



[Global Power Shifts](#)

Will COVID-19 Accelerate a Global Power Shift?

China's Growing Ideological Influence in Africa

[Anna Lena Sabroso-Wasserfall](#) / [Tom Bayes](#)

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a fight against SARS-CoV-2 but also part of the rivalry to dominate the global narrative and to exert political and economic influence. Particularly in light of the worsening relations between China and the US, management of the pandemic and respective policy successes or failures are becoming political issues. Accordingly, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using the pandemic on an ideological level to drive the shift in global power – with a particular focus on Africa.

At the start of the pandemic, Beijing was primarily concerned with repairing the damage to its image, but the tide turned when it successfully contained the spread of the virus within its own borders, even as the pandemic took hold in other parts of the world. China's President Xi Jinping quickly recognised this as an opportunity to present China as the victor in an ideological competition between political systems. Since Xi Jinping came to power, the CCP has been pursuing this rivalry with a focus and determination that far surpasses that of his recent predecessors. China's response to the challenges posed by COVID-19, and how it takes strategic advantage of the opportunities it presents, tells us a great deal about the CCP's aims, and about how it seeks to expand its influence, both in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Is the Pandemic a Turning Point in a Global Competition?

In China, the COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a major ideological and political shift. Since coming to power in 2012/2013, Xi Jinping has attained a level of personal power that goes far beyond that of his recent predecessors. He has focused on restoring ideological discipline within the CCP and consolidating the party's power and influence in every area of Chinese society. This is seen as a deliberate correction of the "ideological drift" that occurred under his immediate predecessors. The Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere, better known as Document Number 9, clearly

reveals his determination to resist the ideological threat that he believes is emanating from the West. According to the communiqué, this threat is primarily composed of promoting "Western constitutional democracy", "universal values", civil society and the Western understanding of journalism as the fourth estate.¹

However, in Xi Jinping's "new era", the CCP is to regain its ideological self-confidence within the People's Republic, but also to broadcast its political convictions more strongly to the outside world. In one of the key moments of his rule so far, at the 19th CCP Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping proclaimed that the model of "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" represents "China's contribution to the political advancement of mankind" and offers a "new option" for other countries to make rapid advances while retaining their independence.² Under Xi Jinping, ideology and nationalism have regained prominence in every area of life and politics, while China's power has multiplied in parallel. As a consequence, the view taken by certain political and academic circles in China is that the US is in terminal decline, and that China is destined to replace it as the world's most powerful country. In China, this perception has received a massive boost by the two nations' relative performance in managing the pandemic, and in some quarters COVID-19 is seen as a crucial turning point in an ideologically driven, strategic competition for global domination.

Africa plays an important part in this competition. The continent is not only economically important for China's rise, but Beijing also views its 54 recognised states³ as valuable supporters on global issues. Thus, Beijing constantly stresses the historical ties and parallels between China and Africa – as victims of imperialism and, in many cases, as fellow combatants in anti-colonial struggles for independence. In the rhetoric of the CCP, they are natural partners in a Sino-African Community of Common Destiny. Moreover, the nations of Africa are an obvious target group for promoting authoritarian rule and a CCP-style state-centred economy as a development model. This is why the whole African continent was and remains particularly important for Beijing's narratives and for its influence-building attempts during the coronavirus pandemic.

In Africa, there is also a perception that the EU's crisis management has been characterised by a lack of coherent measures and strategies.

The Battle of Narratives

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, seemed well aware of the political implications of the pandemic at an early stage. On 24 March 2020 he said: "COVID-19 will reshape our world. We don't yet know when the crisis will end. But we can be sure that by the time it does, our world will look very different."⁴ Borrell also spoke of a global battle of narratives and stressed that the fight against the pandemic has a geopolitical component, including a struggle for influence through the "politics of generosity". This "politics of generosity" is just one example of how China is using its so-called mask diplomacy to shape the narrative and impose its own version of events on the world.



Many of China's partners consider that the West has failed to take the lead and prove its dependability in the fight against COVID-19 – and this has played into Beijing's hands. While in 2014 Barack Obama was able to rally more than 60 countries to combat Ebola in West Africa, the US has recently been wedded to a strategy of



Best relations? In the rhetoric of the CCP, China and Africa are natural partners in a Sino-African Community of Common Destiny. [Source: © Madoka Ikegami, Reuters.](#)

downplaying the COVID-19 pandemic, along with isolationism and an “America First” mentality. Meanwhile, Beijing was ostentatiously taking the lead by hosting its Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19, in June 2020. At times, the European Union has also seemed so preoccupied with itself that even

some of its member states and European neighbours had the impression that it failed to provide adequate solidarity and support. For example, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić declared: “I believe in my brother and friend Xi Jinping” and called the much-invoked European solidarity a “fairytale”.⁵ In Africa there is also a

perception that the EU's crisis management has been characterised by a lack of coherent measures and strategies, especially at the beginning, and that the discourse has at times been dominated by internal disputes and criticisms.⁶

The Western powers' apparent failure to deal effectively with the challenges of the coronavirus within their own borders and to provide meaningful support and leadership to their partners abroad has provided fertile ground for the CCP's narratives and for their strategic outreach in Africa, which now aim to demonstrate that China is Africa's truest and most generous friend and even a role model worth following.

China's Narratives

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese party-state leveraged its extensive networks and connections in Africa to exert influence and promote certain key narratives about the pandemic – some more on the defensive side, others proactive, and some even aggressive. These narratives and their significance have evolved over time, largely in response to the changing pandemic situation in China, Africa, and worldwide.

Beijing proactively set out to find African voices that praised China's handling of the crisis.

1. Deflecting Criticism and Promoting Alternative Explanations for the Origin of the Virus

Among many African audiences, China's status as the country of origin of SARS-CoV-2 caused massive damage to its reputation. For the CCP, this challenge was exacerbated by perceptions that the authorities mishandled the early stages of the outbreak in Hubei Province and that vital information was deliberately withheld, allowing the virus to spread in the first place. In response, Beijing proactively set out to find African voices that praised China's handling of the crisis and amplified them around the world. This

included making direct approaches to political parties and asking them to sign letters praising Beijing's performance in combatting the pandemic.⁷ However, Beijing has also promoted more radical narratives in order to absolve itself of any blame for the spread of the virus, such as repeated claims that the virus actually originated outside China – or even that China was the victim of a targeted attack. For months, Chinese officials disseminated their own theories, such as speculation that the American military could have brought the virus to Wuhan.

2. Handling the PR Crisis

One episode that was particularly damaging to Sino-African relations was the discrimination suffered by African nationals in Guangzhou. After the original outbreak in Wuhan was brought under control, rumours spread on Chinese social media that the African community in Guangzhou was causing a second wave of the coronavirus. As a result, many African residents of the city were subjected to forced quarantines and evictions. Some shops, hotels, and restaurants refused to serve African customers. These events were widely reported and discussed on African social media until the protests were finally taken up by official diplomatic channels. African ambassadors in Beijing complained to the Chinese authorities, and African politicians were unusually outspoken about this discrimination. For example, a video posted on social media showed Femi Gbajabamila, Speaker of Nigeria's House of Representatives, voicing fierce criticism to China's ambassador to Abuja.

China's targeted defensive response consisted of reports that denied or downplayed the discriminatory treatment and statements to the effect that it was a local matter or limited to the behaviour of a few individuals. Statements by prominent Africans, such as Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama, who testified that there was no evidence of discrimination, were also proactively disseminated via Sino-African media channels.⁸ However, this flashpoint in Sino-African relations was not the first time that

instances of anti-African discrimination by the Chinese media, authorities, or individuals have damaged African perceptions of China. The incident once again highlights the challenges Beijing faces in overcoming the cultural unfamiliarity and existing prejudices between Chinese and African people and in giving credibility to its claim that Sino-African relations are a fraternal encounter of mutually respectful partners, united in a community of common destiny.

3. China as a Responsible Great Power and Africa's Most Generous Friend? The Health Silk Road

On the other hand, pushing other, more positive narratives has given Beijing a promising opportunity to change the discourse and to steer it in its favour. Central to this is the portrayal of China as Africa's truest, most generous friend. This narrative has primarily been cultivated through widespread coverage of China's provision of masks and other medical equipment and later on through its promise to provide African nations with privileged access to vaccines developed in China. The accompanying advertising campaigns sought to portray China as a "responsible great power" that came to Africa's aid in its time of need. The official response from the African side has been predominantly positive, as demonstrated when South African Health Minister Zweli Mkhize publicly thanked China for its "lending a hand".⁹ But there have also been negative reactions, which highlight the difficulties faced by Beijing in effectively asserting this positive narrative. One example is the outrage expressed by some Africans on hearing reports that Chinese equipment was of inferior quality, coupled with the fact that it was not always made clear that some of the equipment was being sold, not donated.

Beijing also uses specific branding strategies as a way of increasing positive perceptions. The Belt and Road Initiative brand has served China well by attracting international attention and recognition, so Beijing has now wrapped its medical support into the concept of a Health Silk Road. This is not a new idea in itself, originally dating back to 2015. However, the term began

to be used in the international media when Xi Jinping mentioned it in a conversation with then Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in March 2020.¹⁰ The Health Silk Road has gained much greater significance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the practical scope of the project remains unclear. According to one interpretation in the Chinese media, the Health Silk Road includes current COVID-19 aid and all other activities that contribute to China's vision of global public health governance.

The targeted Chinese response is explicitly contrasted with how Western countries have managed the crisis.

4. China as a Superior Crisis Manager and Role Model

China's positive narratives go beyond trumpeting Beijing's generosity and the related branding. Indeed, they actively present China's handling of the pandemic as being the most successful model – and tout their political system as a viable alternative to the Western model of governance. For example, Chinese state media launched extensive coverage of the rapid construction of emergency hospitals in Wuhan. In June 2020, the State Council Information Office released a lengthy English-language report titled "Fighting COVID-19: China in Action", which detailed Beijing's response, while Chinese officials publicly offered to share their experience of fighting COVID-19 with their African counterparts.¹¹ Beijing's targeted response is explicitly contrasted with how Western countries have managed the crisis – with particular reference to the turmoil at the end of the Trump administration – to suggest that CCP-style authoritarianism has inherent advantages over liberal democracy when it comes to mobilising resources. Senior party official Guo Shengkun expressed it as follows: "During the pandemic, we made great strides in a short time, highlighting the stark contrast between China's



orderliness and the chaos of the West.”¹² The pandemic has given a powerful boost to Xi Jinping’s efforts to present CCP rule as a model for other countries to follow – and has proven a compelling case.

The Instruments of Chinese Influence in Africa

The successful dissemination of Beijing’s narratives cannot, however, be solely attributed to



Chinese vaccine: Beijing is using the pandemic to portray itself as Africa's most reliable partner. Source: © Philimon Bulawayo, Reuters.

African media landscape and deepening Beijing's ties with African political parties.

1. Expansion of Chinese Media Presence in Africa

Right from the start, the media was a key instrument in Xi Jinping's efforts to reassert the party's influence in every area of Chinese life, and since then he has taken further steps to ensure the media remains loyal to the party. This also has a global dimension, with Xi Jinping repeatedly urging Chinese media to "tell China's stories well" to foreign audiences and thereby increase the country's international influence.¹³ Under Xi Jinping, analysts have noted a shift in Beijing's attitude towards censorship and information management, moving from a purely defensive approach aimed at preventing unwanted information from entering China to a strategy that seeks to proactively reshape the information environment abroad to suit its own narrative.

This is happening in a variety of ways, including through the expansion of China's state-run media. Africa was considered the first target continent and test case for this approach and remains the region where China is doing the most extensive work in this respect. This is also subject of a newly published study by the KAS Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa, called "It is about their story – How China, Turkey and Russia influence the media in Africa".¹⁴ The cornerstones of China's strategy in Africa are the China Global Television Network Africa; the monthly magazine ChinAfrica, which describes its target group as "a high-end readership, which includes: government officials, major political parties and business executives in Africa"; China Daily, China's main English-language state-run newspaper, which publishes an African edition, as well as the special supplement African Weekly.¹⁵ Beijing has also expanded China Radio International's broadcasting operations in Africa, both directly and through licensing its content. In addition to

skilful storytelling. It also relies on the extensive infrastructure and networks that can be used for such purposes, and China now coordinates their use as part of a multidimensional approach. This includes increasing China's presence in the

the expansion of leading state media organisations in Africa, Beijing has also used public funds and partnerships with state-owned enterprises to support the expansion of private Chinese media companies on the continent. The combined outreach of Chinese state-owned and private media organisations has significantly increased its African audience in recent years – although the true extent of its success and influence remains a subject for research and debate.

2. Use of Social Media

Another instrument that has become increasingly important in recent years and that has played a significant role in the dissemination of the above-mentioned narratives is social media. Despite the fact that many international websites and social media platforms are banned in China, for some years now they have played a major role in how China presents itself to the rest of the world. Since 2019 in particular, Chinese officials have flocked to open accounts on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and many official Chinese organisations and institutions are now also active on social media, including the State Council Information Office, the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Office, and even *Qiushi*, the ideological journal of the CCP. In addition, more than 40 Chinese embassies, ambassadors, and diplomats in Africa have opened Twitter and Facebook accounts and are actively using them to share their messages.

Admittedly, most of China's diplomatic Twitterers in Africa limit themselves to fairly bland posts and mainly share and promote articles from Chinese state media. But one or two stand out from the crowd and have become known as “wolf warrior diplomats”, a phrase derived from a popular series of Chinese action movies. This trend is in line with Foreign Minister Wang Yi's call for Chinese diplomats to display “fighting spirit”.¹⁶ Some Chinese diplomats in Africa have already been demonstrating this spirit. For instance, at the end of 2019, China's former ambassador to South Africa, Lin Songtian, garnered much attention with tweets in which he fiercely criticised the US administration. Soon

after this, Lin was promoted to a higher position in Beijing – a powerful demonstration of the career benefits that can be accrued by displaying a fighting spirit on overseas social media.

3. Training African Journalists

Beijing's ability to “sell” its favoured narratives is due in part to its generously funded training programmes for African journalists. Since 2012, China has trained around 1,000 African journalists per year in a range of courses and seminars. Every year, the centrepiece of this programme, the China-Africa Press Centre, brings some 30 African journalists to spend several months in China, where they attend training courses and seminars, take tours of China and intern with some of China's leading media organisations.

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has also significantly increased its engagement with African political parties.

4. Cooperation with Political Parties

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has also significantly increased its engagement with African political parties through the party's internal diplomatic service, the International Department of the CCP Central Committee. This is not a new department, but it has grown in importance and stature under Xi Jinping. 2013 marked a significant upswing in its international activities. The CCP currently maintains relations with over 60 political parties in Africa, ranging from traditional ties to former independence movements with socialist, Marxist, or Maoist roots (such as Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi or the Communist Party of South Africa) to newer, pragmatic ties to governing parties across the political spectrum. However, while the CCP continues to maintain particularly close relations with its oldest African friends – many of them in southern Africa – its party diplomacy network

now extends to all regions of Africa, whether anglophone, francophone, or lusophone, and encompasses both democracies and the continent's more authoritarian states.

The International Department also runs, inter alia, an extensive training programme for cadres and officials of African political parties. These programmes and seminars are held in both Africa and China (and also online during the pandemic) and are an important tool for sharing and disseminating the CCP's views on governance and development. While their concrete success is difficult to gauge, it is clear that some parties, at least, are receptive to these programmes. This can be seen by the growing number of African political parties that are setting up academies in emulation of the CCP's model. And in Namibia, in 2018 the ruling SWAPO party decided to amend its constitution to describe its ideology as "socialism with a Namibian character"¹⁷. Beijing's success in combatting the coronavirus will enhance China's credibility with its political partners, and the International Department's engagement now consistently includes instruction in the CCP's epidemic response system. More broadly, the CCP's cultivation of strong ties with its African partners has created a receptive audience for its narratives, as demonstrated by the number of political parties that signed letters supporting the CCP's response to the coronavirus.

Europe Must Be a Reliable and Visible Partner

A detailed examination of the facts suggests that, during the pandemic, China has made effective use of its narratives and toolkit and, in so doing, outmanoeuvred the West. Seen against this backdrop, the long-term political implications of SARS-CoV-2 may end up being all the more profound, for they have coincided with a period of growing global competition. Political trends that were already discernible prior to the outbreak of the pandemic have deepened and intensified in its wake. More than a year after the outbreak of the virus, it can be concluded that COVID-19 has actually accelerated changes in the global power structure.

This prompts the question of what the West can do in practical terms to counter this trend. After all, it is not as if the US and the European Union have not already made a significant contribution to the global fight against the virus, including on the African continent. Rather, the main challenge in this respect relates to the often significantly lower visibility and lack of public awareness of Western aid. Above all, this is due to the fact that neither the US nor the EU have a comparable strategic or comprehensive concept to counter Beijing's multidimensional and highly coordinated mode of communication and action. The fact that a considerable proportion of European aid flows into regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU), or multilateral organisations, such as the World Health Organization, also reduces their visibility, because support of this kind is much more difficult to translate into a catchy narrative that can be picked up by the media. The same applies to the frequently used narrative that an authoritarian system of government led by a "strong man" is more effective in times of crisis. This approach is much easier to present and communicate, compared to the complex political structures of the EU and is simultaneously closer to the political cultures of many African nations.

Liberal democracy is challenged by an alternative model that has gained credibility for many partners in the pandemic.

2020 should have marked the start of even stronger relations between Europe and Africa with the new EU-Africa Strategy and a corresponding focus during Germany's presidency of the EU Council. Instead, Africa now perceives a new vulnerability in the EU as a result of its, at times, weak management of the pandemic and due to the fact that the EU, unlike China, has not managed to offer (virtual) alternatives to essential forums such as the postponed EU-AU summit. In view of this, we need to ask what European actors can learn from China's

deliberate focus on expanding its influence and promoting its narrative in Africa, and what such approaches could look like:

- The model of liberal democracy is being challenged by an alternative model that has now gained credibility in the eyes of many partners in the context of the pandemic. European actors must, therefore, do more to promote the advantages of democracy and, above all, to increase their visibility. They should work with their numerous African partners who share these values.
- European actors should closely monitor how China is building and expanding mechanisms to spread alternative narratives in Africa and take appropriate steps to counter them. These steps could include maintaining and increasing the budgets of independent, state-funded European media that already have a large audience share in Africa, such as Radio France Internationale, the BBC and Deutsche Welle. African journalists should also be given more opportunities to collaborate with European media organisations, including through work exchanges and training.
- European political parties should work more closely with their counterparts in Africa to support an effective democratic political culture – including greater use of facilities such as party academies by European parties.
- Relevant European actors should make efforts to ensure COVID-19 vaccines are visibly equitably distributed in Africa and other developing regions. Although the general view is that the EU is willing to provide support, doubts are being expressed about whether it can actually deliver, in view of its crisis management to date. With this in mind, it is essential to promote a narrative of solidarity and to actively counter Beijing’s portrayal of China as “Africa’s only true friend”.
- Despite all the delays and obstacles experienced during the pandemic, the EU-Africa Strategy should once again move to the fore

and continue to be an important element of the discussions and negotiations between Europe and Africa. The strategy should also be supplemented by a health component and coherently communicate specific proposals for action to African partners and to the African public. It is an opportunity for the EU to present itself as a reliable partner in overcoming the economic challenges that will follow the crisis, for example by investing more heavily in the African health sector.

For Europe and the West in general, it will now be essential to present itself to its African and international partners as a reliable and, above all, visible actor and to proactively strengthen its own narratives and networks – not only during the rest of the pandemic, but also far into the future.

– translated from German –

Anna Lena Sabroso-Wasserfall is Desk Officer for West Africa and Digital Formats in the Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Team at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Tom Bayes is an independent China-Africa researcher and author of the upcoming report “Wielding influence in the age of coronavirus: How the Chinese Communist Party shapes narratives and builds influence in Africa”¹⁸.

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- 18 The report is due for publication in April 2021 and will take a more detailed look at the issues covered in this article.