

**Statement of  
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**Subcommittee on  
Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International  
Organizations  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

**China in Africa: The New Colonialism?**

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

It is a privilege for me to appear before you today, and I thank you for this opportunity.

My name is Gordon Guthrie Chang. I am a writer and live in Bedminster, New Jersey.

I worked as a lawyer in Hong Kong from 1981-1991 and in Shanghai from 1996-2001. Between these two periods, I frequently traveled to Asia from California. I regularly go to Asia now.

I am the author of *The Coming Collapse of China* (Random House, 2001) and *Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes On the World* (Random House, 2006).

I now write regularly about China, North Korea, and the rest of Asia for The Daily Beast, The National Interest, and other publications.

This testimony looks at how China views Sub-Saharan Africa, especially with regard to Beijing's expanding strategic ambitions. I discuss these points in the context of colonialism.

I conclude that Xi Jinping, the Chinese ruler, believes his country should be the world's only sovereign state, which is the essence of colonialism, and that today his country's relations with Africa resemble a new form of colonialism.

Moreover, I believe Xi's ambitions for Africa, however one characterizes them, threaten America.

### **Africa's Special Position in the Chinese World**

In official statements, Beijing maintains all nations are equals, and it says China seeks friendly relations with all.

Chinese leaders, however, consider Africa special. That special status is one the continent enjoyed from the first years of the People's Republic when Mao Zedong, the founder of the regime, looked far afield for support in his various struggles with Moscow for leadership of the communist bloc.

These days, Beijing still keeps ties with the continent warm. It has been, for instance, a tradition of China's leaders to go to Africa on their first trips abroad. Xi Jinping visited Tanzania, South Africa, and the Republic of the Congo during his initial trip as the country's president, in March 2013. There is no year when high-ranking Chinese officials do not make high-profile visits to the continent.

And Beijing does not neglect handouts in maintaining the relationship. Beijing claims that more than half of its foreign aid goes to Africa.

Beijing obviously wants favors in return from African states, and not just them providing a reliable supply of raw materials and ready markets for China's manufactures. Increasingly, Beijing seeks support for its geopolitical goals. Foreign Minister Wang Yi hinted at that last month in Beijing. "Both sides have always thought that China and the African Union should speak with a common voice and coordinate a common position on the world stage," he said at the seventh round of the China-African Union Strategic Dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Manero, writing in the Harvard Political Review, noted that "there is a strong correlation between the amount of aid given, and the support for China's foreign policy objectives."<sup>2</sup>

China needs African support because Xi Jinping wants to show he is the commanding voice of the developing world. At one time, Beijing denied it provided a model for others, but now China's leader openly boasts about it.

The world heard China promote its model during Xi's 203-minute Work Report, delivered at the 19th National Communist Party Congress last October. "It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence," Xi said, referring to his model, branded as "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."<sup>3</sup>

Xi, however, has ambitions beyond helping the developing world. There are indications he in fact believes that not only should China's model be the world's model but also that China's leader should be the world's leader.

Xi suggests the world would be peaceful if Beijing ruled "All Under Heaven." This *tianxia* worldview, which underpinned two millennia of Chinese history under the emperors, is increasingly evident in China's pronouncements and imagery and is of course fundamentally inconsistent with the existence of a multitude of sovereign states. So when Xi speaks about "a community of common destiny," he is most likely thinking of China's rich imperial past and suggesting he should hold sway over all domains, near and far.

The notion of China controlling the entire world is breathtaking—not to mention ludicrous—but Beijing's house scholars actively study the application of the *tianxia* system to the entire planet and Chinese officials offer it up in public for consideration, as Fei-Ling Wang of the Georgia Institute of Technology notes in a new book, *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*.

Xi, for instance, increasingly employs *tianxia* language in his pronouncements. "The Chinese have always held that the world is united and all under heaven are one family," he declared in his 2017 New Year's Message.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Foreign Minister Wang, in *Study Times*, the Central Party School newspaper, last September wrote that Xi Jinping's "thought on diplomacy" "has made innovations on and transcended the traditional Western theories of international relations for the past 300 years."<sup>5</sup> Wang with his time reference is almost certainly pointing to the system of sovereign states, which traces its roots to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648.

Wang's use of "transcended," consequently, hints that Xi wants a world without sovereign states—or at least no more than one of them. China, in these and other pronouncements, is now making the case that it should be the world's only sovereign, the view that Chinese emperors maintained.

The trend of recent comments warns us that China does not want to live within the current Westphalian system or even to adjust it. Its leaders, from every indication, are thinking of replacing it altogether. Chinese words, therefore, appear ominous, not benign, a signal that China will try to do away with what is seen as Westphalia's cacophony with *tianxia*'s orderliness.

And that brings us to China's relationships with African nations. Beijing vehemently denies, as some influential Africans charge, that it is practicing colonialism or neo-colonialism on the continent. "We absolutely will not take the old path of Western colonists, and we absolutely will not sacrifice Africa's ecological environment and long-term interests," Wang Yi in 2015 said to Chinese state broadcaster China Central Television while visiting Kenya.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, Beijing's frequent use of *tianxia* language is inconsistent with its denials of colonial ambitions. China, if it could implement the *tianxia* system it is promoting, would divest all other states, including African ones, of sovereignty. That, of course, would be the essence of colonialism.

### Beijing's Views Today

Xi Jinping's imperial pretensions tell us he wants to be a colonial master, but is he one today?

The Chinese leadership, unfortunately, holds views that foster colonial relations. There are two in particular. First, China's current crop of leaders have a brutish conception of the world.

"China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact," said Yang Jiechi in July 2010.<sup>7</sup> If there is one sentence that sums up how Beijing in fact views the international system, Yang's arrogant assertion, part of an extraordinary half-hour rant, is it.

Yang, then China's foreign minister, did not have Africa in mind while uttering those contemptuous words—he was in Hanoi and glaring at his counterpart from Singapore at the time—but China still looks at Africa in the same way it perceives Singapore—less powerful than mighty China.

Second, to make matters worse, Chinese officials surely see African people as inferior to their own kind. That was painfully evident last month in the 14-minute skit on China Central Television's Spring Festival Gala, the premier television show in China. In "Let's Celebrate Together," a Chinese actress in blackface played the part of a Kenyan mother, who had an enormous bosom and ridiculously large buttocks. Worse, her sidekick was a human-size monkey.<sup>8</sup> The skit was intended to praise Xi Jinping's signature One Belt One Road initiative.

Kenyans, not to mention some Chinese viewers, were outraged at the racist and derogatory depictions of Africans. In recent years, there have been many ugly portrayals of Africans in Chinese media, and although this was not the worst—by no means was it so—this sketch was striking because China Central Television, by airing this to about 800 million viewers, made it clear Chinese officials think of Africans as objects of derision and even subhuman. And because the skit was carried by the state broadcaster, this view

of Africans is apparently shared by the Beijing leadership, which, alarmingly, is making more frequent race-based appeals to the Chinese people.

It is, therefore, hard to think that China's leaders see Africans as equals, and perceptions of inequality suggests they also hold neo-colonial attitudes. The skit, after all, showed patronizing Chinese helping poor Africans who "loved" China because of all the good things it provided Africa.

As a result of the skit, Africans are talking even more about Chinese racism and colonialism. The *Daily Nation*, the leading Nairobi newspaper, quoted a Kenyan student asking "whether Kenya is truly a valuable trade partner to China or just another cow they are milking."<sup>9</sup>

That is the critical question. African nations, at least at first glance, are trading and accepting Beijing's investment and aid freely. The relationship is not colonial in the 19th century sense of the concept, and African states have retained their sovereignty.

Yet the nature of colonialism has been changing. So what is the concept today?

Beijing, perhaps inadvertently, last month revealed a two-part test for colonialism as it rebutted comments from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that China was a "new imperial power" in Latin America. The *Global Times*, the tabloid controlled by *People's Daily*, said in an editorial that Latin American countries were trading and doing business with China of their own "free will" and "for mutual benefit" and that "China has no military bases in the region and has dispatched no troops to any of the Latin American countries."<sup>10</sup>

China may not be an imperial power in Latin America, but in Africa it could be according to the *Global Times* formulation. First, some of the dealings between Beijing and African states seems to be tainted by both corruption and subtle forms of coercion, thereby undercutting African free will.

Second, China established its first overseas military base last year, in Djibouti. Many expect a second one, in Walvis Bay in Namibia, in the not too distant future. Beijing has sent "peacekeepers"—troops—to South Sudan under the U.N. banner.

There are, of course, other definitions of colonialism. "Imperialism, for me, inevitably involves some form of foreign domination, which results in substantially altering the target population or polity; either gradually or suddenly it loses the ability to resist," wrote acclaimed journalist Howard French in *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*. "In *The Abacus and the Sword*, his account of Japan's takeover of Korea, which was launched at the end of the nineteenth century, Peter Duus wrote that imperialism requires 'an available victim—a weaker, less organized, or less advanced society or state unable to defend itself against outside intrusion.'"<sup>11</sup>

The French-Duus formulation, which is as broad as the definition can get and still retain meaning, makes China look like a colonial power in Africa. As an initial matter, there are the Chinese-created moral hazards. Although Beijing provides “no-strings-attached” and low-interest loans—what looks like the apparent opposite of colonization—this easy money encourages governments to spend irresponsibly, creating the debt crises of the future. “China is co-opting states into its sphere of influence by burying them in debt,” writes New Delhi-based China watcher Brahma Chellaney. The title of his article from last month says it all: “China Ensnares Vulnerable States in a Debt Trap.”<sup>12</sup> At the moment, China is trying to renegotiate loans made imprudently to Zambia.

With the enticement of low-cost loans, Beijing gets the opportunity to corrupt officials, obtain the rights to extract minerals and hydrocarbons, flood local markets with manufactured goods, send its workers to Africa, and strain local economies with trade imbalances.

Beijing has, in part by happenstance, developed what French calls “a kind of modern-day barter system” by which Chinese enterprises build infrastructure with payment in the form of natural resources.<sup>13</sup>

Once it locks in countries and makes them dependent, Beijing gains support for its geopolitical goals. One of those goals is the undermining of democracy and the consequent fortification of authoritarianism.

China, in short, is spreading its economic and political model to Africa. In some places this Chinese system has benefitted local populations, and in others it has not. Africa, struggling to shake off the misrule of the so-called “big men,” does not need any more failing states like China-supported Zimbabwe.

As the Zimbabwe example shows, Beijing is affecting the course of African development at a crucial moment in its history. “This is going to determine Africa’s future for the next fifty years,” Ed Brown, an executive at one of Ghana’s think tanks, told French, referring to the relationship with China. “The big question is whether African countries are dynamic enough to take advantage, or whether they’ll end up being the appendage of somebody else all over again.”<sup>14</sup>

Africa’s economy is mostly vibrant as is its demography. Therefore, the region should do well as long as politics does not get in the way. The risk is that Africa becomes a Chinese appendage and falls back, failing to meet its great potential.

For some African countries, mid-century will be an inflection point when population peaks and natural resources run out. The next three decades, consequently, will be crucial. The challenge for these nations will be to take advantage of what Beijing offers without being held hostage to Chinese designs for them.

### America's Stake

Some, like William Hawkins, believe America does not have many interests in Africa to defend.<sup>15</sup> Even if that is true, the U.S., with global reach and responsibilities, has a general stake in the success of all parts of the world, both from economic and security points of view.

We prosper, despite what many think, when other portions of the planet also do well. China, because its relations with Africa are often predatory, can stunt growth there.

And, whatever one may think, there is one crucial interest all Americans have in Africa. Africa gives China the ability to threaten the U.S. homeland. Beijing wants a military base at Walvis Bay, and China's leaders have long looked at raising their red flag over the Atlantic off the African coast. In the Azores, specifically the island of Terceira, Chinese aircraft could control the mouth of the Mediterranean and would be closer to New York than Pearl Harbor is to Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup>

Hawkins may or may not be right about a lack of immediate American interests, but there is no sense in ignoring the potential implications of Chinese control of Africa. A belligerent China in Asia is bad enough. A dangerous China much closer to our shores is far worse.

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- <sup>1</sup> “Wang Yi: In the Historic Process of Africa Standing Up, Getting Stronger, China Willing to Be Africa’s Most Reliable Strategic Partner,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 8, 2018, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzd/t1533145.shtml>.
- <sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Manero, “China’s Investment in Africa: The New Colonialism?” Harvard Political Review, February 3, 2017, <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/chinas-investment-in-africa-the-new-colonialism/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Xi Jinping, “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,” 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> “Chairman Xi Jinping’s 2017 New Year’s Message,” Xinhua News Agency, December 31, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-12/31/c\\_1120227034.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-12/31/c_1120227034.htm).
- <sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Forge Ahead Under the Guidance of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Thought on Diplomacy,” September 1, 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1489143.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1489143.shtml). For more, see “China Says Xi Transcends West as a Diplomatic ‘Pioneer,’” Reuters, September 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-congress-diplomacy/china-says-xi-transcends-west-as-a-diplomatic-pioneer-idUSKCN1BC4KQ>.
- <sup>6</sup> “China Will Not Take Path of ‘Western Colonists’ in Africa—Foreign Minister,” Reuters, January 12, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-africa/china-will-not-take-path-of-western-colonists-in-africa-foreign-minister-idUSL3N0UR1J920150112>.
- <sup>7</sup> John Pomfret, “U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China,” *Washington Post*, July 30, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> See James Wilkinson, “‘Racist’ Chinese Spring Festival Gala TV Show Causes Uproar Over ‘Blackface’ and ‘Big Bottoms,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), February 16, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2133558/racist-chinese-spring-festival-gala-tv-show-causes-consternation>.
- <sup>9</sup> Elvis Ondieki, “Chinese Embassy Denies Racism in ‘Blackface’ Skit,” *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), February 18, 2018, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Chinese-embassy-denies-racism-in-skit-Lunar-New-Year/1056-4310180-y1uiew/index.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> “Tillerson Shows Disdain for China’s Constructive Approach to Latin America,” editorial, *Global Times* (Beijing), February 3, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1087971.shtml>.



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- <sup>11</sup> Howard W. French, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), p. 259.
- <sup>12</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "China Ensnares Vulnerable States in a Debt Trap," *Nikkei Asian Review*, February 20, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Brahma-Chellaney/China-ensnares-vulnerable-states-in-a-debt-trap>.
- <sup>13</sup> French, *China's Second Continent*, p. 4.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>15</sup> See William R. Hawkins, "A Minor U.S. Role in Africa," *Family Security Matters*, November 17, 2017, <http://www.familysecuritymatters.org/publications/detail/a-minor-us-role-in-africa>.
- <sup>16</sup> See Gordon G. Chang, "Red Flag Over the Atlantic," *National Review*, November 4, 2012, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2012/11/red-flag-over-atlantic-gordon-g-chang/>.