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“China in Africa: The New Colonialism?”

Thank you to Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Bass and the honorable members of this committee. It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss China’s engagement with Africa. I want to begin with a note that I think will contextualize my remarks. Africa is a diverse continent with fifty-four countries (except for Liberia and Ethiopia) that share a legacy of colonialism which has shaped political and economic institutions, culture and its position in the global system. When discussing China’s engagement with Africa, some generalizations may be appropriate, but to have a substantive discussion, we should consider the features of the commitments on a case by case basis. In the spirit of specificity, I will focus my testimony on Kenya’s ties with China to hopefully illustrate some of the nuances and ambiguities of China’s role in Africa.

In 2008, the Kenyan government implemented its Vision 2030 development program. The program’s goal was to transform Kenya into a newly industrializing, middle-income country with far-reaching political, economic, and social reforms. The Vision 2030 Delivery Secretariat, the body responsible for administering the development policy, has undertaken a robust agenda that focuses on large-scale infrastructure. Simultaneously, China’s Belt and Road initiative, a project aimed at developing overland and maritime trade routes connecting Asian, European, and African countries correspond with Kenya’s goal to secure its role as the gateway to Eastern and Central Africa. Kenya’s geostrategic position provides much-desired access to consumer markets as well as the facilitation of extractive industries in South Sudan, Uganda, and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC. Both Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road initiative call for substantial investments in Africa’s transport sectors. Infrastructure is the third largest sector that the Chinese are engaged in on the continent of Africa after mining and financial services. On the macro-level, the rationale is that investments in telecommunications, energy, and transport will increase foreign direct investment in the country and the region. On the micro-level, there is an assumption that large-scale capital investments in infrastructure will promote economic growth by integrating rural areas with urban business centers. For Kenya, investments in transport are viewed as an imperative, because its landlocked neighbors such as Tanzania, South Sudan, and Uganda rely on its road and rail network, along with the ports in Mombasa and the one slated to be built in Lamu. Conversely, the East Africa region, home to 230 million consumers, is an attractive destination for products, particularly from China.

Foreign direct investment by emerging economies such as China has been a vital part of Kenya’s growth strategy. Kenyan policymakers believe that the delivery of mega transport projects will boost their competitiveness on the global market and increase the possibilities for high-value production in different sectors. China’s engagement with Africa has included significant debt-financed investments in transport infrastructure. This engagement brings inevitable conflicts between diverse actors from China and local Kenyan communities, who must contend with the ambiguities of China’s role in Africa and its implications for labor markets and production.

Within the Kenyan context, where exogenous factors have historically driven development, infrastructure delivery is a political process, and in the absence of quality decision-making that is participatory and transparent, government and business elites overlook counter-channels of discourse that provide a nuanced critique of the outcome of exogenously-led infrastructure.

First, these projects are primarily financed by Chinese banks or institutions and financing is tied to Chinese companies being awarded the contracts. African governments value turnkey projects and the accompanied funding. China's physical presence building roads, railways, dams, and pipelines provide a sense of tangible progress. African leaders applaud China's responsiveness to requests for development projects. However, in response to high rates of youth unemployment, particularly in Kenya, youth have protested for jobs, decent wages, safe working conditions, and environmental sustainability—all promises made by both the Kenyan and Chinese governments when projects were announced. Second, infrastructure investments aimed at supporting extractive industries or ensuring that Chinese-made goods easily reach African markets is too narrow an approach to economic development.

It may be convenient to argue that China's presence is neocolonial, but that fails to consider African agency in determining the scope and scale of their relations with China. China's strategy is rooted in its imperative to access resources and markets and to appear to be a responsible global power. Conversely, African leaders want to use China's presence in their nations to boost their political legitimacy both domestically and internationally. The issue at hand is how to assess the extent to which elites in Africa and China are fostering policies and practices that further extract from people's livelihoods and constrict political space. A dangerous trend that we do not want to see in African nations follows what we have observed in China with the Xi Jinping's efficient consolidation of power. Currently, there is a problem with a lack of transparency in Sino-African engagements which results in a mutually reinforcing practice among African and Chinese elites of acting autonomously from their citizens. This is despite, a robust campaign of public diplomacy in Africa by Chinese diplomats who frame China as a non-paternalistic and non-hegemonic partner in Africa.

In conclusion, the model of political authoritarianism and economic liberalism is appealing to African leaders, but African publics interpret this model differently. The assumption made by some elites in China and Africa is that liberal economic frameworks are the most efficient tool for development and investments in large-scale infrastructure support that view. The other assumption is that institutions built on democratic norms are inefficient and antithetical to growth. As the U.S. considers its engagement in Africa in an increasingly crowded political and business environment (i.e., China, India, Brazil) it may consider shifting attention to supporting development from within. That is, supporting efforts to create space for African based entrepreneurs to flourish and for civil society to continue to push for political pluralism and inclusivity.