines, seemingly to provide practical economies of scale.³³³ A significant recent development is the creation of dialogue structures with multiple parties – both governing and in opposition – from single countries, explicitly to coordinate and promote the development of BRI activities. Egypt is the first example of this model in Africa (established in 2020), with others in Indonesia and the Philippines.³³⁴ Song Tao set out the logic for these structures in a 2016 interview: 'We grasp the guidance of political party elites, and strive to gather the consensus of the ruling and opposition parties and social elite groups in the countries along the [BRI] route ... to form political and public opinion support for the construction of the 'Belt and Road''.³³⁵ This model, which disregards the ideological divisions of domestic politics in democratic competition in pursuit of the supposedly higher goal of the BRI, may well appear in further African countries in the coming years.

This intensification of Party diplomacy under Xi, with its bold promotion of the CCP's approach and efforts to win the friendship of numerous parties worldwide, has laid the groundwork for the ILD's approach to the Coronavirus.

Figure 7: The tools of CCP party diplomacy

The International Department of the CCP, a ministerial level agency reporting directly to the Central Committee, acts as the Party's diplomatic service, building ties with political parties around the world through a toolbox of different activities:



Exchange of visits: The IDCPC maintains a steady flow of bilateral visits with senior officials of African parties.



'Letter Diplomacy': During Covid-19, the IDCPC innovated with what it dubs 'letter diplomacy', encouraging and publicising letters of support from international parties and rallying them to sign a joint open letter promoting CPC views.



Briefing tours: In recent years the IDCPC has launched a series of multi-country briefing tours to bring the 'spirit' of key CCP developments (including national congresses and Five Year Plans) to international parties, disseminating and explaining the Party's policy agenda.



Training: The IDCPC trains African party officials, both at home and in China. Officials attend CCP party schools for training in party building and administration, cadre development, and public opinion management. During Covid-19, training has gone online – and expanded to include lessons on China's Covid response.



Donations: The IDCPC makes in-kind donations to partner parties, such as computer equipment. During Covid-19, it has donated medical equipment and masks directly to political parties.



Multiparty groupings: The IDCPC forms Africa-wide groupings of political parties (including along language lines) for multiparty interactions. These happen under the banner of the 'CCP in Dialogue with World Parties', a recurring global forum hosted by the Party.

What Does the CCP Teach African Parties?

CCP training of African parties covers a range of core topics that align with the purposes of CCP party diplomacy – and in many instances appeal to African parties and their goals. Many study tours focus on one of these core topics.

Telling the CCP's stories. During study tours in China, the CCP gives African party officials a direct – but curated – experience of the country, showing an image of China calibrated to support the Party's political goals. On the one hand, visits to China's booming megacities, journeys on its modern infrastructure, and tours of leading companies such as Alibaba show a prosperous, innovative, high-tech country. On the other, participants are also shown less developed, rural areas, with the clear message that China, too, is a developing country still confronting poverty – but one that is forging ahead economically. Classroom sessions, meanwhile, tell the Party's stories directly, notably on China's modern history (and the CCP's role in it), global politics, and China-Africa relations.

Economic development. For African nations seeking meaningful, sustained economic development, China's economic transformation is the CCP's principal source of credibility and the greatest draw to its training. Economic development is correspondingly an important topic of training. The CCP stresses the value of each country choosing its own route, rather than following a model putatively laid down by the West, and argues this has been China's approach. Above all, CCP training stresses the Party's own role in orchestrating China's economic rise. In so far as the detail of economic policy is laid out, the focus is CCP initiatives such as the Targeted Poverty Alleviation (精准扶贫) campaign, a drive associated with Xi Jinping that declared victory over absolute poverty in 2020.

A 'people-centred' 'New Political Party System'. Though the PRC is de facto a one-party state, eight parties exist alongside the CCP in a United Front, in which the CCP claims to consult the other parties. CCP training promotes this as a 'new political party system' (新型政党制度) and an alternative form of 'democracy' that is stable, efficient and 'people-centred' – and constitutes China's 'own contribution to human political civilisation'. The Party contrasts this model with the chaos of electoral democracy, where parties put their own interests above those of the people. It claims that it pursues above all the interests of *the* people – in the abstract and collective, rather than as individuals endowed with civil and political rights. That its rule is 'people centred' has been a key focus of the Party's coronavirus messaging, with it claiming to have prioritised people's health and wellbeing. It is this 'people-centred' principle that justifies the CCP's 'leadership over all aspects of society'.

Party building, 'democratic centralism', and creating a 'mass party'. 'Party building' is a major, recurring element of CCP training. The CCP offers to teach how to build long-lasting, stable parties – highly appealing to groups such as Kenya's Jubilee Party, a relatively recent creation in a political environment where political formations are often short-lived; one Jubilee official hoped the CCP would teach them 'how to run and manage a party for 100 years without collapsing.' CCP training emphasises the creation of a 'mass party', present throughout society, ideologically unified and neither defined by ethnicity nor riven by ethnic divisions (whereas parties in a number of African countries are associated with particular ethnic groups). According to the training, the key to the CCP's success in building such a party is 'democratic centralism', whereby the party leadership's decisions are binding on lower levels, which should be disciplined and obedient. This appeals to parties such as Namibia's SWAPO, which has been beset by factionalism and breakaways.

Tackling corruption. Some study tours visit branches of the CCP's Commission for Discipline Inspection and learn about the large-scale anti-corruption campaign instigated by Xi Jinping that has seen the investigation of hundreds of thousands of CCP cadres – and the downfall of a number of CCP leaders. CCP anti-corruption training naturally does not dwell on systemic responses, such as a watchdog press or independent investigative institutions. Instead, the CCP emphasises 'iron discipline' within the Party and inspection by internal party bodies.

Cadre development. Many study tours visit and are part-delivered by the CCP's Party schools (of which there are an estimated 2,700, from the prestigious Central Party School to small, local institutions). The training advertises the importance of ideological education of cadres through dedicated party institutions. Many African participants express admiration for the CCP's ideological training and numerous parties have moved to emulate the CCP's Party school system. In recent years, the CCP has provided direct support to African parties' establishment of party schools, including funding, guidance on structure and curricula, and provision of teaching materials. Related to this, CCP training outlines the Party's competitive, multistage cadre selection process; cadres' ongoing development at all levels through ideological training; and the meritocratic selection of Party leaders through successive levels of ranking and evaluation – as opposed to the vagaries of electoral democracy.

'Managing' public opinion. Some African parties receive training from organisations in the CCP's apparatus for 'public opinion management', ranging from censorship to proactive massaging of public perceptions. This has included details of the CCP's 'supervision and guidance of public opinion', propaganda work through traditional media, and the uses and risks of social media – and how these can best be avoided, through legislation, technology and active guidance.

3.3.2 Party Diplomacy During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Since the global spread of Covid-19, the ILD has continued to pursue the party-diplomatic activities that have become characteristic under Xi's rule (see Figure 7). Not only has the network of senior African political figures built in recent years by the ILD been tapped up to vocally support the CCP and its Coronavirus record, the ILD has also adapted its approach and developed new focuses for pandemic-era party diplomacy – not least as the pandemic has restricted international travel. Three key responses have been central to the ILD's role in China's pandemic response in Africa: donations, 'letter diplomacy', and training.

Donations

Within China's wider campaign of Coronavirus medical supplies donations (described in Chapter 1), the CCP has also made a series of donations to political parties across Africa. Donations have included masks, PPE, disinfectant sanitiser, and test kits, and have generally been presented by locally posted Chinese ambassadors. By April 2020, the CCP claimed to have 'donated medical supplies and humanitarian aid to more than 70 political parties and party organizations in over 40 countries [world-wide] through inter-party channels'.³³⁶

The CCP's Coronavirus donations represent a refashioning of an existing element of its party diplomacy in Africa, as it has long made donations to African parties. Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, the majority of publicly disclosed donations were also

in-kind, such as bundles of computers, printers, photocopiers, cameras and USB sticks donated amongst others to the RPF in Rwanda³³⁷ and the RDPC in Cameroon.³³⁸ However, financial donations have reportedly also been made, including as campaign funds, to parties such as SWAPO in Namibia.³³⁹ It has been reported – indeed alleged, often by local investigative journalists or opposing parties – in multiple countries that the CCP provides financial support to its partner parties in Africa. However, the full extent of any such payments is in most cases unlikely to be transparently disclosed. In recent years the CCP has provided financial support to African parties to fund party schools and training academies. For example, in 2018 the CCP donated around XOF 300 million (EUR 460,000) to Burkina Faso's MPP to fund its party school, after it ended the country's relations with Taiwan in favour of the PRC.³⁴⁰

Training

The party training described above has continued during the pandemic – but its form and content have been adapted to fit the Coronavirus context. The CCP has held a series of Coronavirus-themed virtual training sessions for African political parties, typically lasting three days and ostensibly sharing tips on pandemic management. Beyond promoting the Coronavirus narratives set out above, these webinars have in reality been a repackaging of the existing themes of the Party's training (see Box 2), most notably economic development and the achievements of the Party's management of China's economy (the theme of the webinars is typically *economic recovery* from the pandemic, rather than tackling the virus itself).³⁴¹ In the webinars, China's Covid-19 experience is nonetheless used to illustrate the effectiveness of these existing themes – such as the Party's people-centred approach and skilled economic management.³⁴²

Letter Diplomacy

In the ILD's view, the main departure of Coronavirus party diplomacy was what it dubbed the innovation of 'letter diplomacy' (致信外交).³⁴³ The April 2020 joint open letter rallying world political parties to support CCP narratives was one of three elements of this 'letter diplomacy', alongside a series of bilateral letters to overseas parties, and letters of support received from them.

In March, the ILD sent letters to the leaders of more than 110 parties in over 60 countries to 'systematically introduce [Beijing's] practices and experience in combating the epidemic'. These letters stressed that the CCP 'always puts people's lives and health first', 'Xi Jinping personally directed' China's Coronavirus fight, and that 'China has shared information about the epidemic in a timely manner with the international community in an open, transparent and responsible manner'.³⁴⁴

In return, the CCP reportedly received letters of condolence and support from more than 330 political parties in 140 countries, demonstrating the strength of its 'reputation and popularity' (口碑, 人缘).³⁴⁵ The quantity and content of these letters were widely reported in Chinese state media – for both domestic and foreign audiences.³⁴⁶ According to Xinhua, John Boadu, secretary general of Ghana's ruling NPP, thanked China 'for sharing experience and providing material supplies' and noted that 'China, thanks to its institutional advantages, has made a 'miracle' of its coronavirus prevention and control ... and taken the lead in helping Africa'.³⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the joint letter, too, was widely promoted by Chinese state media – and the ILD's spokesperson joined Twitter to share the news with his first Tweet.³⁴⁸ Despite its advertisement of the letter, however, the ILD has not disclosed the iden-

tity of the letter's co-signatories, preferring to emphasise their sheer number. A small number have identified themselves, such as Kenya's Jubilee Party.³⁴⁹ The ILD nonetheless reckoned it 'a major event in the history of world party exchanges', with the CCP pulling on its network to give leadership to world political parties.³⁵⁰ In its opposition to 'the politicisation of public health issues and the stigmatisation of other countries under the excuse of Covid-19', the letter provided Beijing useful diplomatic support at a time when the Trump administration was trying to draw political capital from the virus' origins in China. In the assessment of the ILD, the letter's endorsement of Beijing's narratives demonstrated the Party's 'international influence, appeal and shaping power, and effectively enhanced the international community's understanding and recognition of the advantages of the system of Socialism with Chinese characteristics and its governance effectiveness.'³⁵¹

The Party's leaders believe that more and more foreign parties wish to learn from the CCP – and that with Beijing's pandemic performance demand has climbed further. According to the ILD, the pandemic had shown the Party-State's 'unique advantages' in rapidly and efficiently mobilising vast resources (already a talking point in CCP propaganda relating to its economic development and infrastructure building). The result was that, 'as the impact of the pandemic continues to grow, the international community will reflect more on the political domain and pay more attention to the essence, characteristics and results of the governance system of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'.³⁵² In the ILD's assessment, Covid-19 has increased the Party's global influence, especially in contrast to democracy, which they say is beset by 'political struggles' and incapable of effecting change as efficiently as the CCP.³⁵³ With the pandemic demonstrating 'the order of China and the chaos of the West', 'China can provide wisdom to a world that is in need of new governance models.'³⁵⁴ Party diplomacy has been used during the pandemic to push this assessment – and will doubtless continue to draw on the CCP's Coronavirus record to promote the effectiveness of its way of government in the post-pandemic years.

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Conclusions

In Africa, Beijing has positioned itself to draw two positive legacies from the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. It has demonstrated solidarity with African nations by providing medical supplies and expertise, vaccines, and debt alleviation. Meanwhile, its apparently effective handling of the virus at home – at least after the initial stages of the outbreak – may lend further credibility to CCP rule as a model of governance from which other developing nations might learn, especially when contrasted with the apparent failings of other nations' efforts to combat the virus.

How these positive legacies will weigh up against more negative legacies in the eyes of African populations and their leaders remains to be seen. Criticism of Chinese authorities' handling of the Coronavirus outbreak, including doubts about the virus' origins and recriminations about the way it was allowed to spread beyond Wuhan, has been voiced across the continent, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. Meanwhile, the mixed response to Chinese donations, in doubts both about their reliability and the motives behind them, demonstrated the negative perceptions Beijing still faces in at least some parts of African societies. Anger at the treatment of African citizens in Guangzhou deepened these perceptions dramatically – and this may yet prove the most durable legacy of the pandemic in African citizens' perceptions of China.

As this report has shown, Beijing has acted robustly to tip the balance firmly towards the possible positive legacies, even looking beyond mere damage control to explicitly seek Sino-African ties actively strengthened by the experience of the pandemic (in sharp contrast to some of the obituaries for the relationship penned early in the crisis).³⁵⁵ Central to this effort has been China's provision of tangible support to African

nations, demonstrating not only that it has emerged as a 'Responsible Great Power' with both the capacity and the will to supply global public goods, but also a reliable partner to Africa in times of crisis. But perhaps as important has been Beijing's framing of this support, drawing on messaging and influencing tools developed in the last decade. Donations have been delivered with considerable fanfare and handover ceremonies used to push key CCP talking points and slogans. The expansion of Chinese state media has created a multiplatform messaging apparatus designed to project the Party-State's chosen narratives in Africa – and to do so with considerable unity and message discipline on key issues such as the Coronavirus.

What evidence exists to date (notably in the absence of audience data) suggests this apparatus nonetheless has limited direct reach, especially compared to a small number of incumbent international media organisations with far greater audience penetration, including the BBC and RFI. (The same can be observed of the middling engagement figures for Beijing's diplomats on social media platforms, where the new foray into active use of these platforms has yet to generate a popular following on the same scale as other nations' diplomatic accounts.)

However, the indirect reach is greater. State media content spreads widely, through syndication, licensing and reproduction on news aggregation websites (which are widely read in many African countries). This is especially the case with Xinhua output but also applies to other outlets, for example with CRI content rebroadcast by local stations. This indirect spread has been strongly promoted by a broad effort to woo African media organisations and journalists, including training tours to China and direct inducements to encourage positive reporting on the country. While the principal focus of training is to shape participants' perceptions of China, filtered through the Party's preferred lens, this outreach also attempts to rally African journalists as allies against Western media the Party alleges misrepresents both China and Africa, and promote the CCP's model of media in service of the state.

The appeal to African journalists of this restrictive model can be doubted. But in the context of weakening popular support for media freedom in Africa – as suggested by survey data³⁵⁶ – and a trend towards greater state interference in the media in a number of countries, this influence is of concern, especially when coupled with CCP promotion of its wider model amongst African elites, notably through party diplomacy. Here it is clear that the CCP has gained in credibility and prestige in recent years, principally due to China's economic transformation but also, conceivably, in light of its Coronavirus response.

While it is not possible or appropriate to generalise to all parties across the entire continent, the evidence is clear that in at least a number of key cases, the CCP has been successful in presenting its governance as a model worthy of emulation. The willingness of many parties to participate in CCP training suggests this, as does the growing number of parties establishing party schools inspired by the CCP's school system. Statements by leaders ranging from Asiedu Nkieta of Ghana's NDC to President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda are explicit that their parties should learn from the CCP. Museveni told his party's campaigners in the 2020 election that they must 'tell the NRM's story' well and emphasise that it put 'solving people's problems first' and directly 'linked the party's success story to [the] Chinese Communist Party and noted that in both cases, they have caused a fundamental change which has led to massive development'.³⁵⁷ Nkieta has argued 'Ghana needs to replicate aspects of China's governance systems to ensure an all-inclusive development that leaves no citizen behind'.³⁵⁸ Kenya's Jubilee Party is acting on this impulse and participates extensively in CCP training, including

receiving training delegations in Kenya to guide them in the creation of a stable, disciplined, 'mass party', lessons similarly embraced by parties including Ethiopia's EPRDF/ Prosperity Party. Meanwhile, SWAPO's 2018 amendment of its party constitution to identify its guiding ideology as 'Socialism with Namibian Characteristics' – an unmistakable echo of the CCP's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' – was a striking demonstration of the prestige CCP rule has won in recent years.³⁵⁹

Afrobarometer's most recent data showed that 23 per cent of respondents considered China the best model for their country's development (second to the US with 32 per cent).³⁶⁰ Even as negative perceptions of China in the industrialised democracies climb to their highest recorded levels, polling by Afrobarometer, Pew, Gallup and others suggest it retains a positive image in Africa.³⁶¹ Beijing's response to the Coronavirus – providing aid, shaping narratives, and wielding influence – has sought to strengthen this credibility and attractiveness. Though the long-term geopolitical impact of the Coronavirus pandemic are yet to play out, Beijing's stated hope that China-Africa relations will emerge positively strengthened by Covid-19 remains credible.

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Policy Orientations

The Coronavirus pandemic's spread in Africa and China's response to it raise a number of challenges and policy opportunities for European policymakers, at both the EU and member state level. China's willingness and ability to support Africa's fight against Covid-19 should be seen as positive. But Beijing's use of this support to push its preferred narratives and talking points should give pause for thought, given the ideological and geopolitical implications. The CCP's crafting of a wide-reaching messaging machine in Africa, its wooing of African media organisations and journalists, and its growing direct engagement of African political parties all underscore this. The trends visible in this report give substance to the EU's identification of the PRC as a 'systemic rival' (while also, in different areas, remaining 'a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, [and] an economic competitor) and highlight the importance of European policy actors mainstreaming an awareness of this status across a broad spectrum of policy areas, including Africa policy.

Responding to Covid-19 in Africa

Despite discussion of 'mask diplomacy' and 'vaccine diplomacy', competition with China's activities in providing Africa medical equipment, vaccines and other public health support should not be a primary motivator for European action to help the continent's Covid-19 response. Both moral reasons and the goal of further strengthening Europe-Africa relations should suffice to mobilise a robust European response to the pandemic's effects in Africa. This has indeed been the case to date, with Europe pro-

viding substantial assistance (including through Covax) without reference to China's activities. Beijing's deployment of its support for maximum visibility, accompanied by its preferred political messages, nonetheless show that it would be counterproductive to European values and interests for the perception to take hold that Europe has failed to match up to the support offered by China. European policy actors should continue to pursue substantive actions in response to Covid-19 in Africa within the areas of public health and economic cooperation, including looking to the longer term and post-pandemic recovery and subsequent pandemic preparedness. Their guiding principle should be to visibly demonstrate European solidarity with Africa.

Public Health Cooperation

- ▶ Europe must take opportunities to visibly **demonstrate solidarity** with Africa by strengthening Covid-19 public health measures on the continent. Activities should be visible and ambitious in scale. A **Europe-Africa Vaccine Partnership** should be central to this, aimed at creating a sustainable, positive legacy of the pandemic.
- ▶ On the one hand, this means continuing efforts to ensure **Covax** works effectively, including provision of suitable funding, logistic support, and Europe-manufactured vaccine. The EU and its members are leading financiers of Covax but support should increasingly extend to donation of Europe-manufactured vaccine doses, notably as supply from India has been disrupted.
- ▶ More importantly still, European policymakers should pursue a coherent spectrum of actions to support localised **vaccine production** in Africa as a positive legacy of the pandemic. The Team Europe Initiative on Manufacturing and Access to Vaccines, Medicines and Health Technologies in Africa is a highly promising start, which already includes EUR 1 billion in funding and advanced plans for supporting a regional vaccine manufacturing hub at the Institut Pasteur in Dakar. The initiative should be sustained and expanded to further regional manufacturing hubs, with a sustainable focus on skills and technology transfer. The EU, its member states and other entities within Team Europe should contribute further to this initiative.
- ▶ In the meantime, it is imperative that Europe **avoid diplomatic own-goals** such as the non-recognition by the EU's **Digital Green Certificate** (which aims to facilitate travel into and around Europe for vaccinated individuals) of the India-manufactured Covishield (AstraZeneca) vaccine, which represents the majority of doses administered in Africa. Such missteps overshadow and severely undermine positive perceptions of the solidarity demonstrated by European support to the Covax scheme. Those EU member states yet to do so should expedite their recognition of Covishield within the Green Certificate scheme.
- ▶ A Europe-Africa Vaccine Partnership should be situated within ongoing, broader public health cooperation. In the wake of the pandemic, this should include activities focused on **health security and pandemic preparedness**. This should include further support to **Africa CDC**, including partnership and exchanges with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, such as the four-year 'EU for health security in Africa: ECDC for Africa CDC' project already announced in December 2020.

- › As they look to **learn lessons** from the weaknesses and strengths of their own responses to the spread of Covid-19, and those of other governments worldwide, European governments should learn from their African counterparts' rapid and decisive implementation of counter-virus measures early in the pandemic's spread, including their effective experience in implementing sanitary checks and public hygiene measures at airports and other transit locations.
- › As the EU and some of its member states explore active cooperation with China in Africa – as has recently been proposed by Beijing – the area of public health may offer some opportunities for partnership. Any such activities must be substantive and focused on genuine African priorities, rather than a mere headline – which would most serve Beijing's wider geostrategic preoccupations. Such partnerships should seek China's collaborative participation in long-term, meaningful, far-reaching public health programmes in Africa. Opportunities for joint activities could include not only in-country activities such as support for African vaccine manufacture, but also joint training of African medical professionals, including three-way scholarships for African medical students to study at institutions in Europe and China.

Debt Management and Economic Recovery

- › It should be recognised that, far from the 'debt trap' caricature, Beijing and its lenders have been willing to restructure loans to African countries and have progressed towards greater participation in internationally coordinated efforts to manage African countries' debt crises, notably through DSSI. However, given the scale – and opacity – of Chinese lending to Africa, more can be done and this should be encouraged. It is in the commercial and diplomatic interest of Beijing and its lenders to **increase transparency** in its lending in Africa. Further coordinated action should be sought through the DSSI and together with the Paris Club.
- › For their part, European governments must contribute substantively to **debt relief or suspension** efforts. It will be essential to mobilise **international private creditors**, given their newly expanded share of outstanding African sovereign debt. The activities of the Africa Private Creditor Working Group and the London Club should be supported and encouraged. To the extent possible, incentives should be sought to encourage participating private lenders to match and coordinate with the actions of sovereign lenders coordinated through the G20/DSSI and Paris Club.
- › A strategic premium should be placed on preventing one legacy of the pandemic being **credit-rating** downgrades for African sovereigns through defaults or major debt restructurings, which would substantially weaken their access to international Eurobond markets and thus to global capital pools. European policy actors can contribute by pursuing **capacity building** programmes with African governments' sovereign debt management agencies, while, together with relevant global partners, encouraging the mainstreaming of debt governance factors into sovereign credit ratings. This would serve to strengthen African credit ratings and improve the terms on which African sovereigns access global credit.

Meeting the CCP's Influence Wielding in Africa

Reaching to the longer-term implications of the developments set out in this report, European policy actors must sustain, and perhaps expand, their democracy promotion and democratic media capacity building activities in Africa.

Democracy Promotion

- › Since the end of the Cold War, there has been no external major power exerting a countervailing force against the democratisation that has taken hold in much of Africa since the 1990s (which the EU and its members have supported extensively). This is no longer the case. Though Beijing is not primarily motivated to pursue the overthrow democracy in Africa per se, its efforts to undermine the credibility of liberal democracy and in its place build up the 'discourse power' and legitimacy of CCP authoritarianism puts contested democratic transitions in parts of Africa (and elsewhere) at risk. This should underscore to European policymakers the importance of ongoing democracy promotion activities – which should be vigorously sustained.
- › Within this, a **strategic awareness** is necessary of the overwhelming importance of meaningful economic development – and of demonstrating that democratic systems can deliver it. The PRC serves – and actively promotes itself – as a compelling example of successful economic transformation overseen not by a democratic system but by an authoritarian party increasingly determined to advertise the effectiveness of such governance.
- › In seeking to support African democracy, Europe has a particular strength and competitive advantage in the depth and breadth of the multifaceted ties between Europe and Africa. This includes European support and engagement with African **civil society**, where the CCP is absent and has little to offer. These activities must be sustained.
- › **European political parties** should expand their **exchanges with African counterparts**, including relationship building and capacity building. In contrast with the CCP's opportunistic focus on ruling parties, European parties should continue to focus on forging durable ties based on shared ideological and political programmes. Activities should include capacity building, such as scholarships, but the focus should be on **genuine relationship building** among equals, representing a chance for European political leaders and activists to develop more accurate understanding of Africa's diverse nations, realities and politics.

Media Cooperation

- › European policymakers – rightly – lack the kind of levers available to their Chinese counterparts to determine the activities of European media organisations. Europe nonetheless has a strength in depth in terms of a range of independent civil society organisations nurturing multifaceted connections with African societies, including within journalism and the media. Moreover, some European media organisations retain a prominent role and large audience share in African countries that outstrip those of China's state media. This is unlikely to be reversed in the near future.

- › The African presence of **European media organisations** should be sustained and strengthened. For public broadcasters this means maintenance of appropriate budgets to ensure **independent, high-quality public service work in Africa**. These organisations should notably continue to expand their **hiring of African journalists**, including in editorial roles.
- › In their outreach to African media, Chinese representatives claim China and Africa are fellow victims of unfair, inaccurate reporting of their countries by ‘Western’ media. The best response is to seek high-quality, accurate reporting on the continent by European media. This largely lies beyond the control of European policy-makers, subject rather to market forces and independent editorial choices. However, **scholarships and reporting bursaries for European journalists and journalism students** to report and study in Africa represents one way this goal can be supported.
- › As Chinese training seeks to make the case for a coercively controlled media environment – arguing the Party’s model ensures the media better serve the nation’s development goals – European actors must continue to **support a free and vibrant press in African countries**. European development agencies and other relevant organisations should continue and expand their funding for European and African non-profits, civil society organisations, universities and other entities working on media training and capacity building in Africa. Entities such as DW Akademie, BBC Media Action, and France’s CFI should be supported in their provision of training and scholarship opportunities for African journalists.

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The Coronavirus pandemic has dislocated global life, shaken economies, and claimed over four million lives. Its complex geopolitical ramifications continue to play out. For China's ruling Communist Party, the pandemic has presented grave political risks – but also strategic opportunities, including in Africa, a politically important region to China's rulers. Beijing has set the goal that China-Africa relations should be positively strengthened by the pandemic. To do so it has mobilised aid – but also wielded influence through its ties to African political parties and used its mouthpieces on the continent to shape narratives of the pandemic.