

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS



**New Old
Wounds**
Colonial
Legacy and
Foreign Policy

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

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Editorial

Dear Readers,

When the UN was founded in 1945, it had 51 member states. Today, that number stands at 193. There were two periods during which the increase in this figure was particularly striking: around 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union; and earlier, between the mid-1950s and early 1960s, when the remaining European colonial empires largely dissolved and their former territories were “granted” both statehood and independence.

That happened more than half a century ago, but it certainly did not involve drawing a line under the subject of colonialism. And that is a good thing. Addressing and reappraising the crimes committed by the predominantly Western European colonial powers in the regions they controlled remains a legitimate and important concern. Equally legitimate is the question as to whether – and to what extent – economic exploitation and colonial-era structures have continued to weigh on the development of former colonies since they achieved independence. This is by no means a new issue. Some readers may recall Marxist-influenced dependency theory, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to modernisation theory. It dealt with underdevelopment as a consequence of what was understood to be a structural dependence on global capitalist systems dominated by the West.

In recent decades, a broader discourse has emerged in academic and activist circles under the label of postcolonialism – one that goes far beyond these earlier questions and concerns. In Germany, this discourse long went unnoticed by the broader public. Then came 7 October 2023, when an Islamist terrorist organisation launched an attack on Israel – the only liberal democracy in the Middle East – indiscriminately murdering civilians and taking others hostage. The cynical response from some self-proclaimed “progressives” was that this was a legitimate act of resistance by Indigenous Palestinians against a state of white settler-colonialists.

This gross political and moral misjudgement is the clearest example to date of the shortcomings inherent in these postcolonial theories. In the present issue of *International Reports*, Andreas Jacobs highlights these flaws in no uncertain terms – flaws that range from a lack of academic rigour, anti-Western bias and antisemitism to a vulnerability to misuse by autocrats and to near-total irrelevance to the real lives of people in former colonies, whose cause postcolonial theorists claim to defend. As Jacobs puts it, “In reality, methodologically and empirically robust work is the exception rather than the rule in this field”. In this current issue, we aim to provide – primarily through the perspectives of our International Offices – a well-informed – though by no means exhaustive – contribution to the discussion on what role colonial legacies and the discourse around them actually play in various countries and world regions.

In her article on the trade relations of African states, Anja Berretta explores the question as to whether the often-poor economic development of these countries can be attributed to the legacy of European colonialism and to ongoing unfair trade

relations between the West and Africa. Drawing on a wide range of data and numerous examples of countries, she demonstrates that the trade and economic policies chosen by African governments themselves often provide a far more convincing explanation of each country's performance.

Colonialism is also relevant in a very different way in the case of certain authoritarian states. David Merkle analyses how China and Russia use selective historical narratives both to reinforce the power of their ruling elites at home and to discredit Western states on the international stage. Postcolonial discourse has become a favourite tool in these efforts – deployed via artificial intelligence and social media not only in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but also among sympathetic audiences in Western societies.

Moscow in particular has often succeeded in portraying Europe and the United States as colonialists while presenting itself as an anti-imperialist actor with no colonial past, which is especially striking given Russia's own long history of imperial ambition in its immediate neighbourhood. Stephan Malerius and Florian Binder trace this history drawing on the example of the South Caucasus, and reveal that in this region, and especially in Georgia, Russia is increasingly seen as a colonial power by some parts of society.

Meanwhile, Sebastian Grundberger examines how the authoritarian Left in Latin America uses postcolonial rhetoric not only to legitimise dictatorships stretching from Havana to Managua and Caracas, but also to lend intellectual support to its alliances with the regimes in Beijing, Moscow and Tehran – “united against the West”, as he puts it in the title of his article.

By contrast, Philipp Gerhard locates Brazil's foreign policy “between West and South”. He argues that after decades of Western alignment, Latin America's largest country has increasingly diversified its relations towards other global partners in recent years – a shift driven by a number of key factors, with the influence of postcolonial narratives being one of them. Initially an elite academic phenomenon imported from North American and European universities, these narratives later gained traction within Brazil's left-wing parties. While they do not shape the country's overall foreign policy, they do help explain certain tendencies, such as President “Lula” da Silva's anti-Israeli rhetoric.

Finally, two articles in the present issue also examine how Western European states are addressing their colonial legacies. Just a few months ago, the United Kingdom agreed to hand over the Chagos Islands – located in the middle of the Indian Ocean and of considerable strategic importance – to Mauritius. As Canan Atilgan and Lukas Wick write in their article, countries that were once part of the British Empire and that are now members of the Commonwealth are increasingly calling on London to confront the darker chapters of its imperial past with honesty. The British

government is willing to engage in such a reappraisal in principle, but it continues to reject formal apologies or reparations.

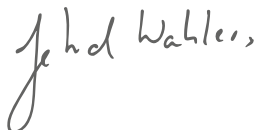
A similar debate has emerged in recent years between Germany and Tanzania, which had been part of the former colony of German East Africa up until the First World War. The impetus for this debate, however, came not from Dar es Salaam, but from Berlin. As Tilmann Feltes and Sebastian Laschet observe in their article, “it seems unlikely that a misguided debate on colonialism would have taken root in Tanzania without German involvement”. The debate was misguided in the sense that the previous German government – particularly the leadership of the Foreign Office – conducted it on a one-sided basis, often ignoring the issues that Tanzania’s government itself wished to address and lacking sufficient awareness of Tanzanian remembrance culture. As a result, the initiative did more harm than good to German-Tanzanian relations.

What does all this mean in terms of German and European foreign policy? The lesson to draw from misguided attempts at reappraising the past – and from legitimate criticisms of postcolonial discourse – must not be to avoid dealing with the dark and, to a certain extent, criminal aspects of Europe’s colonial history. Where our international partners wish to have that conversation, we should engage in it – based on historical facts. Not only is this a matter of moral responsibility, but it is also in our own interest. Many of the 193 UN member states referred to above are former colonies. Their positioning is crucial in light of our ongoing confrontation with revisionist autocracies such as China and Russia.

What we must avoid, however, is a form of ideology-driven remembrance policy that caters more to the emotional needs of domestic politicians, their electorates and certain activist groups than to the actual priorities of our international partners. And under no circumstances should we uncritically adopt a postcolonial narrative that absolves these partners of their own agency, that portrays Western colonialism as the root of all global problems and that in so doing not only misrepresents historical and present realities, but also seriously harms our interests.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The first letter 'G' is large and loops around the first part of the name. The last letter 's' is a simple, horizontal stroke.

Dr Gerhard Wahlers is Editor of International Reports, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (gerhard.wahlers@kas.de).

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Padrão dos Descobrimentos: At the Monument to the Discoveries in Lisbon, a large mosaic shows the routes of Portuguese sailors in the 15th and 16th centuries. Subsequently, Portugal and other European states took possession of large overseas territories converting them into colonies. Even though the European colonial empires have been dissolved for at least half a century now, the long shadows of that era extend right into the present. [Photo: © Markus Matzel, Imago.](#)

After Postcolonialism

Interjection



**ISRAEL BORN OF
BRITISH COLONIALISM**

**CREATED THROUGH
ZIONISTS TERRORISM**

**SUPPORTED BY
WESTERS IMPERIALISM**

Photo: © Mouneb Taim, Imago

In a Nutshell

The outrageous statements coming from “progressive” circles after 7 October 2023 triggered a long-overdue debate on postcolonial theory, though this debate has often lacked clarity and objectivity.

Postcolonial approaches have undoubtedly contributed to the understanding of the legacies of imperialism, but the field is now increasingly dominated by unscientific and politically activist writing.

Recent currents display a pronounced hostility towards the West by narrowing their focus to European colonialism of past centuries. Western “coloniality” has overtaken “capitalism” as the supposed root cause of all global ills.

In these narratives, Israel is vilified as a Western state founded by “settler colonialists” that must be abolished.

The practical value of postcolonial theory in terms of improving living conditions in the “Global South” is close to zero. Instead, this theory has become a useful tool – in both the “Global South” and the West – for a wide range of actors who reject the liberal-democratic order.

The uncritical adoption – and to some extent funding – of such discourse by the German state needs to be reassessed.



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The field known collectively as “postcolonialism” – which encompasses various research approaches and discursive arenas – is currently under sustained attack. This is no accident. Many observers were appalled by the reactions within “progressive” circles to the Hamas massacre of 7 October 2023. These reactions prompted a closer look: What kind of thinking labels Israelis “white settler colonialists”, seeks to liberate the world from imperialism and oppression and simultaneously aims to “provincialize” Europe and the West? Ever since these questions were raised publicly, debate around postcolonialism has intensified, though without being always accurate, and often with more noise than precision. At times enlightening yet usually predictable, this debate is often ineffective.

Dismissing the theoretical structure of postcolonialism as just another woke trend or as a politically correct aberration may be partly accurate, but it often fails to do justice to the phenomenon and leaves critics vulnerable. This is too serious an issue for polemics. What the postcolonial paradigm shift calls for is not culture-war posing, but a thorough and well-grounded examination: The reinterpretations of history and contemporary reality that are taking place here are no longer fringe academic projects; rather, they now dominate entire disciplines, shape public discourse and are both politically championed and institutionally supported. But how are we to face up to the force of this intellectual programme?

First, it is essential to distinguish between postcolonial scholarship that genuinely contributes to the study of colonial history on the one hand and scholarship that is aimed squarely at attacking Western thought and universal values on the other hand. In the former category, postcolonial

perspectives have indeed made valuable contributions. They have helped reframe the importance of colonialism, its lasting effects in the present and the power asymmetries that continue to underlie relationships between former colonies and colonial powers. Postcolonial approaches have played a major role in changing how we view the brutality of European imperialism – a perspective that only a few decades ago was far less critical. Nostalgic glorifications are now largely out of bounds, and the lingering effects of colonial crimes – from arbitrary borders and dependencies to psychological legacies – are broadly acknowledged. However, these elements are becoming less and less central to postcolonial research. Indeed, the focus has shifted from the analytical project of studying colonialism to the operational project of changing the world and its structures. A systematic critique must therefore take into account at least five key elements.

1. Lack of Scholarly Rigour

The first line of critique concerns the claim that postcolonial theories and concepts are by nature scholarly approaches. In reality, methodologically and empirically robust work is the exception rather than the rule in this field, which tends to be dominated by texts that belong more to the realm of practical philosophy, political theory or outright activism. “Scholarly” work often consists mainly of coining and promoting terminology or sociological concepts such as “hybridity”, “subalternity” and “epistemic violence”. While this may be legitimate and occasionally illuminating, it is also an old strategy for boosting the legitimacy of ideologies and even religious belief systems. For similar reasons, Marxism-Leninism once called itself “scientific socialism”.

Despite this, the notion that postcolonial theory is inherently scientific has largely taken hold – just as critics of postcolonialism are increasingly often accused of lacking scholarly credibility themselves. Postcolonial apologists often respond to criticism by claiming that their opponents have not read the key texts, lack expertise or dismiss serious concepts based on a gut feeling, prejudice or vague insinuations. Unfortunately, there is some truth in this. Criticism of postcolonialism is also something of a trend – one that fits comfortably within the current conservative *zeitgeist*. Many critiques lean more on opinion than on substance, with few people outside expert circles taking the time to grapple with the dense writings of Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty or Gayatri Spivak.

However, it is also true that criticism is growing louder because these foundational texts are now being read more closely – and are increasingly often being called into question. In the German-speaking world, we now also find well-informed critical engagement with specific aspects of postcolonial theory. Scholars such as Ingo Elbe – who has written on postcolonial anti-semitism – and Monika Albrecht – who analyses the reception of postcolonial approaches – have laid a solid foundation for challenging the claim that these theories are genuinely scientific. Dismissing such criticism as “unscientific” because it does not argue from within the system does not hold up, especially not for a theoretical framework that sets out to question established knowledge systems and perceptions of reality.

Postcolonial theorists also frequently argue that there is no such thing as “postcolonialism” in the singular – that is, that there is no unified theory or research programme. While this is technically true, it is also a distraction. It is correct that the family of postcolonial approaches addresses a wide range of different phenomena, structures and processes. However, it is equally true that these approaches share a set of core assumptions and convictions: Reality is said to reflect power structures, perceptions are said to be susceptible to deconstruction, changing language is said to change reality and everything is claimed

to be “structural” in nature – and therefore scientific by default. Inherited from French deconstructionism, these assumptions tie the various strands together – even those that do not deal directly with colonialism. Thus, the claim that “there is no such thing as postcolonialism” is a fairly transparent attempt to deflect criticism.

Ottoman conquests, Arab slave trading and Soviet imperialism are largely ignored.

Finally, postcolonial theorists also regularly accuse their critics of engaging in revanchist identity politics and of attempting to engineer a shift to the right or an illiberal backlash. There is some truth to this, as well. Indeed, recent moves by the Trump administration targeting US universities and postcolonial theorists have undermined the credibility of serious critique, thereby turning some of these theorists into perceived martyrs for academic and intellectual freedom. Left-wing identity politics is being fought with right-wing identity politics.

2. Hostility to the West

As a leftist project of world transformation, postcolonialism must also be understood as an intellectual revolt against everything associated with the West (or against that which is perceived as such). Newer strands of the discipline in particular show little interest in analysing colonialism as a global, trans-historical phenomenon and instead focus almost exclusively on European colonialism over the past few centuries. Ottoman conquests, Arab slave trading, Soviet imperialism and other non-Western forms of domination are largely ignored or downplayed. A central reference point remains Edward Said’s 1978 postcolonial classic “Orientalism”, which argued that the West needed the Orient as a negative mirror to define itself. While Said rightly exposed racist and exoticizing portrayals of the “Orient”, his thesis that non-Western



Focus on European colonialism: While postcolonial thinkers – justifiably and sometimes fruitfully – deal with the imperial history of the West, other actors and phenomena are left out. The picture shows the Congo Conference in Berlin in 1884/1885. Photo: © Ann Ronan Picture Library, Photo12, Imago.

people are fundamentally “different” also arrived at a time when the failure of real-world socialism was becoming increasingly awkward for the Left – and when the revolution in Iran briefly fuelled misplaced hopes. Since then, the notion of Western “coloniality” – and the idea that Western societies are intrinsically and incurably racist – has often replaced capitalism as the go-to explanation for the world’s problems.

The end of the Cold War and the 9/11 terrorist attacks accelerated this shift. The open or covert approval of the attacks by certain Western intellectuals helped crystallise what critics of postcolonialism such as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit call “anti-Westernism”. This hostility to the West found further traction after 2000. For example, the failure of Western-led democratisation efforts and the rise of global crises lent support to postcolonial scepticism towards the West. Sociologist Vivek Chibber views this

fixation on “Western guilt” as a reduction of postcolonialism to a cliché-ridden anti-Enlightenment programme.

The reference to “Jewish voices” within the postcolonial camp does not absolve it of the charge of antisemitism.

3. Antisemitism

Third, postcolonial approaches must be criticised for providing an academic framework for antisemitic ideas and activism. Literary critic Adam Kirsch has shown in his book on settler colonialism how concepts that were originally developed to analyse colonialism in the US and Australia are now being mechanically applied to Israel. Since the centuries-old colonisation

of North America and Australia cannot realistically be reversed, Kirsch argues, the abolition of Israel becomes the only remaining case in which postcolonial theory can be enacted in practice.

Those who advocate this programme reject the accusation that it has anything to do with anti-semitism. Further, they claim that criticism of Israel's existence is legitimate, that Israel plays only a minor role in postcolonial theory and that many Jewish scholars also support postcolonial approaches. Here again, there is some truth to these statements – but much is misleading or simply false. It certainly remains a matter of debate whether antisemitism is a structural feature of postcolonial theory or merely a symptom of this theory's anti-Western worldview. For writer Yascha Mounk, the two are increasingly indistinguishable. In intersectional postcolonial

discourse, Israel – and therefore Jews – are lumped in with the West and therefore must be opposed. In Germany, at least, there is still broad consensus that denying Israel's right to exist is antisemitic.

The reference to “Jewish voices” within the postcolonial camp also does not absolve it of the charge of antisemitism; rather, this reference is more a sign of postcolonialism's dominance in both Western academia and cultural institutions than of genuine Jewish support. Where “Indigenous perspectives” are otherwise central to postcolonial thought, Jews appear to be the exception. Instead, this role is more often claimed by Israel's self-declared “Indigenous” enemies. For Islamists such as Hamas – and many other opponents of the Jewish state – postcolonial language and its vocabulary of defamation (“genocide”,



Turning his back on the West: Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov called for a “post-Western” world order in Munich in 2017 – with postcolonial thinkers often serving him and like-minded actors as useful idiots. Photo: © Alexander Shcherbak, TASS, Imago.

“apartheid”, “colonial state”) offer both political ammunition and an ideological blueprint. On the very day of the massacre of 7 October 2023, the BDS boycott movement celebrated the attack as a response by “Indigenous Palestinians” to the ethnic cleansing by “apartheid Israel and the colonialist West”.

4. Exploitation by Autocrats and Radicals

This brings us to the fourth point: Postcolonial thinkers often unwittingly serve as useful idiots for those who oppose human rights, democracy, freedom – and Israel and the West in general. The West’s own self-critical intellectuals have become increasingly important allies to its geopolitical opponents. As early as in February 2017, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov called for a “post-Western world order” at the Munich Security Conference and has since pursued alliances with like-minded actors. Russian ultranationalist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin draws on decolonial rhetoric, as do Hindu nationalists, Chinese power strategists and Iran’s mullahs. Across the globe, postcolonial arguments are used to justify authoritarian, reactionary and ethnonationalist policies.

**In what were once called
“developing countries”,
postcolonial terminology
is seen as intellectual
navel-gazing.**

Islamists were among the first to recognise this potential. For over a century, they have promoted Islam (as opposed to the West) as the solution to the world’s problems. Their fight against democracy, human rights and secularism – as well as against women, ethnic minorities, queer people and religious dissenters – is often framed as an “Indigenous Muslim perspective”. The reach and resonance of this narrative can now be observed not only on social media, but increasingly often also on the

streets of German cities. In 2024, the macho Islamists of the Caliphate Movement marched through Essen and Hamburg, brandishing slogans about “Western and colonial oppression” echoing fragments of postcolonial rhetoric and promoting antidemocratic, antisemitic and anti-Western ideology. This and similar examples clearly show how authoritarian and radical actors are becoming increasingly fluent in the vocabulary of postcolonialism. This shift should have prompted a wave of critical self-reflection among scholars in the field. Thus far, however, there has been little sign of that happening. Postcolonial thought continues to operate on the basic premise that the “Global South” must be liberated from the West as the sole source of oppression.

5. No Help for the South

This is one reason why postcolonial perspectives offer little benefit to the South. While the postcolonial deconstruction of “development” as a Eurocentric concept may have been intellectually stimulating, it has done nothing to improve the lot of those living in what were once called “developing countries”. Postcolonial terminology remains largely unknown in these regions – or is seen as an exercise in intellectual navel-gazing by Western or Westernised elites. Postcolonial activism becomes completely meaningless for the people concerned when it descends into symbolic gestures. In the US and Australia, for instance, cultural institutions and universities have adopted the practice of issuing ritualised statements that recognise Indigenous land rights. It goes without saying that this has no practical impact whatsoever on the communities in question.

Countries such as India, Malaysia and Indonesia emerged from poverty not as a result of postcolonial theory, but through hard work, structured trade relations and the benefits of globalisation. If you ask people on the streets of Cairo, Kinshasa or Karachi, the response is clear: They want more trade and investment, not more lecturing and interference. The fact that postcolonial ideas have nevertheless become mainstream

in many parts of the world has more to do with their usefulness to local elites than with their relevance to people's day-to-day lives. The post-colonial obsession with all things "Indigenous" and the rejection of Western involvement have become convenient tools for non-Western elites to distract from their own failings. In some African countries, postcolonial rhetoric is also being used to justify the growing influence of neocolonial powers, such as Russia and China.

Postcolonial thinkers are sawing off the very branch they are sitting on.

What Comes after Postcolonialism?

If all claims about the world are viewed purely as power-based speaker positions, then the idea of objective truth disappears. Global governance systems, international institutions and even international law are then dismissed as constructs of a colonial, Western system of oppression. The human rights and international law principles underpinning these systems are no longer seen as universally valid, but rather only as "Eurocentric" perspectives that are specific to a certain time and context. The real-world consequences of this shift in thinking are already visible: Human rights standards are being eroded, global institutions and legal frameworks are being undermined and democratic principles are being called into question. If this trend continues, the postcolonial world will be a world driven by hard interests and power politics – a world very different from the one its advocates imagine. Postcolonial thinkers are – perhaps unknowingly – sawing off the very branch they are sitting on, the platform from which they promote their ideas.

All the more reason why critical and clear-headed engagement with postcolonialism is so important. There is nothing wrong with thinking about power and guilt. Indeed, it is vital to reflect on the consequences of declining

Western influence and the erosion of Western institutions. However, it is counterproductive to lump everything together. At a time when some governments and political actors in the West are lashing out against postcolonialism and are discrediting legitimate justice debates, constructive alternatives must be offered – from both left and right – to protect a rules-based order. This is a challenge facing academia, civil society and politics alike.

In academia, the bridges between postcolonial theorists and their critics have largely collapsed. However, a growing body of serious literature now offers a constructive critique of the blind spots and weaknesses in postcolonial knowledge production. This work deserves support and further development, especially when it comes to antisemitism, the legitimisation of authoritarian mindsets and the rejection of universal human rights. To ignore this criticism is unacceptable. But critics of postcolonialism must also become more capable of engaging in discourse. It is not possible to fight leftist activism, political agendas and outright nonsense by replicating these issues from the right.

Public understanding of the scale and significance of the postcolonial shift remains limited. Much as in many areas of academia, the spheres of the art world, media and public debate too often fall for postcolonialism's simulation of scholarly rigour and pseudo-complexity. There is still little critical awareness that this way of thinking now pervades universities, cultural institutions, political parties and NGOs, not to mention the UN General Assembly, Islamist rallies and May Day demonstrations. Some of what is currently labelled "postcolonial" may one day be seen as part of a broader social transformation. However, the scandal surrounding Documenta Fifteen has shown just how vigilant societies must be when hatred and contempt are disguised as progressive indigeneity.

The most important answers to postcolonial challenges will likely have to come from the political sphere. Domestically, the issues at stake are funding and cultural policy as well as

appointments to advisory boards and professorships in addition to political rhetoric and party platforms. In terms of foreign policy, the growing criticism of the West calls for a renewed commitment to Western alliances and institutional cooperation – despite the difficulties in dealing with the Trump administration, or precisely because of them. At the same time, there is a need to revitalise and strengthen global and regional cooperation mechanisms. Postcolonial thinking will not solve the conflicts in the Middle East or in Ukraine, nor will it deliver global prosperity, gender equality or climate solutions. What is needed are global alliances, reliable rules-based systems and smart diplomacy.

The change of government in Germany offers an opportunity for a reset. The previous government too often adopted postcolonial redefinitions and assumptions without reflection, thereby alienating international partners with ideologically driven lectures. There is now a chance to leave behind this mix of ideology, activism and semantic confusion – and to help shape a post-postcolonial world order.

– translated from German –

Trade with Africa

New Old Dependencies?



Photo: © Chris Troch, Dreamstime, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Supporters of neocolonial theories argue that the economic challenges facing African states can be explained by continued dependency on Western countries. However, this view overlooks several important realities.

Over the past decades, the United States and the European Union have granted African states extensive tariff reductions and exemptions even though qualitative product standards can sometimes pose trade barriers. Many African countries themselves maintain high barriers to imports and exports.

Since gaining independence, African countries have taken starkly differing economic policy paths, and their development has likewise varied, which underscores the importance of internal factors in determining prosperity.

Africa's trade is no longer dominated by Europe and the US as it was a few decades ago. Asian countries – first and foremost China – have become major trading partners for many African nations.

The implementation of the planned African Continental Free Trade Area holds significant potential not only for intra-African trade, but also for cooperation with the EU.



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In recent decades, researchers have repeatedly sought to understand why sub-Saharan Africa consistently ranks at the bottom in global assessments of socio-economic progress. While Jeffrey Sachs argues in his book “The End of Poverty” that a “big push” of knowledge and financial support could overcome the lack of progress,¹ for example, Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo takes the opposite view, contending that by absolving governments of responsibility and reducing them to mere recipients, large-scale aid to African countries does more to hinder economic growth on the continent than to help it.² Between these two positions are numerous other development economists who point to causes rooted in elites, in state institutions and in social structures. Postcolonial theorists, meanwhile, maintain that “the history of colonialism did not end with formal independence”³ and that continuing dependencies on former colonial powers – or more broadly, “the West” – continue to obstruct growth and prosperity on the African continent. Particularly common in this context is the claim that the exploitation of Africa’s natural resources is largely to blame for the continent’s lack of economic development.⁴ According to this view, neocolonial⁵ structures favour Western countries in global trade while exploiting African nations: Africa exports raw materials such as oil and minerals but has to import manufactured goods, thereby creating a trade imbalance that impedes industrialisation and development. Trade barriers are also said to further exclude Africa from meaningful participation in global trade.

African Countries Mainly Export Unprocessed Raw Materials

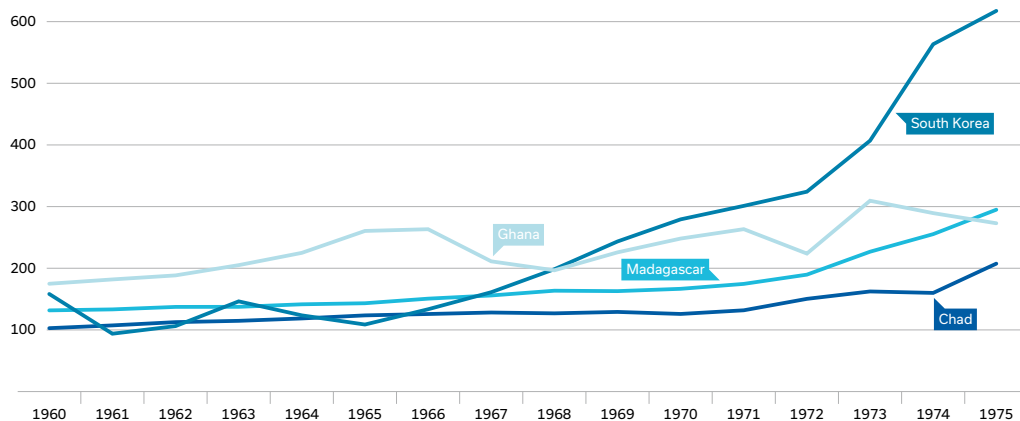
It is true that African states continue to export primarily unprocessed raw materials, such as

crude oil and natural gas, minerals and metals – a pattern that has remained unchanged over the past 30 years. Depending on global market prices, unprocessed raw materials account for between 60 and 89 per cent of Africa’s total export volume,⁶ which is also highly unevenly distributed across the continent. From 2016 to 2020, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Angola and Morocco exported more than the rest of the continent combined.⁷

It is also true that the export of unprocessed raw materials has numerous disadvantages for countries: The extraction of fuels and the mining of ores and metals are capital-intensive activities but create only a limited number of jobs. Profits are often not reinvested locally and are instead transferred abroad. Only a small group of people benefit, while the domestic industrial sector does not. In addition, commodity prices are volatile and subject to significant exchange rate fluctuations, thereby making countries vulnerable to external shocks and complicating national budget planning.

While many Asian countries began pursuing systematic diversification of their production and state-supported export strategies as early as in the 1960s, most African countries failed to invest the profits from raw material exports into the development of their industrial sectors. In 1965, for example, per capita income in Ghana, Chad and Madagascar was higher than in South Korea.⁸ However, South Korea’s strategic focus on export-oriented production for the global market and on the diversification of its product range played a key role in the country’s subsequent economic rise. At the same time, South Korea was also able to create large numbers of jobs by shifting from low-value to high-value goods. In general, the gross domestic

Fig. 1: Per Capita Economic Output in Selected Countries from 1960 to 1975 in US Dollars



Source: own illustration based on World Bank Group 2025, n.8.

product in Asia grew more than twice as fast as in the industrialised countries from the early 1970s onwards. In contrast to Africa – where growth was largely driven by raw material exports – economic growth in Asia was rooted in structural transformation.⁹ This point is also illustrated by the remarkable success of the Chinese economy, which was likewise based on export-led growth.

In 2023, more than 90 per cent of African exports entered the EU tariff-free.

Various studies have shown that countries with a more diversified production and export structure tend to have higher per capita income and that those producing and exporting more highly processed goods generally experience faster growth.¹⁰ By contrast, Africa has undergone deindustrialisation¹¹ since the 1970s in two key respects: Firstly, the share of jobs in the manufacturing sector has declined, and secondly, export structures have become less diversified and the produced goods less complex.¹²

Therefore, since gaining independence, many African countries have failed to implement export strategies aimed at diversification and at

the development of a domestic manufacturing sector. The fact that African countries primarily export raw materials is a result of these countries' export models and strategies rather than of neocolonial structures.

Not a Victim of High Trade Barriers

The European Union is Africa's most important trading partner: Indeed, around 26 per cent of all imported goods come from Europe, followed by China at 15 per cent. These figures are mirrored in Africa's export destinations, with 26 per cent of exports going to the European Union and 15 per cent to China. For Europe and China, however, trade with Africa is of minor significance, accounting for just 2.2 per cent and 3.9 per cent of their total trade, respectively. These figures clearly illustrate that there is an imbalance in trade relations between Africa and those regions – an imbalance that is unfavourable to Africa. Moreover, although Africa is home to around one-fifth of the global population, it generates only about 4.8 per cent of global GDP,¹³ thereby placing the economic output of the entire continent somewhere between that of Japan and India.¹⁴

By adopting targeted measures, industrialised countries have sought to improve African businesses' access to international markets in recent years. Trade agreements between the EU and

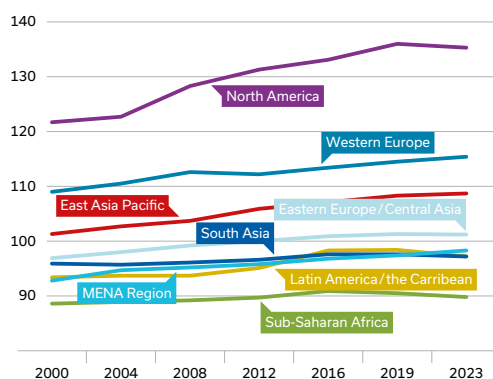
Africa grant better market access to 19 African countries, while a further 35 countries benefit from the Everything but Arms initiative, which provides duty- and quota-free access to the EU. In 2023, more than 90 per cent of African exports entered the EU tariff-free.¹⁵ This situation ensures that African exporters have transparent and straightforward access. The US government's African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) – in place since 2000 – allows for the duty- and quota-free import of various products into the United States with the aim of strengthening trade and economic relations between sub-Saharan Africa and the US. Under President Trump, the future of AGOA has become uncertain; but so far, many countries and industries have benefited from its favourable import conditions, including the textile and automotive sectors.¹⁶ Contrary to the widespread assumption that the EU and other industrialised countries shield their markets from Africa through high trade barriers, both the Everything but Arms initiative and AGOA suggest the opposite.

African countries maintain significant domestic barriers to imports and exports.

However, strict European quality standards often constitute non-tariff trade barriers, particularly in the agricultural sector. Trade relations under the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) also have to be assessed in more nuanced terms. Emerging economies and middle-income countries benefit from improved access to EU markets, but in return, they are also required to open up their own markets. The conditions set out in these agreements are in some cases controversial¹⁷, with critics arguing that the trade reforms could harm rather than support growth markets in Africa. A final assessment of these structural reforms cannot be made here. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the EPAs also aim to

reduce tariffs and quota restrictions, thereby facilitating market access for African goods.

Fig. 2: Economic Diversification by World Region from 2000 to 2023 (EDI Score)



The Global Economic Diversification Index (EDI) measures diversification in terms of trade and production, sources of income and the diversification of government revenues. Source: Prasad, Aathira et al. 2025: *Global Economic Diversification Index 2025*, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, p. 30, in: <https://ogy.de/17rj> [7 Jun 2025].

Various statistics – such as the International Trade Barrier Index¹⁸ and the World Bank's Services Trade Restrictions Index¹⁹ – measure the extent to which a country's trade policy facilitates or restricts international trade. These indices reveal that African countries themselves maintain significant domestic barriers to imports and exports, both tariff and non-tariff. Non-tariff barriers include lengthy and complex customs procedures, difficulties in obtaining import and export permits and the certification of hygiene standards. Regulations concerning duty drawbacks, customs exemptions and VAT refunds are often opaque, time-consuming and cumbersome, thereby frequently resulting in considerable delays. According to the UN trade organisation UNCTAD, technical requirements, inefficient customs procedures and other import- and export-related issues reduce African trade three times more than the tariffs themselves.²⁰

Economic Development of Former African Colonies Is Not Uniform

It is problematic in many respects to claim²¹ – as is often the case among proponents of neo-colonial theory²² – that Africa is merely an “object that has fallen victim to foreign subjects”. Indeed, lumping all 54 African states together as a single “Africa” fails to recognise the highly diverse trajectories these countries have followed since gaining independence. Africa expert Nic Cheeseman points out that this trend towards divergence is likely to intensify in the coming years in terms of both economic and democratic development across the continent.²³

The following examples illustrate this point vividly. When Kenya and Tanzania gained independence from Britain in the 1960s, they had similar per capita incomes, which were largely based on agricultural production. While Tanzania nationalised businesses and introduced

a socialist state model under President Julius Nyerere, Kenya has pursued liberal economic policies²⁴ and market-based structures since independence. Kenya’s per capita income has increased from 793 to 1,800 US dollars since 1960, while in Tanzania, it has increased from 834 to 1,092 US dollars. As a result, Kenyans are now 70 per cent wealthier than their Tanzanian neighbours.

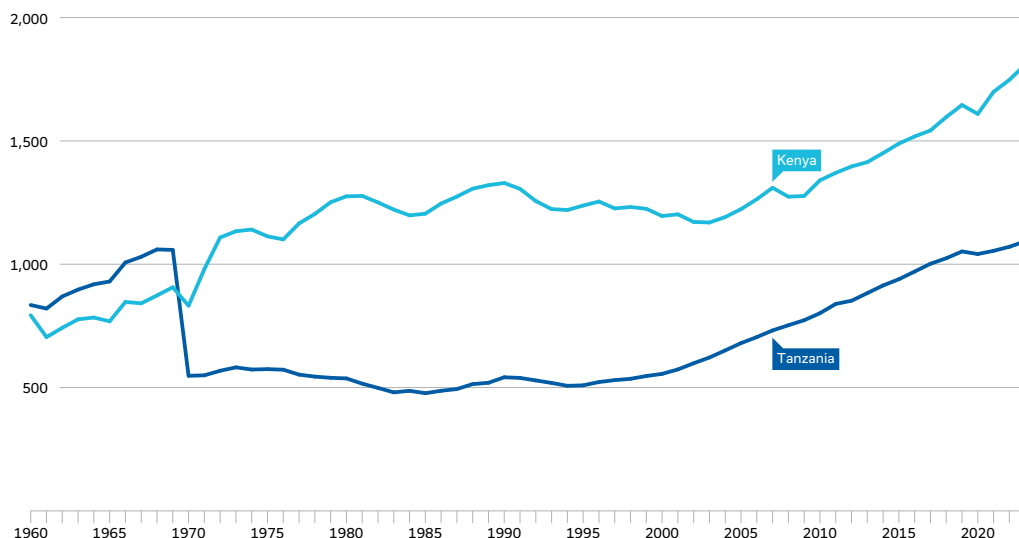
Zimbabwe’s economy deteriorated under President Robert Mugabe.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts that Kenya will become the strongest economy in East Africa in 2025. According to the IMF, Kenya has weathered the negative economic effects of the pandemic better than other countries in the region. Thus far, Ethiopia



No diversification in sight: Many African countries continue to rely on raw material exports such as minerals and metals. Photo: © Harold Bonacquist, Dreamstime, Imago.

Fig. 3: Development of Per Capita Income in Kenya and Tanzania from 1960 to 2023 in US Dollars



Source: own illustration based on World Bank Group 2025: GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$) – Kenya, Tanzania, 5 Jun 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/I598> [8 Jun 2025].

has dominated the East African economy. However, after the Ethiopian government liberalised the exchange rate of its national currency – the birr – against the US dollar last year and thereby abandoned its previously controlled exchange rate, the birr lost significant value.²⁵ By contrast, Kenya's strong performance is attributed to its open market economy and its diversified sources of income as well as to the stability of the Kenyan shilling.²⁶

A comparison between Botswana and Zimbabwe also highlights the crucial role political decisions play in economic development. Botswana gained independence in 1966, Zimbabwe fourteen years later. At the time of its independence, Botswana was poorer than its neighbour Zimbabwe. However, Zimbabwe did not experience an economic upturn after gaining independence in 1980. Although Zimbabwe has abundant natural resources and was once known as the breadbasket of Africa, the country's economy deteriorated severely under President Robert Mugabe: Skilled professionals emigrated, while private investors were deterred by incoherent policies, widespread corruption, land reforms and expropriations.²⁷

Madagascar is one of the few countries in the world that has become poorer over the past 50 years.

A small island state far from its main trading partners, Mauritius gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1968. Since then, its per capita income has increased more than seven-fold – from 1,522 to 11,319 US dollars – such that today, it has the highest per capita income in Africa. In the early 1970s, the country began a major economic transformation, moving away from sugar production – then its dominant source of income – and towards a diversified export model. Its successful development is widely attributed to a combination of political stability, strong state institutions, low levels of corruption, a sound regulatory environment and a clear focus on international trade. This development has included a liberal investment climate and generous fiscal incentives for businesses.²⁸ In addition, Mauritius has the lowest tariff rates in the world.²⁹ Madagascar – Mauritius's larger neighbour – by contrast took a different path

after gaining independence in 1960. It turned inward, nationalised private foreign companies and expropriated privately owned farmland. While Madagascar was considered a middle-income country³⁰ at the time of its independence, it is now one of the few countries in the world that has become poorer over the past 50 years.

A blanket portrayal of Africa as an exploited continent fails to recognise the highly diverse development paths taken by individual countries. Such a one-dimensional perspective also ignores the fact that the continent's independent states possess agency of their own – a capacity for self-determination that some have used to the benefit of their local population. Reducing the lack of economic and social development solely to ongoing global unequal power relations does not do justice to the varied experiences of African countries. It also downplays the success of those nations that – despite often-difficult circumstances – have risen to become emerging economies or – in the case of Mauritius – a middle-income country.

To argue otherwise would imply that African countries have failed in recent decades to take

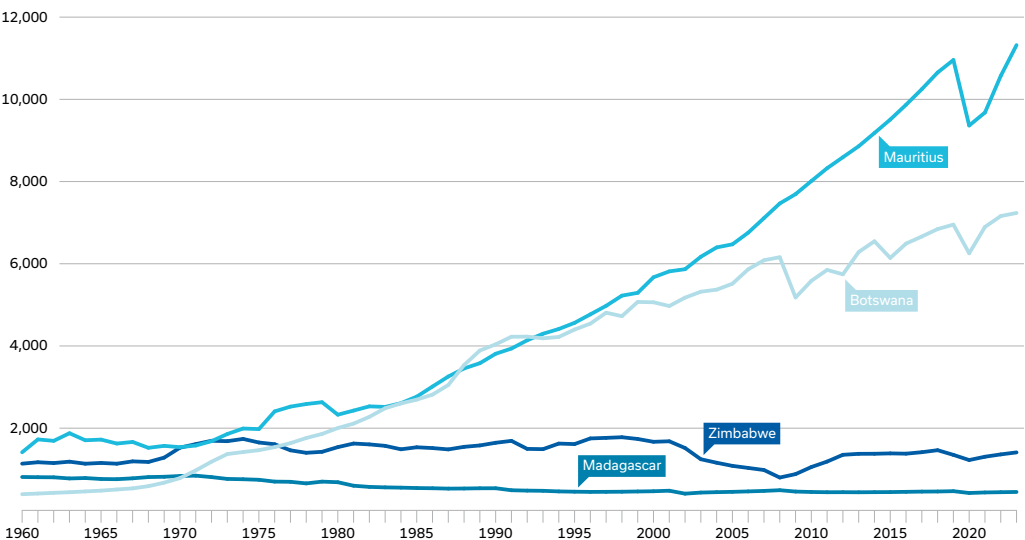
political responsibility for their own economic development and are merely passive objects dependent on outside powers. “However, this kind of paternalism reproduces a colonial view of Africa as a dependent continent that denies Africans any influence over their own capacity for self-determination.”³¹ The fact that Liberia and Ethiopia – the only countries on the continent that were never colonised – have experienced strikingly similar economic and political trajectories also runs counter to neo-colonial theories of persistent dependency.

Africa's International Relations Are No Longer Shaped Solely by the West

While Africa does not yet play a major role in global trade, African countries nonetheless maintain international economic relations and make their own decisions about whom they trade with. Global trade has long ceased to be dominated by Western industrialised nations; instead, Asian countries – most notably China – have also become major economic powers. This shift has also affected Africa's trade relations. From 2014 to 2023, Europe's share of African trade averaged around 27 per cent – down from



Fig. 4: Development of Per Capita Income in Selected African Countries from 1960 to 2023 in US Dollars



Source: own illustration based on World Bank Group 2025: GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$) – Botswana, Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, 5 Jun 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/lsb6> [8 Jun 2025].



Positive example: Mauritius has pursued a liberal commercial policy and active export diversification since the 1970s, thereby rising to middle income status. Photo: © Vale T, Panthermedia, Imago.

48 per cent in the 1990s. Over the same period, Africa's trade with China and India grew from approximately 9 to 23 per cent.³²

It is troubling that the term “neocolonialism” is used to fuel anti-Western resentment.

Like Western industrialised countries, China mainly imports raw materials, minerals and metals from Africa and exports manufactured goods in return – such as machinery and electronics. In addition, China has invested heavily in infrastructure development across the continent over the past decade, often securing preferential access to strategic raw materials in return. Unlike the EU, however, China has thus far made little effort to promote manufacturing industries or to create employment opportunities within Africa.

While the Chinese model has indeed helped many African countries to quickly develop urgently needed infrastructure, the extent to which this model has contributed to sustainable economic growth remains questionable.

Against this backdrop, it is troubling that the term “neocolonialism” is sometimes used to fuel anti-Western resentment by suggesting that the oppressed nations of Africa must be liberated from Western exploitation: After all, the global and diverse trade relations of African countries clearly show that their trade is no longer limited to Europe.

The Political Accountability of African Leaders Must Not Be Overlooked

Neocolonial theories attribute the African continent's relative economic underperformance to external factors. Not only is this view overly simplistic and dismissive of the heterogeneity

of African states, but it also ignores internal dynamics and overlooks the fact that “a lack of good governance and questionable policy choices have significantly contributed to many postcolonial problems”, as the examples of Zimbabwe and Madagascar clearly show.³³ Indeed, as Nigerian scholar Ejike Raphael Nnamdi aptly writes, “[m]ore than 60 years after independence, one wonders why colonialism would still be seen as a scapegoat for our inactivity. Does it mean apart from colonialism and its appurtenances, as exogenous factors, no endogenous factors can be responsible for our predicament? Who takes the blame for the endogenous factors when they are present?”³⁴

In this context, it is also important to acknowledge that trade partnerships and agreements with international companies do not necessarily mean that the population at large receives the maximum benefit. This is particularly true of resource agreements, which are often negotiated behind closed doors – a practice that fosters corruption. While the exact revenue generated by such agreements remains unknown, it is clear that governments are missing out on tax income that could otherwise be used to support socio-economic development. Poor governance, corruption and mismanagement also deter potential investors as these issues can increase business costs by up to 40 per cent compared with other developing and emerging regions.³⁵

Africa’s Agency Is Growing

There is no doubt that colonisation has had negative effects on the social, societal and economic development of African countries – effects that are still felt today. It is therefore right and important that countries such as France, the United Kingdom and Germany acknowledge their colonial past, be willing to confront this history and apologise for colonial injustices. Nonetheless, African countries are no longer economically dependent on their former colonial powers and now make independent decisions concerning their trading partners. At the same time, international trade relations have contributed to growing prosperity in many African countries in

recent decades – provided that these countries have used their post-independence agency to improve overall economic well-being.

Major efforts are required to make the African free trade area a reality.

As trade relations have expanded, so too has the presence of African countries in multilateral forums, such as in the United Nations, in the G20 and in BRICS, whose members now include South Africa, Ethiopia and Egypt. South Africa – which is holding the G20 presidency this year – places particular emphasis on the continent’s economic development. Issues such as industrialisation, the processing of raw materials, trade partnerships and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can be expected to feature prominently in high-level meetings between heads of state and government throughout the year.³⁶ Given the current geopolitical situation and the reduced engagement of the United States with Africa, the European Union has a real opportunity to demonstrate that it is a long-term and reliable partner for the continent – and that it supports these key priorities.

African Countries and Europe Both Stand to Benefit from Stronger Trade Relations

African countries maintain trade and economic ties with a wide range of partners, increasingly also with countries beyond Europe and the Americas. Europe would do well not to overlook this trend: From a geostrategic perspective, trade relations with Africa are becoming ever more important, not least because the future of the transatlantic partnership remains uncertain. The African Union is pressing ahead with the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which offers enormous potential, including for European and German businesses. In 40 years’ time, there will be more people living in Africa than in India and China

combined.³⁷ With the middle class on the continent growing, there will also be a growing demand for foreign goods. At the same time, AfCFTA creates opportunities for foreign companies to set up local production and to benefit from the young and expanding workforce. However, major efforts are still required in order to make the free trade area a reality – and this too should be addressed openly and honestly.

There often seems to be a lack of political will on the part of African governments to dismantle trade barriers and to open up markets. However, stronger intra-African trade could offer the continent enormous benefits: At present, intra-African trade accounts for just 16 per cent of Africa's total trade volume – far below the levels of intra-European trade (67 per cent) and intra-Asian trade (60 per cent). Nevertheless, almost half of the goods traded within Africa are manufactured products, which indicates that once implemented, the African Continental Free Trade Area has significant potential to drive industrialisation across the continent.³⁸ The uncertainty on US tariffs for African exporters as well as an unclear future of the AGOA should be a clarion call for African states to finally prioritise the expansion of internal trade. Even before the free trade area is fully realised, the EU can support the continent in implementing reforms that reduce both tariff and non-tariff trade barriers. This is also in the EU's own interest since only then can European companies make their operations in Africa more profitable.

However, it is not only Africa's export markets that are set to grow in importance: Indeed, the continent's natural resources will do so as well. Many of the strategic minerals and metals needed worldwide for the energy transition and for low-carbon technologies can be found in Africa. There is global interest in securing access to these raw materials, in some cases under questionable conditions. China has often secured access to critical raw materials whose value far exceeds that of the completed infrastructure projects provided in return. A “minerals for security” agreement³⁹ between the United States and the Democratic Republic of

the Congo grants US companies preferential access to mineral deposits, while in return, the US pledges military support to help end the ongoing violent conflict in the country. In West Africa, with financial support from the US, the American company Ivanhoe Atlantic plans to expand the Liberty Corridor between Guinea and Liberia – a project that will not only improve the infrastructure of both countries,⁴⁰ but also significantly facilitate the transport of iron ore from the company's mines in the region.

African countries are in a strategic position and can use the global interest in their raw materials to their own advantage – something that further undermines the neocolonial view of Africa as a passive actor. Europe, too, should secure its seat at the negotiating table, define its economic interests more clearly than in the past and emphasise that both sides stand to benefit from strengthened trade relations.

– translated from German –

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Postcolonialism and Whatever Else Proves Useful

Historical Narratives as Part of the Digital Strategies of Authoritarian States



Photo: © Jonathan Wong, SCMP, Newscom, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Authoritarian states such as China and Russia draw on historical narratives to strengthen patriotism and national unity at home – and to discredit Western states internationally.

Domestically, China emphasises the country's unique historical path and the Communist Party's historic achievements, while Russia invokes the Second World War as the "Great Patriotic War" to similar effect.

From a foreign policy perspective, postcolonial narratives have proved a useful tool: Western global

engagement is broadly discredited as neocolonialism, while Russia and China present themselves as countries without a colonial past.

Social media and AI-based applications serve as central instruments for Russia and China to spread these narratives both domestically and worldwide. Artificial intelligence is used not only to remove unwanted historical interpretations from domestic digital spaces, but also to generate and disseminate content aligned with the relevant narratives.



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Authoritarian states and allied actors increasingly use the digital sphere to associate Western global engagement with colonial history. The aim is to place such engagement at the centre of media and societal criticism, thereby discrediting values-driven foreign policy. This is evident in disputes within UN organisations, where countries such as China and Russia – often with the support of younger member states still grappling with their own colonial legacies – attempt to block resolutions and reports that cast their own actions in a negative light.¹

This situation is also reflected in orchestrated campaigns against NATO or against individual countries that support Ukraine or Israel. Governments and politicians who call for close coordination among NATO members, stronger military support for Ukraine or solidarity with Ukraine or Israel are then accused of “old colonial patterns of behaviour” or of acting from an “Old World” perspective that ignores the interests of emerging states and actors.²

By emphasising or reinterpreting colonial histories, authoritarian actors connect with global narratives of inequality and historical guilt that particularly resonate with the countries of the so-called Global South. Through social media – which is the main source of information in many societies – they deliberately disseminate content that links colonial experiences to current geopolitical interests. In this way, the digital space becomes a stage for politically charged historical narratives.

Postcolonial narratives are also gaining importance in Western societies – especially in debates about inequality, racism and remembrance culture. The trend towards digital information consumption further intensifies

the spread and entrenchment of selected narratives. It becomes particularly problematic when algorithmically promoted content or AI-based language models uncritically reproduce biased interpretations, which then achieve wide reach via social media, opinion pieces and videos. In this way, certain viewpoints can quickly take hold and profoundly shape public debate.

While postcolonial perspectives in Western societies mainly form part of broader societal discourse, in other contexts, these perspectives are deliberately used as tools of state information policy. There, they serve to influence historical and geopolitical interpretations, to expand influence in the Global South and to establish alternative narratives to those of the West.

Great Power Mentality and the Emergence of Grand Narratives

With Xi Jinping's ascent as Communist Party leader in 2012 and as President of the People's Republic of China in 2013 came the rhetorical accompaniment of a promise of Chinese resurgence. The “Chinese Dream” and the pledge to “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” introduced a multi-faceted justification of the “new era”, with the proclaimed goal being to return China to the centre stage of the world.³ The “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” not only highlights China's economic rise but also asserts the ambition to restore its historical role as a “leading civilisational power” interrupted in the past by foreign domination. This line of thinking permeates both the foreign and domestic rhetoric of the Communist Party – and it increasingly shapes China's presence on the international stage.

A similar rhetoric underpins Russian propaganda in support of Vladimir Putin's goal of controlling territories that once belonged to the former Russian Tsarist Empire, including parts of today's Ukraine and that – as the argument goes – are indispensable to the Russian realm and its cultural foundations.⁴ The aims of these grand narratives that look towards a better, greater future for their nations are to generate nationalist sentiment, to evoke national unity and especially to justify the legitimacy of the path chosen to achieve these goals – beyond political participation, and notably without criticism or the questioning of the official narrative.

Russia and China use digital platforms and AI to propagate their interpretations of history.

These “grand narratives” take hold in democratic societies through subsidiary narratives that partly blame their own political and economic elites for the supposed breakdown of the political order. These include the perceived financial burdens of EU membership and the loss of regulatory competence in EU member states, “excessive migration” as an alleged cause of the imbalance in many Western economies or the recent rise in crime and attacks that have had an unsettling effect on the societies in question.

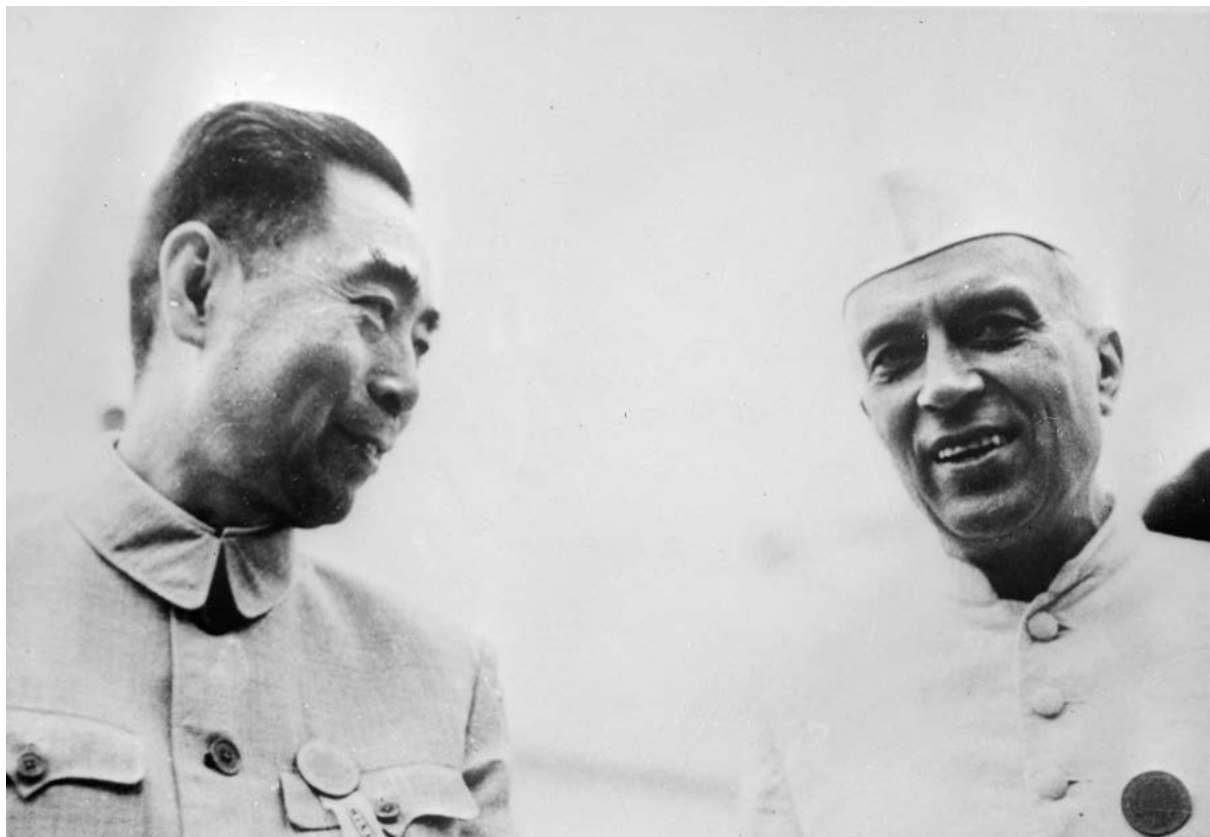
Postcolonialism, the Great Firewall and the Great Patriotic War

China and Russia are two examples in which state actors deliberately use digital platforms and AI to propagate their interpretations of history. Alternative explanations and perspectives are largely pushed aside and – if present at all – appear only on Western-accessible versions of the respective social media platforms (Tik Tok, for example, is a subsidiary of the Chinese company ByteDance), albeit without significant reach.

Control over historical narratives and the development of digital technologies play a central role here: Historical images are deliberately deployed in order to reinforce national unity internally and to establish one's own perspective as the foundation for international cooperation externally. In China, this is reflected in the emphasis on a newly awakened national pride born out of the technological advances of leading Chinese companies – especially when these accomplishments are linked to the message that China has finally overcome centuries of Western dominance. For example, the success of the Chinese open-source language model Deep Seek in January 2025 is frequently described as an epoch-making event – a “breakthrough of national destiny”.⁵

1. China: Control over Digital Memory

China is a prime example of the use of digital technologies and AI to steer and control historical narratives. Not only is the Internet in China strictly monitored, but the digital information space is a core element of state and Communist Party public relations. Here it is decided whether and how coherently a message can be conveyed both domestically and internationally. In recent years in particular, the history of the Chinese Empire and the distinct path of Chinese civilisation that this history represents have become cornerstones of propaganda work alongside the founding and achievements of the Communist Party since the 1920s. The use of historical data, achievements and elements that have been retrospectively interpreted as parts of China's success story – which also showcases China's goodwill and interaction with the global community (e.g. through the ancient Silk Road) – is cleverly linked to the political agenda of government bodies (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative). The “Spirit of Bandung” is repeatedly invoked in order to emphasise China's shared victimhood alongside other states under Western imperialism. In April 1955, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China – Zhou Enlai – was warmly received by African and Asian heads of state with his rhetoric of a “partnership for post-colonial dignity” at the Bandung Conference in



“Spirit of Bandung”: In 1955, representatives of Asian and African countries, many of which had only recently gained independence from European colonialism, gathered in Bandung, Indonesia. The picture shows Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai (left) with India’s Prime Minister Nehru. Photo: © United Archives, Imago.

Indonesia.⁶ Whether at BRICS summits or the annual China-Africa Forum, Chinese representatives still frequently address participants in the spirit of this “common destiny”.⁷

Chinese AI applications must guarantee compliance with “socialist core values”.

The “Great Firewall” that hermetically separates China’s Internet from the global network is regarded by Chinese regulators as a key tool of digital censorship. It blocks access to information that does not align with the Communist Party’s interpretations. AI-driven algorithms and machine learning are used to monitor, filter

and remove content in real time. These technologies specifically detect and delete “undesirable” historical narratives. One example is the censorship of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. In China, the term “Tiananmen” in connection with the 1989 events is heavily restricted, and much content related to the protests is promptly removed from the Internet. Algorithms identify and delete posts in order to prevent public discussion and remembrance of the massacre. AI-powered tools play a crucial role here in that they identify images, texts and even videos that address the topic on digital media and remove them.

However, in the hands of state propaganda, the toolkit goes far beyond censorship mechanisms. In 2017, the State Council unveiled a “New Generation AI Development Plan”, which



"Great Patriotic War": The victory of the Soviet Union in World War II is still the cornerstone of the Kremlin's historical narratives. The annual victory parade on 9 May is nowadays accompanied by extensive AI-generated propaganda in the digital space. Photo: © Anatoliy Medved, RIA Novosti, Imago.

set the foundations for China's AI leadership while also emphasising the need for a normative framework establishing ethical guidelines and legal rules, which was accompanied by a range of very specific legal requirements.⁸ As generative AI advanced, China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology issued national standards for it that covered technical, industry-specific and security requirements.⁹ In this regard, Chinese AI applications must guarantee compliance with "socialist core values". This also includes "important historical matters". One example is the aforementioned narrative of the "Great Chinese Renewal", which describes China's rise as a global superpower following centuries of humiliation by the West. Digital platforms and official media disseminate this

narrative, highlighting the successes of the Communist Party of China and emphasising the state's role in economic and social development. In response to the punitive tariffs announced by the US administration on "Liberation Day" against trading partners worldwide – which hit China particularly hard – China's foreign ministry released an AI-generated propaganda video in April 2025 designed to showcase the country's superiority.¹⁰

2. Russia: The Revival of the "Great Patriotic War"

In Russia, as well, the digital space is a tightly controlled tool used for the purpose of shaping and spreading historical narratives. Under Vladimir Putin, particular emphasis has been



placed on historical building blocks in order to bolster nationalism at home and to serve Russia's geopolitical goals. The narrative of the "Great Patriotic War" (i.e. the Second World War) is key to Russian identity politics.

In Russia, the topic of the Second World War is systematically instrumentalised in order to boost patriotism and highlight the Soviet Union's (and Russia's) role as victor and saviour of the world. The war is often presented as a heroic tale of sacrifice and triumph, with the Soviet leadership – in particular Joseph Stalin – glorified as a key figure. AI and machine learning are used on digital platforms to generate content that reinforces this official narrative. One concrete example is the annual celebration of "Victory Day" on 9 May, when Russia commemorates the Soviet Union's role in the Second World War. Social media and state-backed online media distribute images, videos and posts that underline the heroic depiction of Soviet soldiers and Stalin's rule. Artificial intelligence is employed in order to produce nostalgic images of victories and war heroes that emotionally charge memories of the war and emphasise resistance to the "fascist enemy".

Discursive dominance and technological primacy combine to form an influential tool of political control.

In addition to its use in celebrating Soviet heroism, AI is also used to suppress narratives that portray Russia and the Soviet Union in a negative light. Historical facts concerning Stalin's dictatorship and associated crimes against his own people (e.g. the Great Terror and the famines) are increasingly excluded from public discourse. AI algorithms on social media and news platforms such as VK (VKontakte), Yandex News and Odnoklassniki detect critical content and either reduce its visibility or delete it entirely.¹¹ Moreover, Russia attempts to rewrite the history of the Cold War and 20th-century

geopolitical conflicts in order to justify its current foreign policy from a Russian perspective. Artificial intelligence is used to generate content that portrays Western influence as a threat and Russian "resistance" as legitimate. Efforts are also made to shape the narrative so that Russia appears as a defender of its interests rather than as an aggressor, especially in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Regulatory and Response Options in the Digital Sphere

The use of AI and digital platforms to shape historical narratives in China and Russia reveals how two resources that can be used to exercise power – that is, discursive dominance and technological primacy – are combined to form an influential tool of political control. The increased interlinking of artificial intelligence and historical narrative formation raises complex questions about political influence, technical governance and international regulation – especially regarding the risks of selective memory and the digitally controlled interpretation of history.

A genuine decoupling is already occurring in the information space, driven in part by coexisting and practically irreconcilable concepts of sovereignty in the digital realm. China promotes its own concept of "digital sovereignty" – that is, the state's right to autonomously control, regulate and shape the Internet within its borders both technically and politically.¹² This model clearly differs from the Western liberal understanding of an open, global Internet, not least by deliberately restricting access to information in the digital space. In a world in which machines can generate and filter content, it is becoming increasingly difficult for more and more people to distinguish fact from fiction. The crucial question remains as to whether the increasingly widespread large language models of Chinese AI solutions are trained on datasets from around the world or whether – by way of digital separation – they will increasingly diverge from Western applications, thereby reinforcing entrenched opinions and interpretations. An

initial (provisional) indication arose from an analysis of the DeepSeek-R1 language model that focused on the use of propagandistic elements and on anti-American resentments in a cross-thematic study and that found that narratives differ across languages (i.e. Simplified Chinese, common in the PRC; Traditional Chinese, used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and English).¹³

AI-driven postcolonial narratives primarily aim to influence decision-makers in the short term.

In dealings with decision-makers in Moscow and Beijing – as well as regarding our own scope for action in shaping and regulating AI – the following points are especially important:

1. Although the “grand narratives” that are promoted by states do not necessarily take full hold in target societies, their presence on global digital platforms does intensify social polarisation. In light of this observation, Western states must strengthen their ability to contextualise such attempts at influencing the population and respond appropriately. This can be supported by boosting national capacities – for example, by expanding open-source access, by promoting independent research infrastructures and by improving coordination between administrative bodies and civil society on digital resilience. It is becoming clear that both analogue and digital spaces must be understood not only as arenas of exchange, but also as stages of strategic influence.
2. While there is much to suggest that AI-driven postcolonial narratives do resonate with some people, there remains room for action to limit the long-term impact of these narratives. Such discourses primarily aim to influence foreign decision-makers in the short term. Many of the arguments can often be traced back to misinformation, and they frequently seek to distract from other issues. However, the authoritarian nature of the actors themselves presents vulnerabilities that can be used to call into question the credibility of the very messages they seek to convey. This weakness should be addressed more coherently by governmental and scientific institutions, associations and NGOs across Europe. This process also requires long-term support for projects – including linguists who can track down narratives and who have the expertise to compile them into fact sheets and online databases.
3. China and Russia are highly active in creating alternative narratives, with storytelling having become a key tool for them to spread their messages. Both countries tend to defend their narratives in two ways: first, by adapting the language they use internationally via the employment of terms and concepts that at first glance appear to align with the liberal values shaping the international order, and second, through coercive measures that exert pressure on target countries in order to ensure that reporting that contradicts Russia’s and China’s perspectives is suppressed within their own (linguistic) information spaces. This combination of strategic adaptation and repressive action is not contradictory; rather, it is a deliberate two-pronged approach aimed at achieving international acceptability while at the same time maintaining control over the information space. Liberal democracies need to analyse the coexistence of these mechanisms more comprehensively.
4. On the European side, more efforts are needed to provide high-quality reporting in Chinese, Russian and other languages. Only in this way can contradictions be uncovered, can historical contexts be properly understood and provided, and can weaknesses that are linked to propagandistic agendas be revealed. Similar initiatives should also be undertaken in societies with limited access to independent media coverage, such as in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. We

should view these states and societies as partners, even if they are not “like-minded”. Crucially, combating the spread of false narratives depends on societies that find themselves today under authoritarian pressure and lacking independent sources of information.

5. China leverages its economic relations and other states’ financial liabilities, demanding loyalty and managing in recent years to secure a high level of support, especially from countries in Latin America and Africa, but increasingly also in the MENA region, in the Western Balkans and in the Western Pacific. China has made countries’ acceptance of its own interpretation of its “national interests” a central subject of every dialogue. This significantly affects the bilateral and multilateral behaviour of these countries and their political elites. Many are caught between economic dependence and preserving their political manoeuvring space. China expands its influence not only through investment, but also by activating postcolonial narratives. Concepts such as sovereignty, development and a multipolar order are deliberately contrasted with the history of Western dominance. The appeal of these narratives draws on historical experiences of foreign rule, exploitation and patronising development rhetoric, thereby granting China moral legitimacy in many regions that goes beyond mere interest-driven policy. In light of this complex dynamic, German and European actors must clearly be capable of engaging in discourse and must also acquire the relevant skills. Current dialogue initiatives offer valuable opportunities, such as regional studies (in China: “area studies”) and interdisciplinary competence-building concerning countries and regions. These efforts should be more strongly integrated into university curricula and the political sphere.

– translated from German –

- 1 Speech by Chinese UN Ambassador Geng Shuang on 17 Oct 2024 before the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly. In his address, he condemned the historical crimes committed by Western colonial powers, including the slave trade, resource plundering and human rights abuses. Emphasising that the legacies of colonialism continued to hinder the development of many countries, the ambassador called on the international community to eliminate these colonial burdens and to promote a fairer world order. Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN 2024: Remarks by Ambassador Geng Shuang at the UN General Assembly Fourth Committee General Debate on Decolonization Items, speech, 17 Oct 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/ymaa> [5 May 2025]. Another example is the statement issued by Ambassador Li Song during a panel discussion of the UN Human Rights Council on 29 Sep 2022 in which he described colonialism as the “historical sin” of Western countries and urged them both to critically reflect on their past and to take responsibility for the ongoing impact of colonialism. The ambassador stressed the need to respect the human rights paths of former colonies and criticised Western countries that present themselves as “defenders of human rights” while failing to properly address their own colonial histories. Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN Office at Geneva 2022: Statement by H.E. Ambassador LI Song at the Panel Discussion on the Negative Impact of the Legacies of Colonialism on the Enjoyment of Human Rights during the 51st Session of the Human Rights Council, speech, 29 Sep 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/l3dk> [5 May 2025].
- 2 On Russia see Fischer, Sabine 2023: Diplomacy in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, SWP Comment 2023/C 53, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 13 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/4xtg> [25 Jun 2025].
- 3 The position lost by the former empire due to the devastating consequences of the Opium Wars and decades of weakness – during which the Qing dynasty was forced to cede extensive territories to Western powers – is now being rhetorically reclaimed. See also Xi Jinping’s speech at the 19th National Party Congress: Jinping, Xi 2017: Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, speech, 18 Oct 2017, Xinhuanet, in: <https://ogy.de/89b8> [30 Jun 2025].
- 4 Naduvath, Jaibal 2025: The enduring allure of grand narratives in the digital age, Observer Research Foundation, 24 Feb 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/84a7> [5 May 2025].
- 5 Ottinger, Lili/Wang, Afra 2025: DeepSeek and Destiny: A National Vibe Shift. How an AI startup reignited the concept of national destiny (国运), ChinaTalk, 4 Mar 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/ua5k> [31 May 2025].

- 6 Kuo, Kaiser Y 2025: The Bandung Paradox: China's Anti-Colonial Legacy and Its Global Future, The Sinica Podcast, 24 Feb 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/1no4> [2 Jun 2025].
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Sprick, Daniel 2025: Aligning AI with China's Authoritarian Value System, The Diplomat, 3 Feb 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/3lp9> [31 May 2025].
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 The video was posted and uploaded by China's foreign ministry on all relevant channels, including YouTube: The Washington Examiner 2025: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs posts video titled "Never Kneel Down!", 29 Apr 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/nmm3> [5 May 2025].
- 11 Freedom House documents how Russian platforms systematically remove content or limit its visibility. According to a report by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, VKontakte has massively increased content removals. For example, a total of 94,942 videos, 1,569 community accounts and 787 personal accounts have been blocked. A leak of Yandex's source code also reveals that the search algorithm filters certain critical terms in order to avoid negative portrayals of President Putin. Freedom House 2024: Russia, in: <https://ogy.de/hovs> [3 Jun 2025]; Knockel, Jeffrey et al. 2023: Not OK on VK: An Analysis of In-Platform Censorship on Russia's VKontakte, Citizen Lab, 26 Jul 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/soxj> [11 Jun 2025]. This report illustrates the censorship mechanisms on VKontakte, showing – *inter alia* – that content deemed "extremist" – including critical historical narratives – is removed or has its visibility restricted by automated systems. The investigation demonstrated that VKontakte increasingly blocks content that does not align with the official historical narrative.
- 12 See also Creemers, Rogier 2020: China's Approach to Cyber Sovereignty, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 25 Nov 2020, in: <https://ogy.de/ercj> [11 Jun 2025].
- 13 Taiwan AI Labs 2025: Analysis of LLM Bias (Chinese Propaganda & Anti-US Sentiment) in DeepSeek-R1 vs. ChatGPT o3-mini-high, May 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/e3go> [3 Jun 2025].

Russia as a Colonial Power in the Caucasus

A History of Oppression

Photo: © K. M. Krause, Snapshot, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Although Russia has pursued an imperial policy in its Eurasian neighbourhood since the early 19th century, the country is not perceived as a colonial power in much of postcolonial discourse – partly due to the link between Marxist and postcolonial theory.

The South Caucasus is a telling example of how Russian and Soviet policy towards what are today Russia's smaller neighbouring states has exhibited structural features similar to those of Western European colonial powers: political control, economic exploitation, cultural assimilation.

While Tsarist Russia openly referred to its colonial policy as such, the Soviet Union sought to obscure this policy behind terms such as "solidarity" and "progress".

In contrast to the Western discourse, Russia is clearly referred to as a colonial power in the South Caucasus – most strongly in Georgia. In Armenia, Russia was long viewed as a protective power, but this perception is increasingly being called into question.

The perspective from the South Caucasus deserves greater attention in Western postcolonial debate as it can help challenge Russia's self-image as the spearhead of anti-colonialism.



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Russia as a Blind Spot in Western Debate on Colonialism

It was an international conference hosted by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Nairobi in 2022 that prompted Georgian journalist and Coda Story¹ founder Natalia Antelava to reflect on the question as to why we tend not to view Russia as a colonial power. Bringing together editors and journalists from Africa and Eastern Europe, the conference focused on the observation that Russia's narrative – positioning itself as the Soviet Union's heir and continuing to oppose the “neo-colonial West” – resonates widely in Africa. In a thoughtful essay, Antelava describes growing up in Soviet-era schools in Georgia, immersed in the myth of the Soviet Union as an anti-colonial champion of the oppressed – a perspective that was later reinforced during her studies in the United States. At American universities, colonialism was taught as a form of rule practised by Western powers, primarily in far-off overseas territories. Notably, Russia was absent from this picture.²

The postcolonial debate likewise focuses mainly on power structures, subjugation and cultural dominance by Western empires in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. There is rarely any discussion of the fact that Tsarist Russia – and later, the Soviet Union – acted as a colonial power in the Caucasus and Central Asia following patterns similar to those of France, the Netherlands and the British Empire.³ There are several reasons for this. For seventy years, the Soviet Union positioned itself as a

Marxist-Leninist counterweight to the capitalist West and claimed to support national anti-capitalist liberation movements in countries ranging from Angola, Algeria and Eritrea to Cuba, Colombia, Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, assisting them in their struggle against “Western colonialism”. This resulted in an ideological affinity that still exists today between Marxism and postcolonial theory. The debate shaped by scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah and Samir Amin draws on (neo-)Marxist frameworks in its critique of Western colonialism. A key reference is Lenin's writing on imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, in which he describes how after World War I, the capitalist West sought to preserve global inequalities through (neo)colonial practices. This worldview leaves no room for acknowledging that the Soviet Union itself acted as an imperial power in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Soviet Union is also argued to have been ethnically federal in structure, to have granted extensive sovereignty to the individual Soviet republics and therefore to not be capable of being characterised as a colonial power. What this view overlooks, however, is that the federal structure was purely nominal and that sovereignty existed only on paper. Finally, Russia's – or the Soviet Union's – role as a colonial power remains a blind spot because the concept of decolonisation is shaped by Western European scholars, as is the current postcolonial discourse, in which voices from the “Global South” and East remain underrepresented. This situation results in what David Moore calls a “double silence”, in which Western postcolonial studies overlook the post-Soviet states and

post-Soviet academic traditions rarely incorporate postcolonial approaches.⁴

The blind spots in Western postcolonial discourse provide the Putin regime with a significant advantage. For some time now, the Russian propaganda machine has been using social media to target especially left-leaning groups in Europe and immigrant communities in the United States with the same recurring anti-colonial message – one that seeks to revive and claim the Soviet Union’s narrative legacy for Moscow. In this way, Russia has been able to position itself as a global voice of anti-colonialism.⁵ However, as in other areas, this positioning is based on historical distortion and selective manipulation. In reality, Russia’s own colonial history – as is particularly evident in the Caucasus – stretches back to the early 19th century and forms a continuum that has been virtually uninterrupted to the present day.

Russian colonial rule in the Caucasus was characterised by control, exploitation and repression.

Annexation and Subjugation – the Conquest of the Caucasus

The colonisation of the Caucasus by the Russian Tsarist Empire has to be viewed within the broader context of 19th-century European imperialism. Although colonisation unfolded differently in the North and South Caucasus, it reveals clear parallels with the methods employed by Western colonial powers, such as the British Empire and France.⁶ One key date here is 1801, when the Russian Empire under Tsar Alexander I annexed Kartli-Kakheti (present-day eastern Georgia) just a few years after guaranteeing the Georgian kingdom territorial integrity and military protection under the Treaty of Georgievsk. This treaty is comparable with protection agreements such as those signed by the German Empire with its African

colonies. A second crucial period in Russia’s colonial history in the Caucasus spans from 1817 to 1864, when the Tsarist Empire waged a series of long, bitter and brutal wars in an effort to subjugate the North Caucasus (in particular what is now Chechnya and Dagestan).⁷ This region was home to numerous ethnically and culturally diverse mountain peoples who over the course of nearly half a century of Russian repression repeatedly united in anti-colonial resistance⁸ – most effectively under Imam Shamil (1797 to 1871), who sought to defend local autonomy against Russian invasion forces.

Russian colonial rule in the Caucasus was characterised by political control, economic exploitation and cultural repression. Local resistance was met with widespread violence, including mass deportations, forced resettlements and the destruction of local communities. One particularly stark example is the attempted eradication of the Circassians, nearly 97 per cent of whom were killed during the wars (between one and 1.5 million victims).⁹

Education and culture – particularly through systematic Russification – were key instruments of the colonisation of the Caucasus. Local languages such as Georgian and Armenian were marginalised, while Russian-language schools were established on a broad scale. The history of the Tbilisi Opera House – founded in 1851 – offers a clear example of the colonial methods employed by the Russian Empire, as reflected in the words of Mikhail Vorontsov, the Russian Viceroy of the South Caucasus: “I look at the Russian theatre in Tbilisi not as a means of an entertainment and fun, but as an institution that has the significant goals: familiarizing the local people with the Russian language, Russian habits and their gradual merging with Russia.”¹⁰

Assimilation – or Russification – was a tool used by Russia to consolidate its power. Baku-born author Olga Grjasnowa vividly illustrates this in her novel “The Lost Son”, in which the besieged Caucasian resistance leader Shamil is forced to surrender his son Jamalludin to Russian troops as a hostage during negotiations. Contrary to

the agreements, Jamalludin is taken to Saint Petersburg, where the Tsar personally takes him under his wing in an effort to “assimilate” him – with the intention of later sending him back to the Caucasus as a loyal Russian governor. At the Tsarist elite schools, Jamalludin learns Russian, French, English and German – but forgets his native Avar language. After several years, however, Shamil succeeds in securing his son’s release.¹¹

Unlike the Russian Empire, Soviet Russia sought to conceal its colonial policy in the region.

The conquest and Russification of the Caucasus were accompanied by the establishment of a colonial administration that was systematically planned and implemented following the annexation of Kartli-Kakheti. In 1828, diplomat and playwright Alexander Griboyedov submitted a proposal to the Tsarist government calling for “many thousands of peasants from central Russia to be resettled in the Caucasus in order to create large colonies there”.¹² With a legal system adapted to the norms of Tsarist Russia, the Caucasus remained under Russian military administration until 1917 – and the imperial court made no effort to conceal the colonial nature of this rule. In 1896, the Tsarist Ministry of the Interior in Saint Petersburg established a Department of Resettlement that between 1907 and 1917 published a journal entitled “Voprosy kolonizatsii” (“Problems of Colonisation”).¹³

Colonisation beneath the Communist Cloak – the Soviet Caucasus

While the Russian Empire not only practised colonisation, but also openly referred to its occupation of the Caucasus as such, Soviet Russia sought to conceal its colonial policy in the region – even though these policies were in many respects a direct continuation of Tsarist colonialism.¹⁴ This situation is because Vladimir

Putin presents the 21st-century Russian Federation as the heir to the Soviet Union while simultaneously denying any “colonial intentions”.

Soviet rhetoric promoted equality, brotherhood and socialist internationalism. Soviet leaders championed peoples’ right to self-determination, and in the 1920s, the policy of *korenizatsiya* (“indigenisation”) did in fact support the languages and cultures of non-Russian populations. However, this policy was abandoned in the 1930s and was replaced – in the Caucasus as in other Soviet republics – with the establishment of a highly centralised administration. As in the 19th century, the aim was to assimilate and Russify these regions. The fact that the Soviet Union’s approach in the Caucasus resembled the colonial strategies of European powers can be illustrated via three examples:

1. The forced collectivisation of agriculture with the creation of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* – especially in Armenia and Georgia – led to the alienation and uprooting of rural populations and destroyed traditional ways of life, with effects being comparable to those of land policies pursued by Western European colonial powers. In Azerbaijan, colonial patterns of economic exploitation were particularly evident in the early Soviet period. The profits from the republic’s immense oil wealth – which in the 1940s accounted for over 70 per cent of the Soviet Union’s total oil production – were managed in Moscow without any influence from Azerbaijani officials in Baku.¹⁵ Similar patterns could be observed in the British appropriation of Indian cotton or in the exploitation of vast rubber reserves in the Congo by the Belgian colonial regime.
2. From the 1930s onwards, the Soviet Union pursued a policy of Russification in its republics. In the Caucasus, Russian became the official language of administration, education and public life, while the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced in many Turkic-speaking regions of the North Caucasus. Proficiency in Russian became a prerequisite for social





“Familiarizing the local people with the Russian language, Russian habits and their gradual merging with Russia”: This is how a Russian Viceroy of the South Caucasus defined the purpose of the Tbilisi Opera House, established in 1851. Photo: © Blossfeldia, Dreamstime, Imago.

mobility. In this respect, Soviet authorities in the Caucasus acted much like the British colonial power in India or the French in Algeria and West Africa, where local languages were suppressed and English or French was imposed as the *lingua franca*.

Soviet rhetoric promoted equality and independence.

3. The Soviet repression of local identities and national movements in the Caucasus also followed colonial patterns. After the August Uprising of 1924, hundreds of Georgian

nationalists were imprisoned or executed. Azerbaijanis who opposed Soviet rule and advocated for a stronger Azerbaijani identity were either arrested or disappeared. In the North Caucasus, Soviet authorities sought to annihilate entire peoples, though they ultimately failed to do so: During Stalin’s purges in 1937/1938, an estimated 14,000 Chechens were arrested or murdered, while during “Operation Lentil” in the winter of 1944, some 500,000 Chechens and Ingush were deported to Central Asia, around 300,000 of whom died *en route*.¹⁶

Although Soviet rhetoric promoted equality and independence for decades, the actual conditions in the “Caucasian periphery” were marked

by Russian dominance, coercion, exploitation and destruction. Once the rhetoric is stripped of its cloak of supposed solidarity and socialist progress, what remains is a bare “manifestation of colonialism”¹⁷ that is comparable with that of the British, French and Dutch colonial powers.

In Armenia, dependence has become Russia’s neocolonial instrument.

Russian Neocolonialism in the Caucasus

The threat and use of force, the establishment of new dependencies – or the restoration of lost ones – and a “divide-and-rule” strategy became key principles of Russian foreign policy both in the late Soviet period and after the Union’s collapse. Bartłomiej Krzysztan describes this as a “neo-colonial policy of maintaining influence by perpetuating conflict and instability”.¹⁸ In the Caucasus, examples include the violent suppression of demonstrations in Baku and Tbilisi (1989/1990), support for the Abkhaz side during the Georgian civil war (1991 to 1993), the two Chechen wars (1994 to 1996 and 1999



Dependency as an instrument of power: Armenia and Russia signed an agreement in 2024 on the stationing of Russian border troops at Yerevan airport. Such troops can also be found on Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Iran. Photo: © Aram Nersesyan, SNA, Imago.

to 2009) and the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 – all of which demonstrate how colonial patterns persist. Conversely, in the early 1990s, the first President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Dzhokhar Dudayev, used anti-colonial rhetoric to call for national liberation – echoing Frantz Fanon’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s descriptions of Algerian resistance to French colonial rule.¹⁹

In Armenia, it is dependence that has become Russia’s neocolonial instrument: through the establishment of a Russian military base in Gyumri in northern Armenia, the deployment of Russian border troops at Yerevan Airport and along the borders with Turkey and Iran and the appropriation or control of large parts of Armenia’s economy (including gas pipelines, mines and the railway network). The neocolonial mindset behind this strategy became evident in 2004, when during a visit to Yerevan, Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov referred to Armenia as “Russia’s outpost in the South Caucasus”.²⁰

Russian neocolonialism in the Caucasus is a complex phenomenon.

Russia’s simultaneous arming of both Armenia and Azerbaijan for over two decades and its recognition of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – in violation of international law – reveal deliberate divide-and-rule tactics designed to preserve leverage in the region. Russian “integration projects” such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation are best understood as instruments of domination.

Russian neocolonialism in the Caucasus is a complex phenomenon that ranges from political power structures to entrenched mindsets. According to Thornike Gordadze, Russia’s relationship with Chechnya over the past 20 years is reminiscent of its 19th-century colonial policy. Alongside a strong military presence, the region is ruled by co-opted elites.²¹ What Tsar

Alexander I failed to achieve with Shamil’s son, Putin has managed with Ramzan Kadyrov. Tigran Amiryan in turn describes the colonial mindset of many “relocated Russians” who moved to Yerevan or Tbilisi in 2022/2023 following the start of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. Having brought their Russian comfort zone with them, they view themselves as enlightening or refining the local communities and cultures. They largely refuse to engage in any dialogue about Russia’s colonial policies or about the “recolonisation” of cultures in the South Caucasus.²²

The Discourses of Colonisation in the South Caucasus

In contrast to the “double silence” described above, the South Caucasus has seen the emergence of discourses that explicitly address Russia’s role as a colonial power. The Russian-Soviet colonial oppression is most actively discussed in Georgia.²³ Russia, it is argued, saw itself as pursuing a *mission civilisatrice* – much like Western powers – despite in practice bringing violence, discrimination and Russification.²⁴ One striking example of this is the Museum of Soviet Occupation, which opened in Tbilisi in 2006 and is dedicated to both the history of Georgia’s national liberation movement and the victims of Soviet repression.²⁵ Postcolonial discourse in Georgia is not confined to academic circles: Indeed, it is also voiced in connection with contemporary political struggles. The slogan “Down with Russian colonialism” featured prominently in the protests against the so-called foreign agent law (aka the “Russian law”) in 2024 and also later in demonstrations opposing the *de facto* suspension of Georgia’s EU accession process. Moreover, the fact that Russia has occupied around 20 per cent of Georgian territory since 2008 has contributed to a strong awareness among Georgians of living in a postcolonial state – not in a purely temporal sense, but as a space in which colonial structures have been not overcome, but rather superimposed, displaced and reactivated. The Georgian perspective is not limited to the country’s own experience: In fact, Russia’s colonial past is also understood in

a regional context across the Caucasus. Georgia is the only country in the world that has officially recognised the genocide of the Circassians, having done so in 2011.²⁶

The reassessment of Russian-Armenian relations is still in its early stages in Armenia.

In Armenia, by contrast, the dominant narrative long portrayed Russia and the Soviet Union more as a “protective power” than as a colonial one. This perception rests largely on the idea of Russia as the “saviour” of the Armenian nation during the genocide in 1914/1915. According to this view, not only do Armenians owe their survival to Russia, but without Russia’s protection, Armenia’s very existence would still be under threat today, with the country being left defenceless against Turkey and Azerbaijan. Only more recently – especially since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 – have more voices begun to speak out, naming Soviet-era colonial structures as the root cause of current conflict.²⁷ These voices describe how post-Soviet Russian-Armenian relations display many features of postcolonial dependency.²⁸ In Armenia, too, there has been a shift in how the events of the 19th century are interpreted. A new history textbook for year eight pupils sparked diplomatic tensions with Moscow in 2024 because it described Armenia’s 1829 incorporation into the Russian Empire as an “annexation” – the first time this term has been used officially. Russia’s foreign ministry responded by publishing excerpts from the relevant chapter online, stamping them as “fake”. The use of the term “annexation”, the ministry said, was “provocative”, claiming instead that Armenia’s incorporation into the empire had had “enormous significance for the future restoration of Armenian statehood”. Just days later, Armenia’s Ministry of Education announced that the relevant section of the textbook had been revised, with the word “annexation” having been removed.²⁹ Current academic and public

discourse in Armenia shows that the reassessment of Russian-Armenian relations – especially with regard to their colonial character – is still very much in its early stages.

Conclusion: Gaining a Strategic Edge in the Discourse over Neocolonial Russia

On 15 to 16 February 2024, the ruling party “United Russia” hosted an international forum in Moscow entitled “For the Freedom of Nations”, inviting nearly 400 delegates from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Europe. In his opening speech, Vladimir Putin declared, “Our country has done a great deal to dismantle the colonial system and support national liberation movements”.³⁰ Just one week earlier, an article published in the Armenian journal *Hraparak* claimed that the West’s main objective was to gain “neocolonial control over the Caucasus and Central Asia”.³¹

These quotations clearly demonstrate that Russian propaganda seeks to sow discord among the ranks of its adversary through lies, disinformation and manipulation. That adversary is Europe in geographic terms – and liberal democracies in systematic terms. Although the methods are traditional, they have been vastly amplified by social media. However, the EU is struggling to respond in a way that is timely and – more importantly – effective. Projects such as EUvsDisinfo are well-intentioned, but they fall short.

If the new German government is seeking to change course politically, then a shift in discourse is also needed when it comes to postcolonialism, especially in areas in which academic debate influences political decision-making. A strategy paper by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on realigning German development cooperation calls for greater awareness of the notion that elements of postcolonial theory may “play into the hands of systemic rivals seeking to delegitimise the rules-based world order and foster anti-Western sentiment”. This is also an appeal to take a closer look at Russia in an effort to historically designate the nation as a colonial

power and to expose its current neocolonial policies. We have much to learn from the debates in the South Caucasus. The view from Armenia or Georgia – countries with centuries of direct experience as Russia’s neighbours – is clearer, sharper and literally unobstructed. It is in the West’s interest to listen. Together, we should strive to counter Russian narratives more effectively in the postcolonialism debate and to gain a strategic edge in the discourse.

– translated from German –

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- 2 Antelava, Natalia 2024: When sameness becomes a colonial tool of oppression, Coda Media, 14 Jun 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/4nf3> [25 Apr 2025]. Antelava argues for a broader definition of colonialism, challenging the narrow focus that dominates current discourse. Referring to Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko, she highlights “sameness” as a key tool of colonial oppression – one used differently by Western empires and Russia. While the Western message to subjugated peoples was “You are incapable of being like us”, the Russian doctrine was “You are not allowed to be different from us”. However, “[w]hile there were differences in the way the Russians and the Europeans constructed their empires, the result was the same: violence, redrawn borders, repression of cultures and languages, and annihilation of entire communities”.
- 3 For a comprehensive discussion of this point, see Göksel, Oğuzhan / Huseynova, Natavan 2024: The Other Colonial Empire: Reconsidering Soviet Rule in the Caucasus and Central Asia through a Post-Colonial Lens, *Florya Chronicles of Political Economy* 10/2, 25 Oct 2024, pp. 211–247, in: <https://ogy.de/yui5> [25 Apr 2025]. The text offers an overview of (de)colonisation discourses and their blind spots in both the West and Russia.
- 4 Moore, David Chioni 2001: Is the Post- in Post-colonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique, *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 116: 1, pp. 111–128, in: <https://ogy.de/Ofxs> [25 Apr 2025].
- 5 Russian propaganda also serves here as a script for other authoritarian states, such as Azerbaijan, which last year sought to appropriate (de)colonial narratives in its dispute with France and to use COP29 as a global stage for this purpose. See e.g. Petersen, Svenja 2025: From Nagorno-Karabakh to Mayotte: Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy Pivot into the Anti-Colonial Arena, *Caucasus Watch*, 9 Feb 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/t9lk> [25 Apr 2025].
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- 11 Grjasnowa, Olga 2020: *Der verlorene Sohn*, Berlin; described in similar terms by Lapierre, Alexandra 2008: *Tout l'honneur des hommes: Dans la Russie des tsars, le destin du fils de l'iman de Tchétchénie*, Paris.
- 12 Cited in Etkind, Alexander 2011: *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge, p. 110.
- 13 Yaylovan, Diana / Darchinova, Lala 2022: *Imperial Legacies in the South Caucasus: Armenian-Azerbaijani Relations, 1918–1920*, Journal for Conflict Transformation, 1 Dec 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/nsns> [25 Apr 2025].
- 14 “Historically, the Russian state has always acted on the principle of ‘the strong subdue the weak’. The difference was that if Tsarist Russia did so openly, Soviet Russia would deliberately disguise itself in order to deceive the world community and avoid responsibility for what it had done.” Janeldize, Otar 2020: *International Recognition of the Democratic Republic of Georgia*, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, p. 6, in: <https://ogy.de/e5i1> [25 Apr 2025].
- 15 Described extensively in Sicotte, Jonathan H. 2017: *Baku: Violence, Identity, and Oil, 1905–1927*, 14 Nov 2017, in: <https://ogy.de/88dw> [5 Jun 2025].
- 16 Drolet-Duguay, Mathieu 2023: *Russian Colonialism in the North Caucasus: The Chechen Case*, 1 May 2023, pp. 39–42, in: <https://ogy.de/7qxx> [5 Jun 2025].
- 17 Göksel / Huseynova 2024, n. 3, p. 231.
- 18 Krzysztan, Bartłomiej 2022: *Divided memory, post-colonialism and trauma in the South Caucasus*, Memory Studies 15: 6, 30 Nov 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/599r> [25 Apr 2025].
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United Against the West

Postcolonial Narratives as a Basis for Authoritarian Cooperation in and with Latin America

Photo: © David de la Paz, Xinhua, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Postcolonial and anti-capitalist thought patterns have been closely intertwined in Latin America for decades, forming the ideological foundation of many left-wing politicians' rhetoric – with Havana as the epicentre.

This discourse is marked on the global stage by stark black-and-white thinking: The West is cast as the aggressor, while the "Global South" – authoritarian regimes included – is seen as the victim.

Defending and glorifying left-wing authoritarian governments in Latin America is a core element of this rhetoric and of the organisations that promote it, foremost among them being the Foro de São Paulo,

founded in 1990 by Fidel Castro and Lula da Silva. Criticism of dictatorships is rejected, claiming it violates the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

While the Latin American Left rails against Western "imperialism", it far too often turns a blind eye to the imperial ambitions of its international allies, such as Russia and China.

Power exerted through culture and public discourse is a key factor in the success of the Latin American Left. Centre-right actors must engage with this discourse and defend terms such as democracy and universal human rights against identity-driven distortions.



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On 19 January 2025, the Cuban dictatorship’s online outlet Cubadebate published a commentary in its “Anti-Capitalist Tribune” series entitled “Against Fascism and Imperialism: Politics, Tactics and Organisation”.¹ In the piece, Manu Pineda – a Spanish Member of the European Parliament for the “United Left” – describes the autocratic regimes in Cuba and Venezuela as “key pillars” of an “anti-hegemonic project” and calls on all left-wing and “progressive” movements in Latin America to rally behind them “without fear or complexes” in order to challenge the “political and economic dominance of the West”. Any “lukewarm” attitude towards Cuba and Venezuela, he argues, undermines efforts to build a “fairer, multipolar world freed from the yoke of imperialism”. Pineda’s commentary has been widely disseminated – not only by the Venezuelan regime-controlled regional broadcaster TELESUR, but also by the Lebanese TV channel Al Mayadeen – which is linked to Hezbollah – and by the Syrian news agency Shafaqna.

Pineda’s article exemplifies three core dynamics within the Latin American Left. First, it reflects a common view of international relations in which the West assumes the role of villain, with the means used to oppose it being considered secondary. Second, the article shows the transnational character of this discourse and its global resonance, with a Spanish left-wing politician writing on a Cuban website in support of leftist authoritarian regimes in Latin America and being welcomed not only in Latin America itself, but also in Islamist circles. Third, Havana once again acts as the main axis of articulation – a near-sacred point of longing since the 1959 Cuban Revolution for generations of Latin American and international leftists, and a self-declared bastion of the anti-colonial struggle.

Many of the narratives espoused by Latin America’s authoritarian Left originate directly from Havana’s ideological kitchen or are delivered there as raw ingredients, refined with a romantic revolutionary aroma and then consumed and assimilated across the continent. This applies especially to discourses that fit into postcolonial thought patterns. Susanne Schröter defines these discourses as follows: “Postcolonial theory is essentially based on a binary worldview in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are clearly assigned. In simplified terms, it casts the ‘West’ as the perpetrator and the so-called Global South as the victim.”² She also notes that many postcolonial theorists operate within the tradition of the Soviet Union’s original strategy of linking anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism as part of a communist logic. The Soviet Union, she argues, succeeded in portraying itself as an anti-colonial power on the world stage despite acting as a colonial force itself.

“Hyenas and Jackals”

Post-revolutionary Cuba quickly became a Latin American laboratory for this fusion of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism. One prime example is a speech by then industry minister and central bank president of the revolutionary government Ernesto “Che” Guevara that was given in uniform at the United Nations in 1964: “Our eyes, now free, are opening to new horizons. They are free to see what they could not when we were colonial slaves – that ‘Western civilisation’ hides behind its flashy façade a picture full of hyenas and jackals.”³

From this, Guevara – who was killed in 1967 while fighting as a guerrilla in Bolivia – derived his call for the “liberation of Latin America from the colonial yoke”. Fidel Castro had addressed

the same global forum four years previously: “It must be made clear that the government of the United States is not an advocate of freedom, but an instrument of exploitation and oppression against the peoples of the world.”⁴

Since its inception in 1959, Cuba’s dictatorship has presented itself as a victim and claimed this status on behalf of the “peoples of the world”. In line with its portrayal of Western civilisation as a collection of “hyenas and jackals”, the Castro regime quickly entered into a symbiotic alliance with the Soviet Union, which was in truth the free world’s main global adversary.

Despite being a *de facto* vassal of the Soviet Union, Cuba played a major role in shaping the so-called Non-Aligned Movement.

In his book “Fue Cuba”⁵, Argentine diplomat and journalist Juan B. Yofre shows that coordination between the Cuban revolutionary government and the Soviet Union began almost immediately after the revolutionaries had taken power. Cuba’s role as a “subordinate”⁶ of the Soviet Union rather than as a true partner became especially clear during the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the decision to station Soviet medium-range missiles and troops on the island was made in Moscow before Cuban authorities had even been informed.⁷

Despite being a *de facto* vassal of the Soviet Union, Cuba played a major role in shaping the so-called Non-Aligned Movement – which had been founded in Belgrade in 1961 – and used the movement to raise its global profile with lofty claims of being a “model”⁸ for the world. Cuban guerrilla fighters and their carefully staged media appearances fed the revolutionary longings of generations of Latin American and European leftists. This strategy proved highly effective – and continues to do so

to this day. Despite a one-party dictatorship that has resulted in tens of thousands of victims⁹ as well as in countless human rights violations and in the total absence of the rule of law, free press and legal opposition for over 65 years, Havana still manages to shape the discourse of many on the Latin American Left in a striking way. The moral whitewashing of the Cuban dictatorship – or at least its relativisation – is also culturally rooted in the West. One example is the 2004 Hollywood movie “The Motorcycle Diaries”, which is based on Ernesto Guevara’s autobiography.

This ongoing publicity success of Cuba’s dictatorship is all the more surprising given that the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991 had left Cuba in a dire position. Lacking any significant natural resources, the island was plunged into a deep crisis both economically and ideologically.

At that moment, Fidel Castro turned to his Latin American friends and admirers – chief among them being Brazilian trade unionist and current President Luiz Inácio (“Lula”) da Silva. From 2 to 4 July 1990, the two invited 48 leftist revolutionary parties and in some cases militant organisations from 14 countries to São Paulo. Their aim was to develop “unified and unanimous proposals for the people’s anti-imperialist struggle”.¹⁰ With that, the Foro de São Paulo (FSP) was born. Within a single decade, FSP-affiliated forces had come to power through democratic elections in much of the region. Taking office in 1999, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez became its key figurehead and financial backer. The ageing Fidel Castro became a kind of ideological father figure to Chávez, whose oil revenues helped stabilise the Cuban regime.

The Crown Jewel of Cuba’s Soft Power

Drawing its identity from unwavering support for Havana’s regime, the Foro de São Paulo quickly became the crown jewel of Cuba’s soft power. Through it, Cuba managed not only to maintain the legitimacy of its narrative of the international and anti-colonial class struggle

against its systemic enemy, the US, but also to embed this narrative at the highest levels of power across Latin America. The FSP's 2017 political manifesto – adopted in Managua (Nicaragua) and titled *Consenso de Nuestra*

*América*¹¹ – not only is dedicated to “the example of revolutionary resolve set by Comandante Fidel Castro”, but also calls for “the liberation of our peoples from imperialist and capitalist domination” and from “colonial rule”.



"That 'Western civilisation' hides behind its flashy façade a picture full of hyenas and jackals": Ernesto "Che" Guevara at the United Nations in 1964. [Photo: © United Archives International, Imago.](#)

A closer look at the parties that lend legitimacy to such declarations through their membership in the FSP reveals not only the autocratic ruling parties of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, but also parties that operate under democratic rules at home, such as Lula's Brazilian Workers' Party, Chile's Socialist Party of former President and UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, Costa Rica's Frente Amplio and key factions of the Uruguayan and Chilean Frente Amplio. These parties evidently have few qualms about associating with their authoritarian counterparts. At the same time, anti-colonial resentment is used internally to justify the exercise of power. One example is the letter sent by Mexico's former left-wing populist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) – whose MORENA party also belongs to the FSP – to the King of Spain in 2019, in which AMLO called on Felipe VI to apologise for the crimes committed during the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the 16th century.¹² The monarch's refusal to comply led to his exclusion from the inauguration of AMLO's successor and fellow party member, Claudia Sheinbaum.

Leading actors of the Latin American Left maintain very close relations with Russia, China and Iran.

As the 2024 book "The Pink Galaxy"¹³ reveals, a whole ecosystem of left-wing international organisations, party alliances, think tanks, academic associations, activist groups and state and private media outlets has emerged from both the FSP and the Lula-Castro alliance. This pink galaxy includes the Grupo de Puebla – a group of prominent left-wing politicians featuring former Presidents Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia) as well as former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero – in addition to the academic association CLACSO (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales) and the transnational

organisation Progressive International, which has significant activity in Latin America.

Such groups are ideologically rooted in the Left's tradition of internationalism, which was established by organisations ranging from the Comintern¹⁴ to the Non-Aligned Movement. Progressive International's 2019 founding congress was entitled "Internationalism or Extinction" and adopted a manifesto calling for the "decolonisation of the planet", with Cuba remaining the epicentre of these efforts. In 2024, the organisation held a congress in Havana on a "new world economic order", with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel as keynote speaker. Figures such as former Colombian President Ernesto Samper, former Ecuadorian presidential candidate Andrés Araúz and Grupo de Puebla coordinator Marco Enríquez-Ominami jointly developed a "plan for the uprising of the Global South – for the renewal of the world system through new and alternative institutions".¹⁵

Transnational Authoritarian Cooperation

In the tradition of Cuba's close ties with the Soviet Union, leading actors of the authoritarian Latin American Left maintain very close relations with the global authoritarian players of Russia, China and Iran while largely ignoring these countries' imperial ambitions. As with Che Guevara, the shared aim remains opposition to the dominance of the Western liberal-democratic order. Rather than exporting guerrilla warfare, today's strategy involves other forms of transnational authoritarian cooperation – in the media, in academic and cultural fields and in politics. For China in particular, the economic benefits of this cooperation are more than merely a by-product.

One of the most striking elements of this alliance is media collaboration: Not only is the Spanish-language program Russia Today (RT) the Kremlin mouthpiece's most successful foreign-language outlet, but it also often recruits its journalists from former staff of Venezuelan or Cuban state media or from the circles of left-wing populist politicians.¹⁶ One example is

the RT talk show hosted by former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa in which he interviews like-minded figures such as Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina). Russian state media outlets such as Sputnik additionally amplify Venezuelan regime narratives¹⁷ – just as Venezuelan state media celebrated the “liberation” of cities in Donetsk by Russian forces. Iran’s Spanish-language broadcaster HispanTV follows a similar logic: Alongside its anti-Israel programming, it consistently echoes narratives associated with the pink galaxy. Spanish political scientist Sergio Castaño explains this by pointing to common ground despite ideological differences: Islamist fighters and self-styled secular “progressives” both find shared cause “in anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, prompting them to join forces to advance their respective goals”.¹⁸

Criticism of authoritarian regimes is dismissed in the name of the “autonomy of the peoples”.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the academic sphere. In October 2023, amidst Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, an academic forum brought together leftist scholars and Kremlin-aligned academics. The forum was organised by Saint Petersburg State University, the agency Sputnik and CLACSO, which is the academic arm of the pink galaxy. One attendee was former CLACSO executive director Atilio Borón, who wrote in the Latin American press that Russia was merely defending itself against “NATO aggression”.¹⁹ CLACSO’s subordination to the Cuban agenda became evident in 2023 when current executive director Karina Batthyány was inducted into Cuba’s state-run Academy of Sciences. In a country with strictly controlled universities, the Uruguayan sociologist declared: “We are united by open, critical scientific knowledge with social impact.”²⁰ CLACSO also “cooperates” with Chinese state

research institutions – for instance, on a 2023 book project promoting the official historical narrative of the Chinese Communist Party in Spanish.

Politically, China, Russia and the pink galaxy stand united behind Latin America’s authoritarian left-wing regimes. One recent example was the congratulatory message sent by the Chinese ambassador to Nicaragua in March 2025 to celebrate the country’s new constitution. The charter – which secures all state power for the ruling Ortega-Murillo family and effectively suspends the rule of law and the separation of powers – was described by the diplomat as “democratic” and “revolutionary”.²¹ Chinese President Xi Jinping was among the first to congratulate Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro after the sham election on 28 July 2024. The Venezuelan regime and his own government, Xi said, were “good friends who trust one another”. China would always “support Venezuela’s just cause”, he continued, and “oppose all foreign interference”.²²

An Absolutist View of Non-Interference

The principle of non-interference in internal affairs – a legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement – plays a prominent role in left-wing authoritarian discourse. Commenting on the Grupo de Puebla’s stance towards Cuba and Venezuela, Chilean member Daniel Flores stated, “We don’t discuss these projects, because we respect the autonomy of the peoples”.²³ However, when all criticism of authoritarian regimes is dismissed in the name of the “autonomy of the peoples”, this amounts to a rejection of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the very concept of individual rights. The Latin American Left’s narrative converges with China’s long-standing campaign to redefine the concept of human rights internationally in the sense that the “right to economic development must take priority over all other rights, especially civil and political ones”.²⁴

US legal scholar Tanner Larkin refers to China’s attempt to redefine international norms in this

way as “normfare”.²⁵ The Chinese Communist Party, Larkin writes, holds a “rigid, absolutist view of state sovereignty and non-intervention”, thereby putting it in direct opposition to Western democracy. The moment that anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle becomes an end in itself, liberal democracy is reduced to a tool of Western domination.

The pink galaxy succeeded in systematically embedding postcolonial thought patterns into Latin America’s modern political landscape.

One telling example of this worldview can be found in the writings of Argentine psychologist, philosopher and Marxist activist Marcelo Colussi. In a 2024 book entitled “Let’s go for

socialism”, published by CLACSO and funded through a cooperation agreement between CLACSO and the Swedish development agency SIDA, he writes, “The world revolves around two opposing poles – those who own the means of production, and the workers. Added to this are all other contradictions: patriarchy, racism, imperialism, colonialism, heteronormativity, ecocide. Socialism [...] is a call to arms to create a new society in which all these injustices can be eliminated together.”²⁶ Later, he adds, “What seems absolutely clear is that within the framework of bourgeois democracies, it is not possible to create genuine socialist alternatives through elections. [...] Socialism can only be achieved by destroying the apparatus of domination controlled by the ruling class – the bourgeoisie.”²⁷

Cultural and Political Victories of the Authoritarian Left

Why, then, are anti-colonial and anti-democratic discourses so successful? Álvaro García



Material and cultural hegemony: In recent decades, Latin America’s Left has at times resorted to brute force to stay in power – as in Venezuela. Simultaneously, it maintains cultural and discursive dominance even when it is not in government. Photo: © Juan Carlos Hernandez, Zuma Press, Imago.

Linera – former vice president under Evo Morales as well as member of the Grupo de Puebla and Progressive International – offered insights into the strategy of the authoritarian Left during a speech at the 2018 Latin American Conference on Social Sciences, organised by CLACSO:

“Governments and progressive forces in Latin America also had the strength to build on earlier cultural victories – over a span of ten to twenty years as well as during the concentrated period leading up to major cathartic social uprisings. Gramsci was right: Every political or military victory by the people requires prior cultural victories achieved in various spheres of life – universities, media, neighbourhoods, everyday life, the family and so on.”²⁸

The actors gathered within Latin America’s pink galaxy succeeded in penetrating the cultural sphere systematically, thereby allowing them to embed postcolonial thought patterns – long cultivated in Cuba – into Latin America’s modern political landscape.

The binary worldview of postcolonialism – dividing the world into “perpetrators” and “victims” – is clearly visible in the actions of these left-wing authoritarian actors. According to their logic, the “hyenas and jackals” of Western civilisation, “neoliberalism”, “imperialism” and “fascism” are the perpetrators, while anyone opposing them automatically belongs to the victim group – including autocratic regimes and dictatorships. As urged in the article cited at the beginning of this text, support for Venezuela, Cuba, China or Russia becomes a kind of anti-colonial profession of faith, and any attempt to question it is treated as a betrayal. However, even some leftists view this as going too far. In 2024, journalist Gerhard Dilger – former director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s offices in São Paulo and Buenos Aires – wrote aptly in the German newspaper taz, “In these circles, one rarely hears a critical word about self-styled caudillos like Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua or Bolivia’s Evo Morales – leaders for whom democratic power transitions are not part of the worldview. The well-founded distrust of the United States and

its interventions over the past 200 years far too often descends into crude black-and-white thinking – a mindset that continues to cast Beijing’s or Moscow’s politics in an astonishingly benign light.”²⁹

Democracy and human rights are the political centre’s most valuable discursive assets.

The Political Centre’s Failure to Assert Itself in Public Debate

The relative strength of authoritarian and post-colonial narratives in Latin America is also due to the weakness of their political opponents. The political centre – particularly the centre-right – limits itself far too often to issues such as the economy and security, thereby leaving the cultural and discursive area to the authoritarian Left. This reluctance to engage clears the way for the actors of the pink galaxy: Even during periods of conservative rule, the intellectual and cultural terrain remains largely dominated by left-wing authoritarian and postcolonial discourse. At the same time, this failure on the part of the centre to assert itself opens the door to right-wing populist actors whose identity politics and conspiratorial agendas have little to do with liberal-democratic values. One example is 35-year-old Argentine bestselling author Agustín Laje, who is a supporter of Argentine President Javier Milei. Laje has popularised calls for a “culture war” against so-called globalism³⁰ in Latin American right-wing circles.

A serious attempt to challenge the cultural-discursive dominance of the pink galaxy and to replace it with liberal-democratic narratives is urgently needed, not least for the political centre’s own survival. There are many ways of going about this. The concept of democracy as a universal political ideal must be constantly defended against distortion and hollowing-out, and it must be brought to life through substance and practice. The same applies to the universal

value of human rights. These two concepts – still broadly supported by the Latin American public, according to all surveys – are the political centre’s most valuable discursive assets. It is thus all the more important to not dilute or undermine these concepts through overly broad definitions or identity-driven interpretations.

Based on these values, the contradictions of the authoritarian Left must be exposed – and beyond the echo chambers of the Right. If the democratic Left cannot be emotionally and intellectually detached from the authoritarian Left through clear information and argument, the task will prove extremely difficult. The greatest challenge is to uncover the many contradictions that lie beneath the constant posture of attack found in postcolonial discourse and to break the perpetrator-victim mindset. There is no shortage of ways to do this, including by visualising the human rights records of left-wing authoritarian regimes, by exposing torture and political prisoners, by debunking the myths of anti-colonial icons such as Fidel Castro or “Che” Guevara and by laying bare the international networks of authoritarian cooperation.

European states in particular must recognise in this era of global polarisation that anti-Western narratives often take hold most effectively in overlooked spaces, such as at Latin American universities. Even European development cooperation should take a hard look at whether all of its “partners” truly deserve that name: Indeed, behind anti-colonial narratives lies a transnational network of actors who undermine the West’s civilisational self-image and seek to dismantle the core values of the liberal-democratic model.

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Between West and South

Postcolonial Discourse in Brazilian Foreign Policy

Photo: © Ricardo Stuckert, Zuma Press, Imago.



In a Nutshell

Brazil is a Western country. Unlike most African and Asian states but similarly to most other Latin American countries, its independence dates back around 200 years. Throughout much of this time, Brazil's international relations have been characterised by continuity and close ties with Western states.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, however, Brazil has increasingly diversified its foreign policy towards the "Global South". Disappointment with the stance taken by Western countries during the Brazilian debt crisis was a key factor behind this shift.

Postcolonial discourse is not the root cause of this development, but it has at times been an amplifying factor. In Brazil, such narratives are largely an elite phenomenon imported from North American and European universities, which tend to resonate primarily with leftist parties and their affiliated organisations.

In recent years, these narratives have become more prominent in foreign policy, particularly through the presidential diplomacy of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, as evident, for instance, in his harsh rhetoric towards Israel and his close alignment with African states. In these respects, Lula's positions sometimes diverge from the policies of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, the Itamaraty.



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One was baptised in the Jordan River, the other declared *persona non grata* in Israel: The contrast between former President Jair Messias Bolsonaro and current President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva could hardly be starker. While Bolsonaro pursued an overtly pro-Israel course, Lula has sought confrontation. At the African Union summit in February 2024, Lula did not hold back when he stepped up to the microphones, his voice slightly hoarse as he described the Israeli air force’s bombardment of the Gaza Strip as an unprecedented crime: Nothing comparable had happened, he said, “since Hitler [had] decided to exterminate the Jews”.¹

After Lula had refused to supply ammunition to Ukraine or to explicitly condemn Russia’s war of aggression, Europeans were once again taken aback when the Brazilian president labelled Israel’s attacks on the Gaza Strip a genocide. Such harsh wording was not what they had expected. The Israeli government responded swiftly by banning the former trade union leader. Since then, relations between Brasília and Jerusalem have been frozen. Israel may be a special case – long viewed by proponents of postcolonial thought as a “modern apartheid state” or as a “colonial state” and a popular target of criticism. However, like most Latin American nations, Brazil has not typically been seen on the international stage as an advocate of postcolonial positions, with the possible exceptions of Cuba and Bolivia. This article aims to shed light on the extent to which postcolonial ideas and theoretical frameworks actually play a role in Brazilian foreign policy.

How Postcolonial Is Brazil?

Looking up at the grey November sky, he did not know whether he would ever return: At the end

of 1807, the Portuguese prince regent and future king João VI boarded the ship that would carry him on a months-long journey to Rio de Janeiro. He was fleeing Spanish and French troops advancing on Lisbon, preparing to occupy the ancestral lands of his dynasty. João VI had no intention of submitting to Napoleonic rule or of going into exile in Britain, the kingdom’s long-standing ally. No – he chose Brazil as his place of refuge, hoping to outlast the European conflict there.

A European monarch relocating to a colony is not the only remarkable feature of the period leading up to Brazil’s independence. While still part of the Portuguese empire, Brazil’s role grew in significance – not least because it became the royal seat, gaining new prominence within the imperial structure of Lusitania. Even before its political emancipation from Portugal, Brazil was at times more important than the colonial power itself, its sheer size and the wealth of its fields and mines making it too significant to remain in the shadow of the mother country.

Brazil freed itself from Portuguese colonial rule, gaining independence in 1822. However, this event did not bring about a profound transformation. Indeed, the monarchy continued under João’s son, styling itself as the Empire of Brazil. The colonial hierarchy of Brazilian society – including slavery – was barely revised, and economically, the country remained focused on the production and export of a few raw materials. This historical perspective is especially relevant when considering Latin America’s relationship to the former colonies of Africa and Asia. On the one hand, Latin America gained independence around 140 years before most African and Asian countries, thereby giving it far more time to engage in nation-building. In this

sense, the “post” in postcolonial can be given greater emphasis in the case of Brazil. On the other hand, clear parallels between Latin American and Afro-Asian states remain. Most notably, the persistently high levels of social inequality in Brazil and across Latin America seem to be a characteristic feature of the social long-term effects of the colonial era.

The voices of postcolonial discourse in Brazil rarely come from those who have been marginalised in society.

The Long March to Postcolonialism

For decades, Brazil has ranked near the top of global inequality indicators, such as the Gini coefficient. Even more than 200 years after gaining independence from Portugal, social power structures remain in place that seem rooted in a bygone era. Afro-Brazilian communities in particular continue to face significant disadvantages: They tend to have poorer access to education, are more frequently victims of violence and remain underrepresented in politics. At the same time, the question as to how ethnicity and socio-economic participation intersect cannot be answered easily or conclusively due to the strong heterogeneity of the Brazilian population. However, despite ongoing improvements, there is no doubt that Brazil still exhibits stark inequalities reflecting power structures that bear unmistakable echoes of the colonial period.²

The primary social echo chambers for postcolonial narratives in Brazil are the country’s universities, which still retain a degree of social exclusivity. While Brazil has made significant progress in this area, the academic sphere remains disproportionately populated by social groups that are less likely to face structural disadvantage in everyday life. As a result, there is a certain tendency for social inequality to perpetuate itself. A diploma is essential when it

comes to participating in the competitive *concurso* exams, with these exams granting access to the upper ranks of the civil service, which offer generous salaries. Likewise, only with an appropriate university degree is it possible to enter an influential think tank. In short: The voices of postcolonial discourse in Brazil rarely come from those who have been marginalised in society. This places them in line with the academic forerunners of postcolonialism – Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and above all, the bourgeois intellectual Michel Foucault.

As in Germany, postcolonial approaches enjoy particular popularity within the country’s humanities and social sciences faculties. Just like in Germany, these departments tend to lean politically to the left. Also as in Germany, adopting a postcolonial perspective is considered *de rigueur* in academic circles. As a guiding academic framework, postcolonialism is largely a fashion – a trend imported from Anglophone universities that has spread to local institutions. Within this ideological context, academic work is often produced through a postcolonial lens by dissecting its subject matter in terms of asymmetric power structures. The insights that such an approach yields are often limited, with other explanatory factors at risk of being marginalised or trivialised by this postcolonial mode of analysis. Yet this is not a phenomenon unique to Brazilian academia; the same pattern can also be observed in Germany.

In Brazil, postcolonialism as an academic trend follows in a long line extending from the university-based Marxism of the 1950s and 1960s through to dependency theory and world-systems theory in the 1970s and 1980s. However, as the *dependência* theories of Brazilian sociologist – and later president – Fernando Henrique Cardoso made clear, these frameworks lacked any inherent socio-revolutionary impulse. This is not without logic: After all, those who champion these ideas are unlikely to seek a radical change to their own social status. As (supposed) advocates for those who are marginalised in society, they carry their convictions into federal politics and public administration even though



The anti-Lula: While Brazil's current president has been declared persona non grata in Israel, his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro virtually celebrated his close ties to the country and to Benjamin Netanyahu. Photo: © Menahem Kahana, UPI Photo, Imago.

their influence there remains limited. Postcolonialism has no shortage of political appeal, however, as it lends itself to blaming injustices on the international order or on former colonial powers.

Postcolonial perspectives are primarily to be found in Brazil's leftist parties and in their affiliated organisations. The political claim of representing disadvantaged population groups is thereby translated into a global outlook. The fight for justice is not seen as a phenomenon limited to Brazil. Postcolonialism enables the construction of a sense of solidarity – however superficial – among formerly colonised peoples. As the host of major international events in 2024 and 2025, the Brazilian government

has succeeded in bringing social issues onto the global stage. Fighting world hunger and introducing a globally binding tax on so-called super-rich individuals were key items on Brazil's agenda at last year's G20 summit, for example. At this year's BRICS+ summit, the hosts will also focus on food security.

In his foreign policy, Lula primarily uses postcolonial argumentation patterns to consolidate his support base at home.



primarily uses postcolonial lines of argument to consolidate his support base at home, with garnering support abroad being a secondary effect. This approach reflects an interdependence between Brazil's domestic and foreign policy.

Foreign Policy Priorities and Postcolonial Ambivalences

It is precisely this interplay between domestic and foreign affairs that explains the stark contrast between Bolsonaro and Lula in their relations with Israel. Lula's predecessor Bolsonaro showed an almost-fervent enthusiasm for the "Holy Land" and sought close alignment with the Israeli government. He maintained excellent relations with Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he referred to as a friend and a brother.⁴ This close relationship was naturally facilitated by the ideological affinity between the two leaders. At the same time, Bolsonaro was also able to gain domestic political capital from his decidedly pro-Israel stance.

Evangelicals have emerged as a significant political force in Brazil.

While these are not explicitly postcolonial messages, they form part of a broader sequence of remarks that the ever-active President Lula makes in front of the global media. In a speech to the Angolan National Assembly in August 2023, he addressed both these issues directly: "It is unacceptable that one per cent of the world's population is richer than the poorest 50 per cent. It is unacceptable that although the world produces enough food for all living beings, 735 million people still go to bed hungry every night."³ Reducing social inequality was originally a key domestic priority for Brazil's leftist parties, particularly the ruling PT. However, it was only with the diffusion of postcolonial theories from the universities into politics that this agenda also began to shape Brazil's foreign relations. In his foreign policy, Lula

Support for Israel is just one example – albeit a highly visible one – of how the former president sought to portray himself as a defender of Christian-Western values. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of US President Donald Trump, who is likewise known as a staunch supporter of Israel and the Netanyahu government. This performative religiosity is further reinforced by the assassination attempts that both Bolsonaro and Trump narrowly survived – an experience they interpreted as a divine mandate to lead their nations. The primary – though not sole – target audience of such staging is the evangelical community, which has become a loyal political base.

Evangelicals have established themselves as a powerful political force in Brazil – one that can

no longer be ignored. No other religious group is growing as rapidly as this charismatic movement within the Church. Bolsonaro instinctively recognised the political relevance of these evangelicals and integrated them into his campaign from the outset, even travelling to Israel with one of Brazil's most prominent pastors to be baptised by him in the Jordan River. This strategy proved highly effective: Even today, around 80 per cent of evangelicals claim that they would vote for Bolsonaro. At rallies in Brazil supported by Bolsonaro, it is now common to see the Israeli flag flash among the crowd clad in Brazil's national colours of yellow and green. In addition to evangelicals, the political Right traditionally draws support from the country's middle and upper classes. This has led to a degree of ethnic distinction between the two political poles – even in a country as heterogeneous as Brazil.

The Left is seeking to reposition Brazilian identity more firmly in relation to its non-European roots.

The political Left draws on different demographic groups to consolidate its support. Former union leader Lula has thus far failed to win over the evangelical community and instead draws heavily on his traditional base. Particularly within the academic Left – where anti-American sentiment is often pronounced – support can be mobilised by invoking a familiar canon of admired countries and leaders. Just as the Right looks to figures such as Trump, Javier Milei and Nayib Bukele, the Left has icons of its own: Indeed, during his first two terms in particular, Lula repeatedly expressed admiration for Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Nevertheless, these gestures of solidarity remained largely symbolic – vague enough not to harm Brazil diplomatically yet clear enough to win over supporters at home.

However, the Left soon appeared to be running out of role models. Admiration for Castro's Cuba

undoubtedly harkens back to the 1950s and 1960s, when the small island stood up to the mighty United States and sought to export its revolution. The enthusiasm for Chávez's Venezuela stems from the 2000s, when booming oil revenues made it possible to fund generous social programmes. However, this latter example came with a limited shelf life: As soon as the petrodollars stopped flowing into the treasury, the gloss of "21st-century socialism" faded – and so too did the excitement of its supporters. Over the past two decades, Venezuela has lost its appeal for both the Brazilian and the wider Latin American Left. It was only with the rise of post-colonial theories at universities that a new narrative framework for public sympathy emerged.

Combined with identity politics, the previously material concept of inequality was supplemented with an ethnic dimension. Through postcolonialism, the newly imagined dividing line no longer runs solely between rich and poor, but also between white and non-white. The addition of this new attribute expanded the potential for shared identification. Where an international socialism – defined by political common ground – had previously served as the unifying element, the focus has now shifted to a category of countries with a colonial past and with corresponding ethnic features in their populations. In Brazil – as elsewhere – the term "developing countries" has largely fallen out of use, with the term "Global South" taking its place. The political Left is now seeking to reposition Brazilian identity more firmly in relation to its non-European roots.

A similar development has been observed in other Latin American countries in recent decades, often referred to as "re-indigenisation". Countries such as Ecuador, Peru and especially Bolivia have increasingly emphasised their Indigenous heritage, often at the expense of European influence. This act of "rediscovery" is intended by political leaders to strengthen the socio-cultural fabric of the nation – and by extension also the leaders' core voter bases. In Brazil, a comparable – albeit more muted – attempt can be seen in the emphasis on the

country's African roots. As such, the political divide between left and right is also fuelled by the question of identity – and by the role that European versus African heritage should play in defining Brazil's national self-image. The political Left embraces postcolonial solidarity and questions the European legacy, while the Right presents itself as the guardian of a Christian-Western tradition, thereby implicitly reinforcing ties with Europe.

These are polarised positions, of course, but they are clearly reflected in the presidential foreign policies of Lula and Bolsonaro. Just as Lula's attacks on Israel caused controversy, Bolsonaro repeatedly made undiplomatic remarks about Venezuela. Both presidents used foreign policy to target the allies of their domestic opponents with the aim of discrediting them. Nonetheless, these sharp shifts in presidential diplomacy are not echoed in the institutional foreign policy of Brazil's foreign ministry, the Itamaraty. Brazil's overall foreign relations are shaped by

continuity and pragmatism, meaning that politically charged alliances are usually avoided: What ultimately matters is what benefits Brazil.

However, this does not rule out the use of post-colonial arguments in official Brazilian foreign policy. Indeed, questioning established power structures – and, where possible, reshaping them – offers a number of openings for Itamaraty diplomats. Brazil has long championed issues such as reforming the United Nations Security Council, creating alternative reserve currencies to the US dollar and transforming the remaining Bretton Woods institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund. Altering the global status quo is clearly in Brazil's interest. The country views itself as a (future) global power and aligns its foreign relations accordingly, with the aim of supporting economic development, strengthening its international standing and underlining its ambitions. In this sense, postcolonial discourse can at times serve the logic of Brazil's foreign ministry.



On the sands of Copacabana: Activists call for an “Act for Palestine” in November 2024. The pro-Palestinian stance of Brazilian foreign policy is particularly pronounced under President Lula da Silva, but has been evident since the 1970s. Photo: © Ingrid Cristina, Zuma Press, Imago.

This situation is especially evident in two world regions: the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Beginning long before 7 October 2023 – in fact, ever since the 1970s – Brazilian foreign policy has supported the idea of Palestinian self-determination in relation to Israel. This is reflected in Brazil’s consistent voting record in international organisations – notably in the United Nations – in favour of the Palestinians. Brazil is home to the world’s largest diaspora of people of Syrian and Lebanese origin, but this is not the reason behind the nation’s position; rather, it is a matter of strategic calculation. While Brazil was heavily dependent on oil imports from the Arab world 50 years ago, economic considerations still largely underpin its support for the Palestinians today. In demographic and economic terms, Israel cannot compete with the Arab states. Although Brazil no longer relies on oil imports, it continues to maintain close trade ties with the Arab world, which remains a significant destination for Brazilian exports.

Lula’s Holocaust comparison caused offence among more than only diplomats.

It should be noted that Brazil’s support for the Palestinians is not rooted in ideological conviction. At least according to Itamaraty’s framing, the country’s voting behaviour in favour of the Arab world is not intended to be seen as a vote against Israel. As such, there is at times a degree of tension between presidential and institutional foreign policy, especially when the president strays too far from Itamaraty’s official line. Lula’s Holocaust comparison caused offence among more than just diplomats, and the president has since tempered his remarks. On the other hand, Bolsonaro failed in his attempt to move the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The divergent examples of Presidents Bolsonaro and Lula represent the two extremes of the foreign policy spectrum. As head of the executive, the Brazilian president has numerous ways of influencing the country’s

foreign policy, but his powers are not without limits.

Brazil also pursues an interest-driven policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. Since the 1970s, the country has sought to expand its ties across the South Atlantic. Popular points of connection include Brazil’s sizeable Afro-Brazilian population and the legacy of Portuguese colonial rule, particularly when dealing with the PALOP states – that is, African countries in which Portuguese is an official language. By presenting itself to African states as a fellow developing country, Brazil aims to build broader support in international organisations – especially in the United Nations. Here, too, the objective is ultimately to gain certain advantages for itself. Lusophony is not a prerequisite for engagement, but it does facilitate exchange. At the height of its Africa policy in the 2000s, Brazil also intensified its relations with Anglophone and Francophone African countries.

While the Israeli-Palestinian dualism occupies a special place within postcolonial theory and is particularly prone to polemics, Brazil’s relations with sub-Saharan Africa stem from a different context. Given Brazil’s marked African heritage, ties across the South Atlantic are more than just a geopolitical litmus test, as in the case of Israel. Indeed, they are also historically tangible. It is therefore hardly surprising that President Lula emphasises the commonalities between Brazil and Africa. Even here, however, the former trade union leader tends to pursue a somewhat different path from the Itamaraty: He generally maintains closer ties with the African continent than those envisaged in institutional foreign policy.

Shortly before making the comparison between the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip and the genocidal crimes of the Nazis at the African Union General Assembly, Lula invoked the bond between Brazil and Africa: “Africa’s struggle has much in common with the challenges facing Brazil. More than half of Brazil’s 200 million people say they have African roots. We – Africans and Brazilians – must find our own paths in the emerging world order.”⁵ Here, too, the

president pursued both a foreign and a domestic agenda. Evoking shared roots serves to strengthen the connection between Brazil and the African continent across the South Atlantic, with the aim of securing influence and support abroad. Domestically, the former trade unionist's Africa policy generates sympathy and approval among those segments of the population that are increasingly embracing their African heritage.

On a West-Southwest Course?

Brazil's entry into so-called South-South cooperation was no coincidence. Indeed, it came during the "lost decade" of the 1980s, when the country groaned under a crushing debt burden and was economically incapacitated. Previously hailed as the "second Japan" and seemingly on the verge of becoming an industrialised nation, Brazil instead fell into the debt trap. Only after being disappointed by its former close partners in North America and Western Europe – when the latter withdrew support for Brazil's economic development – did the country turn southwards. Whether considering Brazil's role in BRICS or certain excessive displays of post-colonial rhetoric, this historical context must not be forgotten. Statements and decisions from the presidential palace may surprise and confuse some, yet Brazil remains fundamentally a Western country. The West is not just NATO or the OECD. Indeed, it extends further. Europeans and Germans in particular need to make themselves attractive again – attractive enough for Brazil to want to resume close cooperation as was the case before the 1980s. However, that can only happen through offers that serve the interests of both sides.

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Imperial Shadows

How Britain's Colonial Legacy Continues to Impact Its Politics



In a Nutshell

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government has negotiated the transfer of the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean – which have thus far been under British administration – to Mauritius. The agreement highlights the ongoing tension between colonial reckoning and restitution on the one hand and national (security) interests on the other hand.

At no point did the UK government consider relinquishing the military base on the archipelago, which it runs jointly with the US; the newly negotiated treaty grants the UK an initial 99-year lease, with the option of a further 40-year extension to be activated by mutual agreement of the parties.

Public debate continues in the UK over the Empire's failings and achievements. Labour and the Conservatives are united in rejecting reparations, but the Conservatives have criticised what they see as a growing "culture of self-doubt" and are keen to uphold a positive national self-image in this debate.

Brexit was accompanied by the promise of greater freedom in foreign policy and by the hope that economic losses from leaving the EU could be offset by reinvigorating ties with the Commonwealth – a hope that has gone largely unfulfilled.



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The renewed public attention on the Chagos Islands has revived the broader national debate on decolonisation, which is reflected not only in party-political discourse, but also in public opinion, where questions of guilt and responsibility are becoming increasingly divisive. Reckoning with the British Empire remains central to the construction of national identity and is a key factor influencing how the UK views the world.

Ultimately, Britain's imperial past also casts light on some of the deeper causes of Brexit. With its "Global Britain" strategy, the UK sought to decouple from the EU and to reforge its historical ties with the Commonwealth both economically and politically. But how successful has this approach been in practice? The attempt to offset economic losses through stronger links with former colonies has proved more complex than anticipated. Indeed, British foreign policy now finds itself caught between the legacy of empire and the challenge of global repositioning.

Between Justice and Security: The Chagos Islands

When Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced in October 2024 that the UK would be transferring sovereignty over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, he was not expecting a heated security policy debate over the potential costs and consequences. Labour's goal had been to finalise the process – initiated in 2019 by Boris Johnson – of returning what had been described as "Britain's last African colony", and to do so before Donald Trump returned to the White House.

Whereas previous Conservative governments had repeatedly postponed a decision, Labour

viewed itself as being forced to act after several legal opinions had indicated that Mauritius would likely win a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Such a defeat would have meant losing the entire archipelago – and with it, also significant strategic assets.¹ The Starmer government sought to pre-empt such a worst-case scenario from the perspective of its own national security interests and opted for a proactive approach by attempting to reach a negotiated agreement with Mauritius. In addition to strategic considerations, the handover also presented Prime Minister Starmer with an opportunity to demonstrate the UK's commitment to international law and the nation's global obligations.

The historical claim of Mauritian sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago remains contested, thereby making the rectification of "historical injustices" more complicated than it might initially appear. The link between the two territories stems mainly from their shared colonial administration – first under French, then under British rule.² In 1965, the administration of the Chagos Islands was separated from Mauritius and was placed under direct British control as the British Indian Ocean Territory. The UK had made this step a precondition for granting independence to Mauritius. In the late 1960s, between 1,500 and 2,000 Chagossians were forcibly removed to make way for a US military base on the main island of Diego Garcia. Aside from this military base, the islands are now uninhabited.

Diego Garcia hosts one of the most important US military installations in the Indian Ocean – a key hub for air operations, maritime surveillance and logistical support for missions in the

Middle East, South Asia and Africa. The CIA has also used the site for covert operations, as confirmed by Lawrence Wilkerson, former Chief of Staff to US Secretary of State Colin Powell.³ Most recently, strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen were coordinated from the base. In light of China's growing regional presence, the base is widely viewed as a crucial outpost for projecting US power in the region.

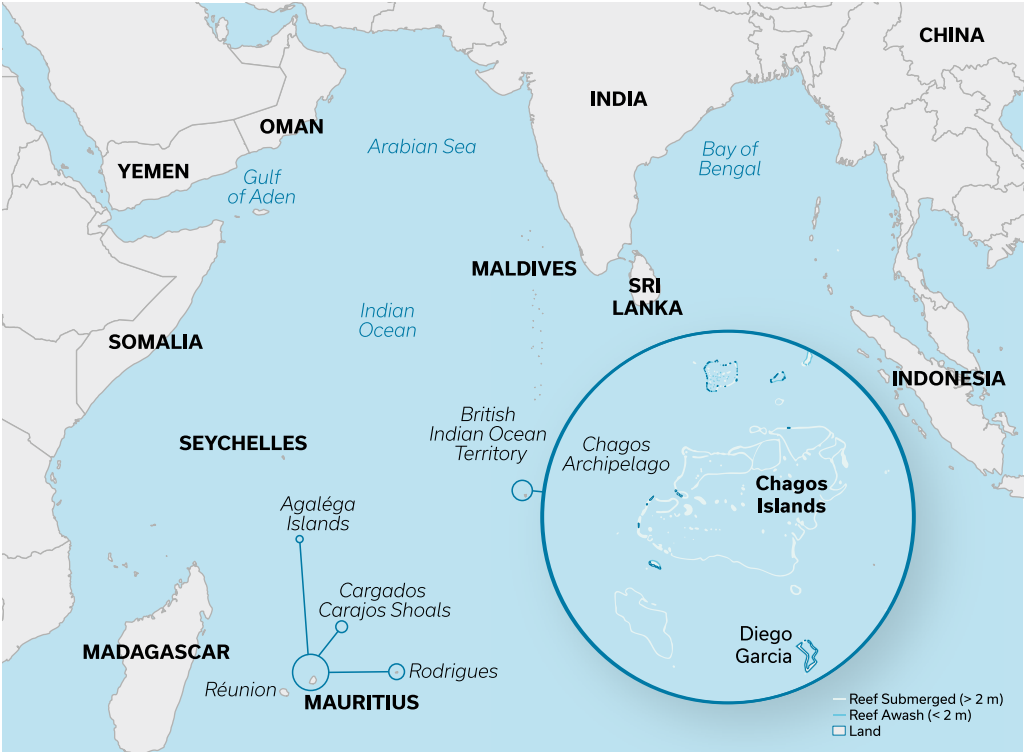
The Tories accuse the government of squandering strategic advantages.

Both the separation of the islands and the displacement of the local population had already been deemed a violation of international law in a non-binding advisory opinion issued by the ICJ in 2019. Endorsed by an overwhelming

majority of the UN General Assembly, the opinion called on the United Kingdom to return the islands to Mauritius "as soon as possible".⁴ For the new British Prime Minister, this was reason enough – five years later – to pursue a negotiated agreement with Mauritius. An initial deal had already been reached by October 2024, just a few months after Starmer had taken office.⁵ Due to changes in government in both Mauritius and the United States, however, the agreement had to be renegotiated and revised.

The breakthrough finally came during Keir Starmer's visit to Washington in April 2025 after US President Donald Trump had agreed to the deal. Having described the UK's planned hand-over just weeks earlier as a betrayal, Trump now accepted the originally proposed 99-year lease, not least because an optional 40-year extension was negotiated, to be activated by mutual agreement of the parties.⁶ A key figure in securing this outcome with the White House was Jonathan

Fig. 1: Location of the Islands of the Chagos Archipelago and of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean



Source: own illustration, map: OpenDataSoft, World Administrative Boundaries ©.

Powell, the UK's National Security Adviser. It was largely thanks to him that the US side was persuaded to view an agreement with Mauritius as the most effective way to pre-empt any future legal challenges to the use of the base.⁷

The agreement brought months of uncertainty to an end, though criticism continues in both the UK and the US. In particular, Republican lawmakers in Washington and Conservative figures in the UK have expressed concern about financial burdens and potential security risks, particularly given the close ties between Mauritius and China. One of the most vocal critics on the US side is Senator John Kennedy, who has repeatedly stressed that despite billions in US investment and formal agreements, the strategic use of the military base is by no means guaranteed. Mauritius, he warned, could exploit the situation to pressure Washington with excessive lease demands while Beijing continues to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal.⁸ Meanwhile, the opposition Conservative Party accused the Starmer government of allowing excessive legal caution to distract from the UK's national security interests and to jeopardise its strategic advantages.

The criticism thus extends far beyond party-political or domestic issues and primarily highlights the security policy implications of the agreement. The Chagos question concerns not only American and British interests, but also those of NATO allies, who share a common interest in maintaining Western influence in this strategically important region. Destabilising the security architecture in the Indian Ocean could have lasting consequences for global defence strategies. In this context, the Chagos case is more than a question of decolonisation.

The agreement – as well as the debate surrounding it – highlights both how slow and how difficult the process of coming to terms with Britain's colonial past remains and how complex the notion of “reparation” can be. However, the agreement also highlights the UK's geopolitical priorities: Given the potential impact on both its partnership with Washington and its own

national security, a full loss of the territory and the military base was never an option for London. Consequently, from the very beginning, the government ruled out any return of the islands that would have bypassed US consent. The UK's handling of the Chagos agreement suggests a country navigating a delicate balancing act between historical accountability and national security interests.

The UK government rejects official apologies and financial reparations.

Britain's Colonial Debate: Between Guilt and Pride

Britain's colonial past remains a recurring topic in public discourse. A major turning point came during the COVID-19 lockdown, when the Black Lives Matter movement spread from the US to the UK. Nationwide protests against racism and colonialism prompted a reckoning with Britain's imperial history. One defining moment was the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston – a slave trader long honoured as a philanthropist – by demonstrators in Bristol in June 2020.⁹ Universities and cultural institutions across the country expressed solidarity and began re-examining their own colonial legacies. Demands for critical engagement with Britain's imperial past gained momentum, including calls for education reform, the removal of monuments and discussions on reparations. A symbolic occasion came with King Charles III's visit to Kenya in October 2023, during which he expressed “deepest regret” for the “abhorrent and unjustifiable” violence committed during British colonial rule – though he stopped short of a formal apology. Human rights organisations criticised this reluctance and called for an unreserved apology.¹⁰ The UK government continues to reject both formal apologies and financial reparations, however, instead showing a willingness to consider indirect forms of redress, such as debt relief and development cooperation.

While the form of compensation remains contested, the terms of debate have also shifted. The conversation is no longer shaped only by traditionally anti-colonial voices: Increasingly often, conservative actors are now promoting a more affirmative national narrative that emphasises the “achievements” of the British Empire.

The Conservative Party sees itself as defending a positive national self-image in the colonial debate.

The prominent argument is that it was the British Empire – through its naval power – that abolished the transatlantic slave trade, and this well before the US Civil War. Groups such as History Reclaimed aim to “challenge distortions of history and bring context, explanation and balance to a debate in which dogma often overrides analysis, and condemnation trumps understanding”.¹¹ One of the group’s leading figures, Nigel Biggar, argues in his 2023 book “Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning” that a more differentiated approach is required and that the Empire should not be viewed exclusively in negative terms. He contends that British colonialism not only ended practices such as slavery, widow-burning and human sacrifice, but that it also left lasting legacies – such as the rule of law, effective governance and education systems – that still benefit former colonies.¹² Biggar was appointed a life peer¹³ at the instigation of Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch in January 2025 and now sits in the House of Lords.

Biggar’s work bolsters Badenoch’s campaign to restore confidence in Western civilisation. The Conservative Party sees itself as defending a positive national self-image in the colonial debate. Its members argue that despite the nation’s imperial past, Britain has reason to be proud. Badenoch in particular often cites a study suggesting that nearly half of young Britons view their country as racist – a finding that

she uses to criticise what she views as divisive and one-sided narratives that foster a culture of self-doubt.¹⁴ For today’s Conservative leadership, calls for reparations reflect a never-ending narrative of guilt that is driven primarily by the political Left. Britain’s prosperity and progress, the Tories argue, stem not just from colonialism, but from a diverse and capable society. Former Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick went even further, suggesting that former colonies should show greater gratitude for the democratic institutions inherited from the Empire.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Conservative Party leader has linked the emergence of authoritarian regimes in some African states to a rejection of British values.¹⁶

A closer look at the British Empire reveals why debates over its colonial legacy remain so complex, deeply divisive and firmly embedded in public discourse. Over centuries, imperial dominance not only shaped the global geopolitical order, but also forged a distinct British self-image – one that often carried more weight than a European sense of belonging. The Empire granted Britain major economic advantages, control over global trade routes and worldwide influence. This dominance fed into a romanticised view of colonialism that still resonates in parts of society.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, the colonial nature of the Empire contributed to industrialisation, technological leadership and the development of a global social and political perspective. However, this nature was also underpinned by racist hierarchies, systematic exploitation and a deeply entrenched sense of superiority.¹⁸ A more measured view reveals that the impact of colonialism varied considerably from region to region. Settler colonies such as Australia and New Zealand experienced comparatively successful development, while countries with large Indigenous populations often suffered severe long-term political and economic burdens.¹⁹

The darker sides of the Empire are beyond dispute, which is why the UK is under growing pressure to respond to demands for reparations. At the 2024 Commonwealth Summit in Samoa, member states called for a meaningful, truthful



Under international legal pressure: In 2019, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly supported an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice, in which the Court called on the United Kingdom to return the Chagos Islands to Mauritius “as soon as possible”. Photo: © Kyodo News, Imago.

and respectful dialogue on the issue of reparations – especially in relation to the transatlantic slave trade.²⁰ The UK did indeed play a major role in this trade and did not begin to actively combat it until the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.²¹ For both Labour and the Conservatives, however, financial compensation has never seriously been on the table. There is cross-party agreement in Britain that this particular can of worms should remain closed. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has likewise repeatedly reaffirmed this position, even while expressing a general openness to dialogue on addressing Britain’s colonial past.²² This openness not only serves to support his agenda of colonial reckoning, but also reflects the fact that a significant part of the UK’s post-Brexit

economic strategy depends on trade and relationships with Commonwealth countries.

Brexit, the Commonwealth and Global Britain

A longstanding belief in Britain’s global significance continues to shape the country’s foreign policy outlook. One of the clearest examples of this is Brexit itself – arguably the most far-reaching political decision in recent UK history. For many of its supporters, leaving the European Union was closely tied to the restoration of national sovereignty, which in particular involved regaining control over trade policy and the ability to strike independent agreements around the world. Britain aimed

to become “global” again, and “Global Britain” became the official foreign policy strategy under the Conservative government. In this way, London sought to redefine its influence within a changing international order.²³ Even before the 2016 Brexit referendum, certain narratives and slogans shaped the debate: taking back control, shifting decision-making power from Brussels to London, the notion that Commonwealth trade could offset the effects of Brexit and the hope of reviving historical global ties.

The strategy of revitalising ties with the Commonwealth through Brexit has proved only partially effective.

It is therefore unsurprising that after leaving the EU, the UK placed particular emphasis on the Commonwealth and its 56 member states,

many of them former colonies. The aim was to revive old trade routes, to reassert regional influence and to make economic use of historical relationships, particularly in Africa. Countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Ghana were identified as strategic partners in promoting economic development, security and stability across the continent.

However, the strategy of using Brexit to revitalise historical Commonwealth ties and to generate new economic opportunities under the banner of Global Britain has proved only partially effective. While the Commonwealth may appear to offer London privileged access through its geopolitical network, the reality is far more complex. Former colonies have long been asserting their economic and political independence, increasingly seeking new partnerships and pursuing their own interests. In this context, historical power structures are losing relevance, and Britain is being forced to position itself as an equal partner.



Targeted by protesters: In 2020, the statue of the philanthropist – and slave trader – Edward Colston was toppled in his hometown of Bristol. Years before, protesters had already marked it with paint. Photo: © Keith Ramsey, Depositphotos, Imago.

The ambition to redirect the UK's external trade flows and global influence via the Commonwealth has not materialised as hoped, as is clearly reflected in the numbers. While post-Brexit trade with the EU has seen only a minor decline,²⁴ trade with the Commonwealth has stagnated despite Britain's regained autonomy in global trade. In 2023, only about 10 per cent of UK exports went to Commonwealth countries – barely more than before Brexit.²⁵ The Commonwealth accounts for around 13 per cent of global GDP,²⁶ while the EU's 27 member states generate roughly 14.7 per cent.²⁷ Even so, trade with the EU remains the cornerstone of Britain's international commerce.

British development policy also reveals tensions between rhetoric and reality. On the one hand, London repeatedly emphasises its intention to deepen cooperation with countries in the “Global South” – not least to defuse calls for reparations. On the other hand, however, the government's announcement of cuts in development aid sends a contradictory message and seriously undermines the credibility of its partnership ambitions. Aid now accounts for only 0.5 per cent of gross national income and is set to fall even further. Prime Minister Starmer has even proposed reducing this figure to 0.3 per cent in order to increase defence spending.²⁸ Since 2019, UK Official Development Assistance to Commonwealth countries has already fallen by 70 per cent – from 1.88 billion to just 570 million pounds in 2023.²⁹

How strong the UK's future relationships with its former colonies will be ultimately depends on two factors: the level of investment in these relationships, and the alignment of interests, as illustrated by the contrasting examples of Singapore and India. In the case of Singapore, Britain has achieved some success. The 2021 free trade agreement and the 2022 Digital Economy Agreement build on mutual strengths in the services sector. As early as in 2020, bilateral trade exceeded 22 billion US dollars, thereby providing a solid foundation for further growth. India, by contrast, has proved a more difficult partner. Although Prime Minister Johnson agreed on an

ambitious 2030 Roadmap with India in May 2021 that would cover cooperation on trade, climate, health and defence, progress has remained limited. Negotiations on a free trade agreement were suspended at times, and it was not until May 2025 that the UK and India concluded a comprehensive deal after years of wrangling.

Commonwealth countries expect the United Kingdom to engage credibly with its colonial legacy.

Brexit and the Global Britain strategy are both expressions of a broader search for a foreign policy identity. Ultimately, neither have delivered on the ambitious goals they set. Brexit embodied a hope shaped by historical and national identity, yet it failed because this hope no longer aligned with the realities of Britain's global influence. It has since become clear that Global Britain faces significant real-world challenges. The hoped-for revitalisation of the Commonwealth as an economic and political bloc has thus far only materialised in limited ways. Many member states are not economically reliant on Britain and increasingly assert their own priorities, thereby diminishing the significance of historical connections. In addition, more and more Commonwealth countries now expect the UK to engage credibly with its colonial legacy as a prerequisite for deepening ties.

Outlook

Britain's imperial past remains a defining element of national identity, yet this past is becoming increasingly at odds with the political and economic realities of the 21st century. Coming to terms with colonial history continues to pose an unresolved challenge for both domestic and foreign policy. The debate will remain part of public discourse – at times more prominent, at others more subdued, and shaped by shifting perspectives ranging from critical engagement with colonial wrongdoing to the nostalgic

idealisation of the Empire. It is precisely this ambivalence that shapes Britain's national self-image today. The United Kingdom now faces the task of developing a balanced identity – both at home and in its foreign policy – that acknowledges its colonial legacy while also meeting contemporary ethical standards.

The country's future role in global affairs will largely depend on how credibly it can move beyond outdated imperial thinking while simultaneously harnessing the potential of the Commonwealth to serve its own strategic interests. Only under these conditions will the UK be able to secure a lasting and relevant role on a multipolar world stage – a role that genuinely reflects the country's ambitions as a global power.

Since the government's revised Integrated Review of 2023 – which may be seen as a realignment of Britain's global role – new geopolitical realities have begun to influence strategic thinking. The new Labour government has pursued a noticeably more pragmatic course. Rather than positioning itself as a global power in the imperial tradition, Britain has placed greater emphasis on international partnerships in an effort to redefine its role in a multipolar world. The focus is now on cooperation – particularly within both NATO and the G7 as well as with the EU. In hindsight, Global Britain appears less a realistic foreign policy strategy than a post-Brexit identity project – a narrative that has ultimately failed to withstand geopolitical realities. The current government is now attempting to combine its outreach to the Trump administration with an equally ambitious policy towards the EU. Looking back, Brexit may ultimately prove to have been an opportunity for the UK to re-emerge from years of global retreat – and to define a new and meaningful role for itself between both sides of the Atlantic.

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Between Idealism and Pragmatism

The One-Dimensional Colonialism Debate between Germany and Tanzania

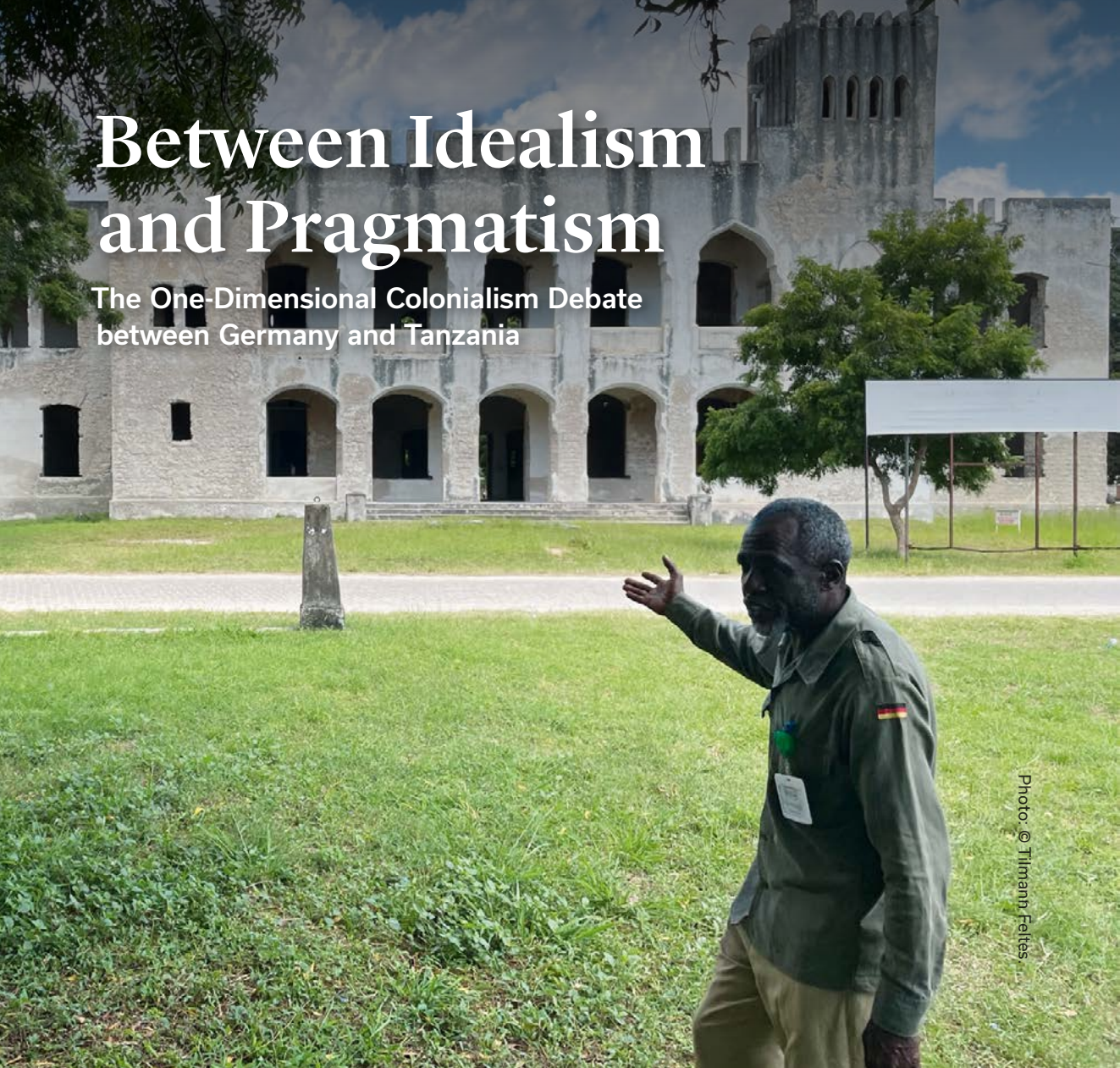


Photo: © Tilmann Feltes

In a Nutshell

The debate surrounding Germany's colonial past in East Africa long remained a marginal political issue in Tanzania, but in recent years, it has gained greater prominence, largely due to efforts by the former German federal government.

In particular, the former leadership of the Federal Foreign Office pursued a policy towards Tanzania that focused unilaterally on the past, often lacking an informed understanding of both historical facts and current debates within Tanzania itself.

Led by the CCM party for over 60 years, Tanzania's government shapes national memory politics and

pursues its own interests in this area, which do not always align with those of the broader population or of the various ethnic groups. Nevertheless, Germany should not attempt to engage in a policy that bypasses the Tanzanian government.

The issue of reparations is likely to occupy the new German government, which should avoid raising unrealistic expectations and should also act with caution, bearing in mind the difficult experience of negotiations with Namibia.



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Although so-called Africa policy – i.e. Germany's foreign policy towards the numerous African countries – still remains a peripheral issue in the German parliament, certain debates do make their way into national headlines from time to time. One such issue is the reappraisal of Germany's colonial past on its neighbouring continent. According to the current coalition agreement between the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU and the Social Democratic SPD, the process of addressing colonialism is to be intensified. Unlike in more prominent policy areas, this field regularly sees constructive debate and underlying cross-party consensus in the political centre, that acknowledges the inexcusable nature of colonial crimes. Nonetheless, differences of opinion remain, especially when the debate on colonialism, originally rooted in cultural policy, risks becoming entangled in the pitfalls of foreign policy. The present article reports from Tanzania on the unintended problems that can arise from a one-dimensional approach to the issue, and outlines what a more strategic realignment of foreign and restitution policy towards Tanzania might look like. The discussion is guided by three main theses, which are elaborated in the following sections:

1. The debate on colonialism as imposed by Germany in recent years is overly simplistic and lacks nuance. As a result, it fails to reflect complex realities on the ground in Tanzania. This can lead to serious foreign policy pitfalls.
2. The process of addressing Germany's colonial past in Tanzania must take place in partnership with local actors. This can – and should – be aligned with Germany's foreign policy interests.

3. German foreign and development policy towards Tanzania needs to be recalibrated in order to avoid diplomatic and cultural dead-ends. With a more pragmatic approach and a deeper understanding of local contexts, it is not too late to break free from the current policy stalemate vis-à-vis Tanzania.

The Political Relevance of Germany's Current Debates on Colonialism

Who Are the Actors, and What Ideologies Do They Represent?

Debates on colonialism and their coverage in the media have increased significantly in Germany in recent years. Key topics include the renaming of streets, the treatment of colonial monuments, the repatriation of human remains¹ and the restitution of cultural artefacts from colonial contexts. Many of these areas still require substantial progress, but there have been some notable achievements that are regarded as a success across different parts of the political spectrum. Museums (e.g. the current Tanzania exhibition at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin), libraries and universities are increasingly engaging with their colonial entanglements and with the origins of their collections, including the question of possible returns to the communities of origin.

However, certain civil society actors and left-leaning members of parliament are repeatedly calling for measures that – if implemented – would place the German government in a precarious foreign policy position. Various associations – such as “Berlin/Augsburg/Munich/Leipzig Postkolonial” and “Decolonize Berlin”

German East Africa was a colony of the German Empire from 1884/1885 to 1918. Its territory encompassed today's Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and a small section of Mozambique. The German Empire had already established colonies in Togo, Cameroon and German South-West Africa in 1884. German East Africa was the most populous German colony and was regarded as having the greatest economic potential.

The foundations of the colony were laid by the German East Africa Company (DOAG), whose representatives began talks with leaders of various local groups in 1884, pressuring them to sign unilaterally drafted treaties that "officially" relinquished all rights to these groups' land in favour of the German colonisers. In February 1885, a "protection charter" signed by Kaiser Wilhelm I authorised Carl Peters – head of the DOAG – to occupy the territories. Colonial administration varied greatly by region: in some areas, German colonial officials did not appear until decades after Germany had claimed ownership. Peters was dismissed from office in 1897 due to his particularly brutal methods.

Daily life in the European colonies in Africa was structured around the notion of separate "racial" groups. There was a fabricated hierarchy that placed whites at the pinnacle of civilisation, while blacks – sometimes not even regarded as full human beings – were at the bottom. This racist mindset served as the justification for a so-called civilising

mission by Europeans, which in turn was used to excuse and legitimise harsh and discriminatory treatment. This racist and now-obsolete mindset was manifest in day-to-day life in German East Africa.

There were repeated uprisings by the indigenous population against German colonial rule. The Maji Maji Rebellion (1905 to 1907/1908) is especially remembered for its high death toll and brutality. The First World War marked the end of German East Africa. Following its defeat, Germany was forced to cede all its colonies, and German East Africa was transferred to British control.

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along with academics and representatives of the Left Party – have called for general compensation for particularly severely affected Tanzanian communities and regions.² Sevim Dağdelen, who was an MP for the left-wing populist BSW party until the beginning of 2025, is also among

those who have demanded reparations: In a parliamentary question to the federal government in June 2024, she implicitly suggested that such payments need not necessarily take place "in coordination with or with the consent of the Tanzanian government".³

Demands for reparations are a central theme of mainstream postcolonial theories and debates. However, these demands are often based on simplified and therefore historically inaccurate representations of the past. The pre-colonial period in Africa – in which slavery, warfare and exploitation already existed – is frequently romanticised, while Western influence up to the present day is uniformly demonised. One of the main criticisms of postcolonial theory – which also becomes evident in the Tanzanian context – is the use of selective historical narratives to justify particular political convictions.⁴

Germany's Engagement in the Colonialism Debate

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Tanzania in 2023 and issued the first-ever apology for Germany's colonial past in a speech delivered at the Maji Maji Museum in Songea. Also present was the responsible Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, who has visited Tanzania three times during her term of office from 2021 to 2025. During each of her trips, the focus has been on Germany's colonial legacy. On her final visit in 2024, she took part in a memorial ceremony in Moshi – an event held at irregular intervals since 2018 and largely coordinated by external civil society initiatives based in Berlin. Apparently inspired by the president's apology the previous year, she delivered a speech in a similar tone, apologising to the victims and figuratively bowing before them. She did so as an official representative of the German government and – as explicitly stated in her speech – also in a personal capacity as a descendant of Carl Peters, co-founder of the colony of German East Africa and therefore speaking on behalf of her family, as well.⁵ However, a planned dialogue with the descendants of Chagga King Mangi Meli – who was executed by the Germans – did not unfold as intended. Despite weeks of preparation, the Tanzanian government intervened on the day of the event and blocked direct contact with the descendants. The intimidated descendants were reminded by the government that in Tanzania, all such matters must first be addressed through official channels – and that any statements should

be submitted to a state commission established expressly for this purpose.⁶ With some understanding of the hegemonic political self-image of the ruling CCM party, which has held uninterrupted power since Tanzania's independence more than 60 years ago and also dominates national memory discourse in the country, such a development might have been anticipated. Tanzania's political system is highly centralised, with individual regions overseen only by Regional Commissioners, who are directly appointed by the president. There are no freely elected regional parliaments.

At the memorial ceremony in Moshi, the Minister of State was accompanied by two activists from the German organisations “Berlin Post-kolonial” and “Flinnworks”, both of which are involved in shaping the reappraisal of Germany's colonial past and also call on the German government to pay reparations to descendants of colonial victims. These activists appear to have had a close relationship with the leadership of the Foreign Office during the term of Germany's previous government because they were invited multiple times and participated in numerous joint events.

The debates in Germany reflect a limited understanding of how Tanzanians themselves remember the colonial period.

In the publicly accessible travel reports of the leadership of the Federal Foreign Office, there are several instances that reveal just how unprofessional the historical accounts in the travel descriptions are. For instance, the period from 1891 to 1919 is cited as the duration of the colony of German East Africa – an error that overlooks the actual beginning of colonial occupation by six to seven years.⁷ Furthermore, the reports claim that one-third of the population died as a result of the Maji Maji War. That figure continues to circulate in various online articles, but this claim originally stems from a Tanzanian

PhD student's estimate dating back to 1973 and was clearly labelled as a rough approximation at the time. Rather than citing a polemical and unverifiable figure, it would have been more appropriate to acknowledge that the precise number of deaths cannot be determined but that current estimates range between 200,000 and 300,000.⁸

During all three visits, the Minister of State met with descendants of prominent individuals who had been executed by the Germans during the colonial period, and she raised the issue of the return of human remains and cultural objects with senior Tanzanian politicians, failing to place greater emphasis on other topics or at least link them more closely to the important issue of the colonial past. As one expert aptly put it, "You can't help but get the impression that the federal government [the cabinet of Olaf Scholz, editor's note] has no systematic plan for how it intends to proactively undertake a reappraisal of Germany's colonial history."⁹

Culture of Remembrance in Tanzania: National Unity versus Local Diversity

What the debates in Germany have in common is a limited understanding of how Tanzanians themselves remember the colonial period, of how prominent the issue is within Tanzanian society and politics and of the range of views held locally, some of which are mutually contradictory. In order to steer Germany's well-intentioned but often poorly executed efforts at addressing the colonial past back towards a more strategic and genuinely partnership-based approach – one that would also be recognised as such by the Tanzanian government – it is essential to understand how the issue is debated within Tanzania itself.

It is only since 2023 that the first academic publications dealing exclusively with how the German colonial era is remembered in Tanzania have begun to appear.¹⁰ Key insights from these studies have evidently not yet reached those responsible for shaping Germany's foreign policy towards Tanzania in the recent past.

However, these perspectives are crucial when it comes to making well-considered, nuanced decisions.

The state-led practices of remembrance are at times rejected by the wider population.

In Tanzania, there is a wide range of forms of remembrance that may often be surprising from a German perspective and that may sometimes seem to fundamentally contradict one another. The dominant actor is clearly the nation state, which has since independence aimed to establish a largely homogeneous culture of remembrance in order to support nation-building and foster patriotism. The Maji Maji War is the most significant event in this context and is a common theme in ceremonial speeches by Tanzanian politicians. In the state narrative, the Maji Maji War is regarded as the founding myth of the Tanzanian nation because it is seen as the first time 20 different ethnic groups "united" to resist German colonial forces.¹¹ In the south of the country in particular, the war is commemorated with monuments, museums, streets, radio stations, restaurants, hotels and even a football club and its stadium being named after it.

Nevertheless, these state-led practices of remembrance are at times rejected by the wider population. One example is the obelisk in Kilwa Kivinje, originally erected to commemorate uprisings in the 1880s but later repurposed by the government as a memorial to the Maji Maji War. This change gave rise to such strong local opposition that residents spent years urging the government to restore its original meaning – something that has only recently been done. Similarly, the annual remembrance days for the victims of the Maji Maji War have been repeatedly marked by disputes between government representatives, the Ngoni people and the other 19 ethnic groups involved in the conflict. The latter have criticised the disproportionate focus on





Waiting for the German President: Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan is seen ready to receive her counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier at Dar es Salaam airport in October 2023. While Steinmeier travelled with a large business delegation, subsequent visits by senior German Foreign Office staff focussed almost exclusively on the past. Photo: © Achille Abboud, Imago.

the Ngoni, even threatening to boycott the commemorations in 2023. These examples clearly indicate that the Tanzanian government pursues its own interests in shaping remembrance culture – interests that do not always align with those of the population at large.

The reappraisal of colonial history has gained momentum since the visits by German officials.

Knowledge of such local disputes – and the sensitivity that comes with it – was not clearly reflected in the visits to Songea by the German President and the Minister of State, which thus led to local dissatisfaction following the visits. President Steinmeier's speech focused almost entirely on Ngoni leader Songea Mbano and was addressed directly to Mbano's descendants.¹² The other 19 ethnic groups were not mentioned, nor was there any acknowledgement of the fact that the war had actually been initiated by members of the Matumbi people. The Minister of State's activities in the south of the country were likewise primarily focused on the Ngoni people. Although the main issue here appears

to have been a lack of awareness of local specificities rather than ill intent, the conduct of official German representatives during their visits further contributed to the marginalisation of other population groups. These groups have long been calling for greater recognition and visibility, also through elected representatives in Tanzanian parliamentary debates. Local voices have reported that following the visits and the engagement with selected communities, the Tanzanian government first had to “clean up” and restore order to what Germany had disrupted.¹³

Tanzanian Politics and the Colonial Legacy

The reappraisal of colonial history remains a marginal topic in Tanzania’s parliament, but it has gained momentum since the visits by German officials. In particular, representatives

from southern Tanzania – a region that suffered severely under German colonial rule – have called not only for the construction of museums and memorials, but also for broader infrastructure and development support.¹⁴ In 2017, opposition MP Vedasto Ngombale (CUF) called for German reparations to the descendants of victims of the Maji Maji War in a question to then Defence Minister Hussein Mwinyi. While the minister publicly supported the idea,¹⁵ the cabinet appeared divided on the issue, and one year later, Foreign Minister Augustine Mahiga firmly rejected any demands for reparations and the return of cultural objects at a meeting with his German counterpart, Heiko Maas.¹⁶ During the same parliamentary term, the Tanzanian opposition also called for the dinosaur skeleton currently being held in the Museum of Natural History in Berlin to be returned to Tanzania. These requests were likewise dismissed by the



Founding myth: The Maji Maji War is the cornerstone of Tanzania’s official historical narrative. In the south of the country, even a football club is named after it. Photo: © Sebastian Laschet.

government in parliament, citing high maintenance costs, a lack of exhibition facilities and limited economic value.¹⁷

As a representative of the same government – and in contradiction to previous statements – Tanzanian Ambassador Abdallah Possi made a statement in 2020 calling for the return of all cultural objects and human remains. His remark appeared to be an initial attempt to gauge the response of the German side, and he went on to state that reparations would follow as the next step: “How this all develops will depend very much on the response of the German government. If they are open to negotiations, things will be straightforward. If they are not, then we may pursue not only a moral, but also a legal route.”¹⁸ The ambassador explained the timing of these demands by pointing to successful developments in comparable cases in other countries, to “activists who are increasingly speaking out – both in Berlin and in Tanzania” – and “the growing willingness among German policymakers to address these issues.”¹⁹ Since the visit by President Steinmeier, calls for reparations have also become more prominent within Tanzania itself.²⁰

No formal agreement has yet been drawn up between the two governments regarding the colonial past, nor has the Tanzanian government officially demanded reparations. This is partly due to the fact that on the Tanzanian side, there is still no clear political strategy on how to proceed. However, three separate committees have already been established in order to provide clarity: an expert committee, a committee made up of state secretaries and ministers and a negotiation committee tasked with ensuring the return of all human remains and cultural objects.²¹ The request for an initial visit by this committee to Berlin was approved in December 2024 by the former German government and took place in early 2025. Since then – and beginning even beforehand – Tanzania has been calling for the establishment of a similar commission on the German side. The new German government will now have to decide how to approach this process.

Pragmatism over Idealism: A Call for a More Strategic Approach to the Colonialism Debate

In recent years, it has become clear that an idealistic and one-dimensional approach to addressing Germany’s colonial legacy in Tanzania risks leading to cultural and diplomatic dead-ends. However, it is not too late to realign German foreign policy towards Tanzania – a realignment that must also take German interests into account. In order to achieve this goal, it is crucial to understand the dynamics triggered by past actions and demands as well as the potentially negative consequences they may yet produce.

The apology on the part of the German President is a welcome development.

The greatest stumbling block will likely be the demand for reparations that is now to be expected. In order to prepare a forward-looking dialogue that is less time-consuming and less prone to conflict, lessons must be drawn from the stalled negotiations with Namibia. In addition, any payments should not go directly to specific population groups without the approval of the Tanzanian government. This could potentially lead to the exclusion of communities that are not well represented in Tanzania’s mainstream remembrance culture. The Tanzanian government has already stated that it considers any direct engagement with individual groups to be a disruption to national unity that the country will no longer tolerate. However, past experience indicates that the Tanzanian government itself favours certain groups. Given the country’s ethnic diversity – with over 120 groups – distributing such funds would be even more complex than in a country such as Namibia. Whether it comes from German civil society or increasingly from Tanzania itself, any further talk of reparations only risks creating unrealistic expectations. Germany



should be prepared for a Tanzanian proposal to reframe reparations as additional development cooperation. Given the already-above-average development budget allocated to Tanzania, such proposals should be critically questioned. Germany's foreign policy has sent out mixed signals in this area – not least through its close cooperation with activist groups that advocate reparations and that have been given platforms at events in Tanzania.

Unlike in Namibia, where the lengthy negotiation process has meant that the right moment for a high-level apology has been missed, such an apology already took place in Tanzania with the visit of the German President. This is a welcome development. What matters now is both ensuring that any future visits or apologies are informed by a deep awareness of local cultural dynamics and taking care to avoid perceptions of favouritism towards a few selected ethnic groups, which would exacerbate existing inter-ethnic tensions. Since this has already occurred in the past, future visits must involve greater consultation with both the Tanzanian government and experts familiar with the specific local context.

Pragmatism over Ideology

Germany's efforts to reassess its colonial past and foster remembrance culture are too important to be viewed solely as left-leaning political causes: Given the risks to foreign policy outlined above, it is important to ensure that this area is not monopolised by one end of the political spectrum. The German government should avoid offering concessions on demand, should refrain from sending out the wrong signals and should give greater weight to its own foreign policy interests. For this reason, engaging critically with the past must be more strategically linked to future-oriented cooperation.

Although colonial atrocities must never be downplayed and the colonial system continues to influence society, the economy and politics in some areas, Tanzanian partners should not be cast in a perpetual victim role that frames

all failings of the country's own autocratic government as ongoing consequences of colonialism. This postcolonial mindset is ultimately self-defeating as it reproduces the very clichés of African countries – that is, of being passive and helpless – that it seeks to challenge. In order to build a culture of remembrance that does justice to both sides, the Tanzanian perspectives described would need to be given greater consideration in Germany. If these perspectives continue to be ignored in the German debate, this would amount to a renewed marginalisation of formerly colonised societies. Unfortunately, the impression to date has often been that despite aspiring to engage in dialogue on equal footing, actions have been driven more by ideology than by a careful engagement with individual, cultural and political sensitivities on the ground. Even on the issue of the repatriation of human remains, for example, scant attention has been paid to the fact that the Tanzanian government is only at the beginning of its own internal processes. The Minister of State responsible at the Federal Foreign Office later acknowledged that unlike other consulted governments, the Tanzanian authorities showed “little interest in this topic”.²² This insight reveals once again that African countries differ widely and that a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate.

The colonial present can be seen particularly in the actions of Russia and China in Africa.

Another risk lies in placing too much focus on colonial history as the central theme of bilateral relations. This would mean missing out on opportunities for positive engagement in other areas, such as economic cooperation. Germany's new government should make this clear to its Tanzanian counterparts. While the German President's visit sent out a valuable signal by including a large business delegation, all subsequent visits by senior Foreign Office representatives have focused on the past. However,

Germany has much to offer in addressing current challenges – to the benefit of both sides. In this context, Germany’s extensive development cooperation should also be more strongly emphasised and aligned with a clearer strategic focus. Traditional development projects or concepts such as a “feminist foreign policy” are not high on the list of priorities in many African countries: Indeed, most governments are primarily concerned with staying in power and with creating jobs for their young and growing populations.

Russia and China as New “Anti-Colonial” Actors?

Only an integrated approach that combines economic cooperation, diplomacy and development will allow Germany both to present a credible alternative to authoritarian models and to strengthen its position in Africa. Despite the necessary reckoning with colonial history, today’s geopolitical landscape makes it clear that there is also such a thing as a “colonial present”, as can be seen particularly in the actions of Russia and China in Africa. These states benefit from the missteps of Western governments and use disinformation campaigns to present themselves, in a strategically more savvy way, as supposedly “anti-colonial” actors. For instance, Russia increasingly refers to its allegedly anti-colonial past²³ in contrast to the West – a narrative promoted through large-scale propaganda campaigns, such as those by RT in Dar es Salaam. Meanwhile, China is frequently described as neocolonial due to its aggressive economic power play and its tough stance towards its African debtors.

Germany’s frequently naïve foreign policy only plays into the hands of such anti-democratic narratives. This broader geopolitical context underscores why a more strategic approach to Germany’s colonial legacy is important – not only to do justice to the past, but also to navigate future competition in the region. In this light, it is a positive sign that the CDU/CSU and SPD coalition agreement states, “We will firmly oppose Russian and Chinese influence in Africa, together with our partners.”²⁴

Addressing Current Challenges Is the Priority for Our Partners on the Ground

In the case of Tanzania, colonial history does not play a major role in political and public discourse. Our African partners are less interested in retrospective soul-searching than in gaining greater support in facing up to the pressing challenges of the present. The former German government brought the issue of remembrance into bilateral relations too quickly – sometimes at the risk of alienating Tanzanian politics and society. A gridlock similar to that seen in Germany’s negotiations with Namibia is even more likely in Tanzania due to the country’s own internal cultural and political dynamics. Indeed, Tanzanian calls for “reparations on our terms” are only just beginning to emerge.

In conclusion, it seems unlikely that a misguided debate on colonialism would have taken root in Tanzania without German involvement. Now that the issue has gained traction, however, the new German government will have to deal with it for longer than it might wish – and likely with negative implications for the broader scope of German development cooperation.

– translated from German –

- 1 This is particularly significant because in many African cultures, the mourning process is only considered complete once human remains have been properly buried.
- 2 Tanzania-Network 2023: Our Demands. List of demands on the occasion of the visit of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Songea (Tanzania) on 01.11.2023, 26 Oct 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/igcx> [29 Apr 2025].
- 3 German Bundestag 2024: Fragen für die Fragestunde der 177. Sitzung des Deutschen Bundestages am Mittwoch, dem 26. Juni 2024, Bundestagsdrucksache 20/11888, 21 Jun 2024, p. 15, in: <https://ogy.de/sc9b> [6 May 2025].
- 4 For example, the Left Party in the Bundestag has described the Maji Maji War as genocide – contrary both to current academic findings and to the position of the Tanzanian government. While the scorched-earth tactics and mass killings used at the time would have been classified as war crimes under international law even as it was at the time, current research does not support a definitive legal classification of the events as genocide. See Bachmann, Klaus 2018: Genocidal Empires. German Colonialism in Africa and the Third Reich, pp.174–176, in: <https://ogy.de/v2c8> [4 Jun 2025]; Haug, Frederik 2018: Verbrannte Erde. Die Haltung der Bundesregierung hinsichtlich des kolonialen Gewalthandelns des Deutschen Kaiserreichs in Deutsch-Ostafrika, pp.23, 55, in: <https://ogy.de/i7vt> [4 Jun 2025].
- 5 Carl Peters played a central role in the colonisation of German East Africa and was a controversial figure even during the colonial period due to his brutal methods, which earned him the nickname *Hängepeters* (literally: “Hangman Peters”).
- 6 Official title: “National Committee for Discussions on the Return of Antiquities, Artefacts, and Human Remains from Germany”. 19 members of the delegation visited Berlin for the first time in early 2025 and held talks with the senior leadership of the Federal Foreign Office. A similar commission was also established in Cameroon in 2022.
- 7 Keul, Katja 2022: Reisebericht Tansania. (10.–12. April 2022), 25 Apr 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/6tok> [29 Apr 2025]. In the academic literature, the beginning of the colonial period is generally dated to either 1884 or 1885 depending on interpretation because it was not until 1885 that Kaiser Wilhelm I issued the official order to occupy the territories claimed by Carl Peters in 1884. The year 1885 thus marks formal international recognition and the establishment of a “protectorate”. By contrast, the year 1891 refers only to the full administrative takeover from the German East Africa Company by the German Empire. In reality, colonial occupation began well before 1891, including with the deployment of officials and military conflict. In another official report, Keul cites the correct starting date.
- 8 At a symposium in 2025, however, the Minister of State gave the wrong year for the execution of the African leaders of the Maji Maji War by German forces – a surprising mistake given that this very event had been one of the main themes of her trips to Tanzania. Keul, Katja 2025: Symposium in Gedenken an 140 Jahre Berliner Konferenz 1884/85, speech, 31 Mar 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/4dme> [29 Apr 2025].
- 9 Fues, Thomas 2023: Koloniales Raubgut in Deutschland: Was jetzt geschehen sollte, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Blog Joint Futures 27, 23 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/48fu> [4 May 2025].
- 10 Kirey, Reginald Elias 2023: Memories of German Colonialism in Tanzania, in: <https://ogy.de/walp> [4 Jun 2025]; Laschet, Sebastian 2024: Erinnerungen an Deutsch-Ostafrika und der Umgang mit kolonialer Vergangenheit in Tansania, in: <https://ogy.de/idem> [4 Jun 2025].
- 11 However, even though these ethnic groups were fighting the same enemy, the resistance was locally organised and fragmented, and it is thus in fact inaccurate to speak of a coordinated, collective effort. Nevertheless, this historical detail is secondary to the state narrative.
- 12 Steinmeier, Frank-Walter 2023: Besuch des Maji-Maji-Museums, speech, 1 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/wjq2> [29 Apr 2025].
- 13 Remembrance of the German colonial era remains present in nearly all regions of the country. Just as in Germany, there are also colonial-apologist narratives in Tanzania that sharply contradict the official state narrative. These are often based on ahistorical reasoning that associates the German colonial period solely with positive elements. At some German war cemeteries in Tanzania, there are still no explanatory panels that critically contextualise outdated colonial inscriptions, for example. Cemeteries such as the one in Sakarani Park in Tanga continue to be actively used by far-right groups, such as the “Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen”, in some cases with financial support from Germany.
- 14 Tanzanian Parliament 2017: Kikao cha Hamsini na Tano – Tarehe 28 Juni, 2017, pp.31–37, in: <https://ogy.de/zw38> [29 Apr 2025]; Tanzanian Parliament 2021: Kikao cha Nne – Tarehe 5 Februari, 2021, pp.84–86, in: <https://ogy.de/ss5x> [29 Apr 2025]; Tanzanian Parliament 2024: Kikao cha Sita – Tarehe 15 Aprili, 2024, pp.39–41, in: <https://ogy.de/jck1> [29 Apr 2025].
- 15 Tanzanian Parliament 2017: Kikao cha Nane – Tarehe 8 Februari, 2017, pp.16–18, in: <https://ogy.de/d6gn> [29 Apr 2025].
- 16 Zeit Online 2018: Tansania will keine Entschädigung von Deutschland, 4 May 2018, in: <https://ogy.de/nxde> [29 Apr 2025].
- 17 Tanzanian Parliament 2017, n.14, pp.31–37.

- 18 Hüntzschel, Jörg 2020: Ein Saurier und die Folgen, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 5 Feb 2020, in: <https://ogy.de/iiwo> [29 Apr 2025].
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Kibwana, Thomas Joel 2023: Mr Steinmeier, Thanks for Your Apology. Now, Let's Talk About Reparations, The Chanzo, 2 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/jqob> [3 May 2025].
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- 23 Dobronravin, Nikolai 2025: Russia's Solidarity with African Countries in the Struggle against Neocolonialism, Valdai Club Foundation, 10 Apr 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/Oogl> [3 May 2025].
- 24 CDU / CSU / SPD 2025: Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, p.128, in: <https://ogy.de/ufg3> [4 Jun 2025].

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A statue of Hubert Lyautey was covered with red paint in Paris in June 2020. Lyautey was a champion of colonialism and acted as Resident-General of French Morocco from 1912 to 1925.
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