



DEFENSE DOSSIER

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GLOBAL SOUTH

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CHINA'S ERODING GLOBAL IMAGE

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HOW TO CONTEST BEIJING'S GAINS IN THE "GLOBAL SOUTH"

Michael Sobolik



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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the November 2023 issue of AFPC's Defense Dossier. In this issue, we turn our attention to the "Global South," where a frenzied competition is underway for hearts and minds, for economic primacy, and for military access.

We open by focusing on perceptions of the U.S. and China in the Global South, as regional public opinion increasingly shapes competition in the economic marketplace. Here, China has been gaining a clear foothold, due to the large infrastructure projects associated with its sweeping belt and road initiative (BRI). But as Beijing struggles to continue what has become a sprawling and costly network of projects, its international image is beginning to take a hit. Nevertheless, in regions like Latin America, the U.S. faces an uphill battle to bolster its public image and counter Anti-western trends. Meanwhile, the struggle for discourse in the Middle East rages on, as China forges multiple partnerships in the region. In our final article, we close with guidance on how policymakers in Washington should best view the challenges posed by Chinese soft power, and what strategies they have at their disposal to counter it.

As always, we hope that you find the pages that follow both illuminating and insightful.

Sincerely,

Ilan Berman
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison
Managing Editor



Public Opinion and Great Power Competition in the Global South

Eric Olander

Americans, for the most part, tend to prefer simple storylines. Good guys vs. bad guys. Back in the 1980s, it was Rocky Balboa facing off against the menacing Soviet Army Captain Ivan Drago and, of course, we prevailed! Later, after 9/11, President George W. Bush presented the world with a simple choice, “you’re either with us or against us,” in the battle against global terrorism.¹ Today, that same thinking shapes our foreign policy by framing international relations as a binary struggle between autocracy and democracy.

The packaging of a superpower contest as a set of myths like Sylvester Stallone duking it out with the evil Soviets was convenient for the U.S. government at a moment when global geopolitics was defined by the relations between two economically uncoupled superpowers and a largely disempowered “Third World” or Non-Aligned Movement. Thus, it persisted, even though that framing helped inflict significant damage on the Global South in the form of proxy conflicts from Chile to Angola to Indonesia.

Today, however, the situation is very different.

China’s rapid rise to major power status over the past 40 years upended the geopolitical landscape, sunsetting the U.S.’ brief tenure as the world’s lone hyperpower² and ushering in a new era of multipolarity. Middle power states in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas have far more leeway today to manage their international relations than they did half a century ago. Their allegiances, for the most part, tend to be less ideological and more pragmatic, with a focus on bolstering their societies through increased trade, investment, infrastructure development, and climate change mitigation.

The scholar Evan Feigenbaum rightly noted that these countries, universally, do not engage the major powers with the kind of zero-sum, us-vs-them ap-

proach that predominates so much of the thinking in official Washington.³ Instead, he contends, for these middle powers and emerging economies, the decision to partner with China, the U.S., India, Europe, or other major powers is a “both-and” consideration, not “either-or.”

That thinking reflects the important point that pragmatism, more than any ideological consideration, drives policymaking toward China in the vast majority of developing countries. Many countries in Africa and elsewhere do not align with China’s worldview on democracy, human rights, or individual liberties.⁴ But they also recognize that it is simply not in their national interest to challenge China on these issues.

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL CONSTRAINTS

All too often, U.S. observers dismiss those considerations as evidence of China successfully bribing governing elites in poorer countries.⁵ That kind of thinking is also an important adjunct to the “Chinese debt trap” accusation that contends Beijing uses debt as an economic tool to undermine the sovereignty of smaller, poorer countries—an argument that has been widely debunked by debt experts.⁶

But that inaccurate perception of how China engages with developing countries is ultimately harmful to the U.S.’ own interests and its ability to foster closer ties with those same states. After all, what’s the message that an African or Latin American leader takes away from a Congressional hearing about Chinese debt trap diplomacy?⁷ While participants in that hearing may think they’re acting to help those countries by purportedly exposing malign Chinese behavior, that’s not how it’s interpreted abroad.

Instead, what leaders in Global South capitals hear is: that the U.S. believes they are too foolish to know what’s



going on and don't understand the deals they are signing with the Chinese.

That, however, is simply not true. Many officials in these countries know full well that the financing terms with Chinese creditors for infrastructure development projects were not always great. Often, they were forced to stash large sums in offshore escrow accounts, the contracts were priced in dollars (making them vastly more expensive), and arbitration was frequently set in Hong Kong or China, not in a neutral venue.⁸ But these officials simply didn't have any other choice. There were no competing offers from U.S., European, or Japanese development banks. Borrowing from private capital markets for the kinds of multibillion-dollar railway and port projects that China financed through concessional lending was simply too expensive. And private investors mostly shun these countries due to perceptions of excessive risk. Ultimately, the decision for these leaders was reduced to a simple choice: to borrow from China, or to do nothing.

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LOCAL PRESSURES

Doing nothing, though, was never really an option. These leaders face the combined pressures of climate change, bulging youth populations, high unemployment, and multiple economic disruptions brought on by

COVID and now the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

So, when the Chinese ambassador calls and says, "What do you need?"—that's a conversation these presidents and prime ministers are eager to have. And later, when the Chinese delegation sits down to present their offer, it's very often compelling: loans, risk insurance, contracting, and the first five years of operation are all included in a single package. Sometimes a down payment is required, but if that's not possible, then revenue from a country's resources can be used instead to pay for a portion of the deal.

The most important part of the offer, though, is speed. The Chinese will often complete an entire project in less time than it takes for a comparable U.S. or European initiative to finalize the preliminary negotiations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, President Félix Tshisekedi broke ground on the 220kv Kinsuka power substation in January 2021, just as his term was getting underway.⁹ Within 24 months, while the president is still in office, Chinese contractors will hand over the \$299 million facility to the local government.¹⁰

The key takeaway here is that Chinese contractors were able to complete the project within a single electoral cycle and allow President Tshisekedi to do what politicians everywhere love to do more than anything else: cut ribbons on new infrastructure. More importantly, the President can now use the Kinsuka power substation in his re-election campaign to demonstrate that he delivered on his promise to improve the quality of life for two million residents who will soon enjoy far more reliable electricity service.

This explains in large part why governing elites, particularly in democratic countries, are often look very favorably toward working with the Chinese to build infrastructure. Similarly, residents in those countries know full well that it was the Chinese that built this new infrastructure which often has an immediate, transformative impact on their daily lives.



Beijing's critics, including many in the United States, contend that Chinese contractors can operate at that speed only because they use sub-standard labor, ignore environmental considerations, and build low-quality infrastructure. While there are certainly anecdotal cases to support those claims, researchers have concluded there was no measurable difference in the quality of World Bank-financed construction projects in Africa done by Chinese contractors and those carried out by OECD country firms.¹¹

Furthermore, oft-stated accusations that China uses large quantities of imported labor to work on construction projects abroad and pay below-market wages are also not supported by the facts, according to research by scholars at the University of London.¹²

Many of those criticisms of Chinese development finance and infrastructure in the Global South have been U.S. talking points going back more than a decade, to when Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State.¹³ While those narratives no doubt play well in the U.S., they have been wholly ineffective in swaying public opinion in Africa or elsewhere in the Global South. The two most credible public opinion polls in Africa, Afrobarometer¹⁴ and the Ichikowitz Family Foundation African Youth Survey,¹⁵ both show Chinese favorability ratings across the continent at par or better than that of the United States.

But that may soon change.

CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES

China's image in the Global South has benefited enormously from financing and building hundreds of billions of dollars of infrastructure. People have been able to see firsthand how Chinese engagement in their countries has made a positive difference in their lives.

Now, however, the Chinese government has turned off the money spigot. Beijing is no longer financing the kinds of large-scale infrastructure projects that generated so much goodwill in the Global South, particularly in

Beijing is no longer financing the kinds of large-scale infrastructure projects that generated so much goodwill in the Global South, particularly in Africa and the Americas, and is instead transitioning to a new “Small is Beautiful” strategy... The problem for China is that those projects are much less visible, and there is now a significant reduction in the Chinese physical presence in many Global South countries.

Africa and the Americas, and is instead transitioning to a new “Small is Beautiful” strategy.¹⁶ Those massive multibillion-dollar railways, ports, and highways that once defined the Belt and Road Initiative have now been replaced by green energy, telecommunications, and health initiatives in the \$50 million range.¹⁷

The problem for China is that those projects are much less visible, and there is now a significant reduction in the Chinese physical presence in many Global South countries. As a result, Joseph Asunka of Afrobarometer forecasts, this will likely prompt a downturn in China's favorability among African publics¹⁸—a trend that will likely play out in other regions as well. This means that if the Chinese government wants to hold on to the positive sentiment that's reflected in those public opinion surveys, it's will have to find an alternative to infrastructure to propel its soft power diplomacy agenda in developing countries.

That isn't going to be easy. Even though anti-U.S. and anti-European sentiment is increasingly pervasive across large swathes of the Global South, Western countries are nonetheless able to offset some of that hostility through the appeal of more open, multicultural societies, popular media, and, most importantly, large diaspora communities. China, in contrast, has none of those attributes.

In the early 2000s, China tried to compete head-



on with the U.S. and Europe in soft power through a major media push that included a massive expansion of CGTN, regional editions of the *China Daily* newspaper, and even an equity stake in one of South Africa's largest online news portals, among other initiatives.¹⁹ None of it was very effective; research conducted in some of Africa's largest media markets revealed little appetite for Chinese propaganda. Seeing that it wasn't generating the desired results, Xi Jinping largely froze spending on the media expansion drive soon after he came to power in 2012.²⁰

To be sure, CGTN, China Radio International, and *China Daily*, among other Chinese Communist Party-run media outlets, still have a sizable overseas presence. They just haven't expanded in almost a decade.

Going forward, it's likely that public opinion in the Global South toward the Chinese may bifurcate. Elites who benefit directly from Chinese engagement through business ties, scholarships, or some of the many all-expense paid junkets bankrolled by Beijing will continue to hold favorable views of China. The masses in those same countries, meanwhile, won't necessarily form negative perceptions of China. More likely, they'll simply become indifferent as the Chinese presence in their communities becomes less visible, a pattern also seen in some of the continent's other external relations.

HOW THE U.S. CAN COMPETE

China's reduced visibility in many Global South regions presents the United States with a sizable opportunity to improve its reputation in developing countries after 20+ years of neglect and mediocre policy implementation. Here are some recommended actions that can be taken by U.S. policymakers and other interested stakeholders:

- Develop a more compelling U.S. "offer." The main priority today for all developing countries is jobs. The Chinese speak to that concern when their ambassadors talk about trade, infrastructure, and investment. It's a simple offer. Those same discussions with U.S. envoys, though, are often much more muddled, blending security, values, aid, as well as economic issues, among others. Instead, the U.S. needs to create a much more streamlined offer of its own that speaks less about values and

more about initiatives that will deliver tangible economic benefits.

- Talk less, deliver more. Say what you want about the Chinese, but they deliver. Whether it's a new substation in Kinshasa, a high-speed railway in Jakarta, or a state-of-the-art data center in Riyadh. U.S. officials, in contrast, seem to enjoy making big announcements, but focus less on actually following through. The Biden administration's "Build Back Better World" (B3W) was a bust, and the G7's "Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment" (PGII) isn't shaping up to be any better. And even small deals like last December's EV battery MoU signed by the United States with Zambia and the DRC, tend to stall. If the U.S. wants to improve its standing with these countries, it has to do a much better job delivering on its promises.
- Prioritize the Global South. Regardless of what today's new era is called—a new Cold War, Great Power rivalry, or something else—it will be defined by which side can build the larger coalition of partners, allies, and friends. During the Cold War, U.S. policymakers understood this. Yet the lesson seems to have been forgotten in today's Washington, where engagement strategies with developing countries are often erratic, ineffective, and motivated by competing with China more than anything else. Even if that overriding China focus remains front and center—which it is likely—the best way to accomplish it will be through more genuine attention, resources, and innovative policies specifically tailored to these vital regions.

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China's Eroding Global Image

Alexander B. Gray and James B. Skinner

In the intricate dance of international relations, a country's global image plays a key role. It informs bilateral and multilateral relationships, facilitates or complicates alliances, and often becomes a driving force steering economic and strategic engagements. Over the past twenty years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has undergone a transformation, not just in its domestic and international policies but in the image that it projects on the world stage as well.

Two decades ago, a rising China, buoyed by rapid economic growth initiated under Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening-up" policies, declared its intention to integrate into the international community as a "responsible global stakeholder." Chinese policy, as reflected in a proverb frequently referenced by Deng, long focused on "hiding your capabilities and biding your time," allowing Beijing's military capacity and foreign policy ambitions to follow its economic development. Yet in recent years, that strategy has been discarded in favor of a far more aggressive foreign and security posture, with profound implications for China's global image. Today, the shimmer of that benign image of the early 2000s has been significantly tarnished by the CCP's own policies and actions, with important implications for Beijing's long-term competition with the West.

THE CHARM STRATEGY OF THE PRE-XI ERA

Before the tenure of President Xi Jinping, the CCP was distinctly conscious of its global image. The era of President Hu Jintao epitomized this approach, with "peaceful rise" the preferred slogan of the Chinese leadership. Beijing was keen to project the image of a benign superpower, with a particular emphasis on non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, a particularly stark contrast with U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghani-

stan during the 2000s. During this period, China actively participated in global institutions, sought to forge partnerships with major economies, and promoted cultural exchanges.

Under Hu, China followed what it billed as a more inclusive approach to diplomacy. The 2008 Beijing Olympics exemplified this charm strategy: it was not merely a sporting event but a spectacle to showcase China's cultural richness, technological advancement, and desire for global camaraderie. The propaganda message underlying Beijing's efforts during this era was sometimes explicit, sometimes not: namely, that China's capitalist-authoritarian model of government was best suited to raise living standards and lift developing countries out of poverty. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and perceived U.S. failures in the Middle East and South Asia, this model gained momentum and adherents around the world, prompting a torrent of commentary predicting China's toppling of the American-led world order. Sentiments like those expressed in *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's "China for a Day" or Fareed Zakaria's "The Post-American World" became accepted wisdom even in the West, a tribute to China's then-sparkling global image.

THE XI ERA: A SHIFT IN STRATEGY

Enter Xi Jinping and the unraveling of China's hard-won image as the champion of developing states. Xi had no intention of abandoning the Hu-era goal of global leadership; rather, it was a recalibration of means. Xi has replaced earlier, softer slogans with his "Chinese Dream," emphasizing what he terms the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The "Chinese Dream" seeks to aggressively right the perceived wrongs of China's recent history and return the country to the CCP nationalist's

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vision of its rightful place in the world. The means to do this, in contrast with previous eras, is through a forward-leaning foreign policy that prioritizes CCP interests at the expense of Beijing's global image via one-sided economic relationships with developing countries and a willingness to use all elements of national power to achieve strategic objectives.

One of Xi's flagship programs, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), epitomizes this new approach. On the surface, the BRI is an infrastructure development initiative targeting both developed and developing countries. It is also a testament to China's ambition to reshape the global economic order in its favor through coercion, intimidation, and the use of economic muscle to influence the strategic orientation of other countries.

FROM CHARM TO CONTROVERSY

This newly assertive posture has had deleterious impacts on Beijing's public image. Polling shows that favorable views of China around the world have steadily declined since Xi's rise to power in 2013.¹ These trends were accelerated by souring trade relations, the COVID pandemic, and other world events connected to Xi's leadership. By 2022, majorities in 17 of the 19 advanced economies surveyed by the Pew Research Center had little to no confidence in Xi's approach to world affairs.²

Xi's increasingly authoritarian regime has also seen substantial human rights abuses, with forced labor standing out as a particularly egregious issue. The Uighurs, a Muslim minority group, have borne the brunt of this ruthless policy. Forced into "re-education camps," they are subjected to systematic oppression, exploitation, and surveillance, with the U.S. State Department ultimately labeling Beijing's behavior "genocide." This flagrant dis-

regard for human dignity and international law has put a significant dent in China's global image and stirred international criticism.

The effect has been pronounced. Countries once spellbound by Chinese capital are awakening to the harsh reality of strategic entrapment.

- **Sri Lanka:** The Hambantota port stands as a cautionary tale. Unable to repay Chinese loans, Sri Lanka handed over the port on a 99-year lease in 2017, sparking concerns over sovereignty and strategic implications while allowing China to gain strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region.³
- **Maldives:** The Maldives, an idyllic island nation in the Indian Ocean, has faced significant challenges and pushback in its dealings with Chinese debt diplomacy. Over the past decade, the Maldives has borrowed heavily from China to finance its ambitious infrastructure projects and development initiatives. This has led to fears of the Maldives falling into a debt trap, where it becomes overly dependent on China and may have to cede strategic assets in exchange for debt relief. That, in turn, has prompted pushback from various quarters, including international organizations and neighboring countries, who worry about the Maldives' growing indebtedness and the potential implications for its sovereignty.⁴ As a result, the Maldivian government has been facing calls for greater transparency and accountability in its dealings with China to ensure the long-term well-being of the nation.
- **Malaysia:** Under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia temporarily shelved the BRI-backed East Coast Rail Link project, citing unfavorable terms due to concerns about its financial viability and the high cost.⁵ The initial agreement placed a disproportionate financial burden on Malaysia, potentially compromising its fiscal health.
- **Samoa and Fiji:** In the Pacific, China's investments, particularly with infrastructure projects, have been critiqued for their environmental and societal impacts. In Samoa, there has been a pushback against a proposed Chinese-backed port project in Vaiusu Bay due to environmental and sovereignty concerns.⁶ Similarly, in Fiji, there have been concerns about the level of debt

The CCP's repression at home and abroad further squashed hopes among the international community that Beijing could develop into the pluralistic, benign partner the West had once envisioned.



accrued from Chinese loans and the potential for undue influence.⁷ Local concerns in both nations over land ownership, environmental degradation, and the overshadowing of indigenous interests have become prominent.

CHINESE COOPERATION IS OVER

The CCP's repression at home and abroad further squashed hopes among the international community that Beijing could develop into the pluralistic, benign partner the West had once envisioned. In Hong Kong, the world watched as China used draconian national security laws to crush a prosperous free society and renege on its international commitment to "One Country, Two Systems." In Xinjiang, modern day concentration camps constructed to ethnically and culturally cleanse the Muslim population represent some of the worst human rights abuses since 1945.

For many, the COVID pandemic confirmed the lengths the CCP would go to impose its will on the domestic populace. It would later come to light that in the early days of the pandemic, when responsiveness and cooperation mattered most, the CCP was singularly focused on containing its own failures rather than the virus. Beijing silenced medical professionals, blocked legitimate investigations into the origin of the coronavirus, and made accusations of foreign complicity in the virus' outbreak that no serious medical authority has dignified.

Xi's "Zero COVID" policies employed Beijing's growing surveillance state to mandate strict quarantines, track the movement of individuals via QR codes, and shutter the economy until the storm passed. Its unsustainability forced even the CCP to rethink its strategy, as it left the export economy in ruins and hamstrung efforts to fix the country's growing demographic problems. Even today, almost a year after Beijing revisited "Zero COVID," China's economy is struggling to overcome its effects, such as astonishingly high youth unemployment and a crippled real estate sector. These failures have been watched intently by a Global South that once held Beijing's development model in highest esteem.

China's newly assertive posture has had deleterious impacts on Beijing's public image. Polling shows that favorable views of China around the world have steadily declined since Xi's rise to power in 2013. These trends were accelerated by souring trade relations, the COVID pandemic, and other world events connected to Xi's leadership. By 2022, majorities in 17 of the 19 advanced economies surveyed by the Pew Research Center had little to no confidence in Xi's approach to world affairs.

SEEING CHINA STRAIGHT

The myth of the CCP's economic model and its commitment to peaceful global integration has been pierced by alarming revelations of human rights abuses, aggressive territorial ambitions, and economic coercion strategies. Countries that were once welcoming of Chinese investment have awakened to the intricate web of strings attached, where sovereignty, human dignity, and economic autonomy are subtly compromised. From the internment camps in Xinjiang and the suffocating National Security Law in Hong Kong to indebtedness via the Belt and Road Initiative, the CCP's global image has transformed from that of a partner for growth to one of a harbinger of hegemony and control.

The question is no longer about China's place on the world stage, but about the nature, intent, and implications of its presence. Every Chinese investment, policy, and diplomatic overture is now evaluated not just for its economic merit, but its strategic implication. The CCP's international narrative is no longer uncontested, and as nations navigate their engagements with China, one reality has become apparent—the era of unbridled enchantment with the dragon is unequivocally over.



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China's Struggle for Discourse Power in the Middle East

Tuvia Gering

Extraterritorial powers have long seen the Middle East as a prized arena in which to vie for resources, markets, land, and, eventually, control. In recent times, a new source of contention has emerged in the form of narratives. With audacious global initiatives and a vision to reform the U.S.-dominated international order, Chinese leader Xi Jinping is on a quest to redraw the narratives that define the Global South writ large, and the Middle East in particular. This struggle for what Beijing refers to as "discourse power" will shape the future of great power competition and limit opportunities for regional cooperation on global challenges.

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK

In his 1993 anthology *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argued that narratives have played an important role in the history of Western imperialism in the Middle East. While land is the primary battleground in imperialism, Said maintained, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging" determines who controls it.

In the post-colonial era, Said's controversial ideas found resonance in the developing world, especially in China. The ascent of the "U.S.-led West" following the Cold War and the subsequent invasion of Iraq ignited discussions on how discourse and narratives underpin and sustain Western hegemony in the region. In a 2007 monograph, for instance, Ma Lirong of Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) asserted that Western hegemony and America's position as the only superpower necessitate hegemony over discourse or control over narratives, which she refers to as "discourse power."¹

Chinese analysts today define discourse power as "a type of narrative agenda-setting ability focused on reshaping global governance, values, and norms to legitimize and facilitate the expression of state power." As

Kenton Thibaut of the Atlantic Council has laid out, it encapsulates the fundamental "right to speak" and the "right to be heard" on the global stage.² But its implications go far beyond rhetoric; China believes that the West's mastery of discourse power enables it to assert and maintain its dominance over the international order.

Chinese policymakers became aware of the significance of discourse power in the run-up to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, which were overseen by then-Vice President Xi Jinping. The high-profile event brought China under intense scrutiny from international observers for its violations of human rights. Beijing responded by launching a multibillion-dollar propaganda campaign abroad to increase its soft power.

However, it was not until late 2012, when Xi assumed the mantle of leadership, that China took a significant step forward in this pursuit. Xi articulated the need to "struggle over public opinion" to "seize" discourse power from the West. Beyond that, he aimed to erode and ultimately dismantle Western discourse power. In its place, he envisioned a new international order, led by China, in which state sovereignty supersedes civil liberties and cultural essentialism excuses violation of universal human rights.³

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, comprising 22 Arab League members and hosting the physical and spiritual headquarters of the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), serves as a linchpin of international influence. China's mission is facilitated by a convergence of interests, as many of its nations share both dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led "rules-based international order" and a common aspiration to foster a multipolar world. Furthermore, a majority identify with China's self-proclaimed status as a post-colonial, developing



nation within the Global South, and echo a sentiment of underrepresentation on the global stage due to Western “discourse hegemony.”

The imperative of gaining discourse power in the Middle East was underscored in the aftermath of the wave of anti-government protests that engulfed the region beginning in 2010. Wu Sike, China's Special Envoy to the Middle East at the time, bemoaned China's passive role in the crisis, claiming that “China's international discourse power has yet to achieve the status and role commensurate with our country's stature.”⁴

Subsequently, Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) researcher Li Weijian published an article in 2013 in which he made a compelling case for competing for discourse power in the Middle East. Notwithstanding the Arab Spring's actual origins, Li characterized it as a “manipulated revolution” orchestrated by the U.S.-led West.⁵

To Li and his colleagues, American interventionism had not waned with the decline of neoconservatism after the War on Terror. Instead, it had evolved more pernicious tools for instigating regime changes and “color revolutions.” In fact, they maintain, the same neocons who advocated for invading Iraq goaded Washington to pivot to Asia in order to contain a rising China whose very existence threatens Western hegemony. Today, this cohort sees the Biden administration's designation of China as a strategic rival, and its enactment of an overt value-based foreign policy, as being framed by the same “democracy vs. autocracy” ploy.

According to Beijing, America's pivot to Asia and relative withdrawal from the Middle East did not diminish Washington's hegemonic ambitions. On the contrary, Wang Jinyan of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) notes that the U.S. intensified its efforts to “undermine, discredit, and constrain” China's development interests in the Middle East, engaging in a “vicious competition” for the hearts and minds of the Arab world.⁶

Over the last two decades, meanwhile, China's development interests in the Middle East have truly diversified and grown, necessitating a proactive approach to protecting them. China-Middle East trade exceeded \$500 billion in 2022, with China importing more than half of its crude oil from the region.⁷ Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, has built or invested in more than 200 major infrastructure projects in the region.

China's approach goes beyond simply mitigating the adverse effects of American discourse hegemony. Xi has instilled confidence in the superiority of the Chinese model over the Western model, and Beijing now believes that its alternative “Chinese solutions and Chinese wisdom” are capable of addressing the region's “development and security deficits.”⁷

Chinese analysts today define discourse power as “a type of narrative agenda-setting ability focused on reshaping global governance, values, and norms to legitimize and facilitate the expression of state power.”

THE INDISPENSIBLE NATIONS

International polls have perplexed foreign observers, with China maintaining significant levels of favorability in the Middle East despite its well-documented repressive policies toward Muslim minorities. What's more, numerous dignitaries from Muslim-majority countries have visited Xinjiang on orchestrated tours in recent years—hinting at how adept China is becoming at managing perceptions through interests.

According to Li Weijian of SIIS, the U.S. used its agenda-setting capacity in the Syrian revolution, creating a “discourse trap” by pushing for early votes at the UN Security Council. Li claims that this led to the framing of Russia and China, who vetoed the motion, as defenders of an “evil regime,” when in fact they were attempting to stop further bloodshed.⁸ Concurrently, this incident demonstrated to Beijing an untapped opportunity to leverage its permanent seat at the top UN body. Since then, it has demonstrated growing sophistication in using its prerogatives for political ends in the Middle East.

Yet, the BRI continues to be the focus of its discourse power efforts. Under Xi, Beijing established strategic partnerships with 15 MENA countries that align China's development strategy with their respective visions. China's desire to impact the future of the Arab world is evident in the significant strides it has made with its so-



called Health, Digital, Space, and Green "Silk Roads" that now crisscross the Middle East and North Africa.

China also uses multilateral organizations to institutionalize engagement. Over the last year, it has expanded BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to include MENA states. For the past two decades, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) have also been important platforms in this regard. The upgrade of CASCF to summit status during President Xi's visit to Riyadh in December 2022 demonstrates the MENA region's growing importance in China's global strategy.

China's approach goes beyond simply mitigating the adverse effects of American discourse hegemony. Xi has instilled confidence in the superiority of the Chinese model over the Western model, and Beijing now believes that its alternative "Chinese solutions and Chinese wisdom" are capable of addressing the region's "development and security deficits.

Despite this growing engagement, however, Chinese analysts acknowledge that the U.S. remains the preeminent holder of discourse power in the Middle East. Sun Degang of Fudan University explains how China should seek to fill this void by developing novel concepts, which would "gradually embed Chinese concepts in the UN, international organizations and multilateral norms vis-à-vis the Middle East."⁹

In line with this objective, since 2021 China has introduced three new initiatives: respectively, the Global Initiatives on Development (GDI), Security (GSI), and Civilization (GCI). They join the BRI as the "blueprint" for China's efforts to reform global governance. Learning from the "marketing blunders" of the Sino-centric BRI, these new initiatives covertly advance anti-liberal ideas under the guise of high-consensus issues like develop-

ment, security, and cultural exchange.

Security has traditionally been low on China's list of priorities in the region, which may explain why the world was caught off guard by its successful mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023. Since the turn of the century, China has attempted to position itself as a "responsible major power" through symbolic special envoys to the Middle East and inconsequential peace initiatives. The March coup ensures that its "new security architecture for the Middle East" and efforts to position itself as a superior mediator to the U.S. are now taken more seriously.

China's GCI, which directly challenges universal values, is the country's most overt plan for undermining liberal societies. During the 4th China-Arab States Political Parties Dialogue in July in Ningxia, Liu Jianchao, the head of the Communist Party's International Liaison Department, pledged to invite 200 leaders of Arab political parties, think tanks, and media to China each year, promoting shared "Eastern values" and opposing "Islamophobic countries" that impose their culture and social systems on others.

DIFFERENT VISIONS

In the final analysis, while some still hold out hope for renewed major-power cooperation in the Middle East, the entrenched dichotomy between China and the U.S. presents a starkly different reality. China's rise is accompanied by a heightened determination to challenge the U.S.-led West. The West, in turn, perceives a fundamental threat to the existing international system as a result of an increasingly assertive China.

To a very large degree, regional politics will be shaped by the comparative appeal of these two competing visions. For, as Sun Degang writes, "In essence, this is a battle for discourse power."¹⁰

But the region's states will only be willing to internalize American advice if their U.S. partners make a serious effort to understand their perspective on religious matters, and respect their long-term strategic goals.



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Latin America In The Geopolitical Crosshairs

Dinah Gorayeb

The competition for influence in Latin America is back on, but this time with more players. During the Cold War, Latin America became a battleground between the Soviet Union and the United States, with each vying for who could exert the greatest influence. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Chile, and Cuba, the United States economically and militarily supported anti-communist governments, while the Soviets backed left-wing governments in the region.

The resulting frictions left the region weakened, with governments still grappling with the societal, economic, and democratic toll. Guatemala, for instance has struggled for decades with endemic corruption and organized crime. Cuba continues to repress domestic dissent and political criticism. And Nicaragua still imposes severe limitations on the freedom of expression and association of its citizens. All of these actors, and many others, are now being influenced by a new array of external forces.

It has taken the United States a while to realize this reality. In the 2000s, following the fall of the Soviet Union, Americans tended to believe that Latin America was “locked in,” and therefore immune to influences from outside the Western Hemisphere. More recently, however, we have come to realize that this is far from the case.

The reasons are obvious. Twenty years ago, when the United States shifted its attention to the Middle East, it left an enormous political vacuum in Latin America – one which China and Russia have been more than happy to fill. Anti-Americanism has surged in tandem with a new “pink-tide” of leftist politics in the region, while a lack of attention from Washington, as well as endemic conflicts and societal tensions, have led many Latin American countries to engage with – and become influenced by – non-Western powers.

ADVANTAGE: BEIJING

China, for instance, has slowly and stealthily infiltrated into Latin America, expanding its soft power and economic ties without overtly posing a military threat to the United States.¹ Although in the 1980s the United States was the region’s biggest economic and trading partner, things began to change in the 2000s. As the United States launched its War on Terror and shifted attention to the Middle East,² China was beginning to place growing emphasis on the developing world as a source for imports to fuel its expanding economy.

Fast forward nearly a quarter-century, and China has become the top trading partner of fourteen Latin American countries, while Chinese state firms are among the biggest investors in a multitude of regional industries, such as energy, infrastructure, and space. China was also pivotal to the region during the COVID-19 pandemic, supplying medical equipment and vaccines. As of 2023, twenty-two Latin American countries have signed on to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and China has free trade agreements with multiple regional states.

One of the biggest sources of economic influence in Latin America comes from Chinese credits and loans through the China Development Bank and the China Export Bank.³ Beijing has provided billions of dollars in loans to Latin American countries and businesses alike – more than the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, or the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF). The trade-off is apparent; China’s loans contain less constraints or governance requirements than do Western ones, with Beijing effectively turning a blind eye to autocratic governments and human rights violations. In exchange, however, these countries are expected to support the domestic and foreign policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁴

China has also created “oil for loans” arrangements, in which oil-rich countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, and



Venezuela, provide the PRC with oil at below-market interest rates. For example, in 2022, Ecuador and China reached an agreement to restructure Ecuador's debt to China in return for an amended price formula on Ecuadorian oil prices. The arrangement will reduce more than \$1 billion in loans and interest rates that Quito owes to Beijing in exchange for a deal that will generate more than \$28 million in oil revenue.⁵ Since 2007, Chinese state-owned banks have also lent \$50 billion to Venezuelan oil concerns through such loan-for-oil deals. In 2016, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was forced to negotiate grace periods for almost \$20 billion of debt that was owned to China, and did so again in 2020. Now, it is estimated that Venezuela still owes \$10 billion to China.⁶

As China takes control of ports, energy grids and space tracking stations in the region, national security risks and economic dependence on Beijing becomes a growing possibility.

MOSCOW CALLING

In one way or another, Russia has exerted influence in Latin America for decades. Unlike China, however, Russia exercises its contemporary power through historical anti-democratic ties, rather than economic entanglements. Moscow maintains strong relations with authoritarian regimes such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Venezuela, but it has also developed ties with other regional powers, such as Argentina and Brazil. While China maintains modest military contacts with Latin American states, Russia's advantage in this area is bigger – at least for the time being. Building on Cold War-era ties, the Kremlin has established extensive counternarcotics operations, become a major arms provider, and even built basing arrangements around the region.⁷ All of this represents a deliberate effort on the part of Russia's government to project its power and influence into America's geopolitical backyard.

Today, Moscow's main regional trading partners are Argentina, Ecuador, and Brazil, owing to their shared membership in the BRICS grouping. Russia's energy sector has played an important role this regard. Russian energy exports to the region have increased by 44% since 2006, becoming an important component of the

country's influence and power – especially in light of the Western sanctions that have been levied on Russia over the past year-and-a-half in response to its war against Ukraine.⁸

Moscow is active in the manipulation of regional media as well. Through a broad-ranging disinformation campaign, Russia has sustained local support and shifted the prevailing narratives regarding its foreign policy.⁹ Variants of Sputnik and Russia Today (RT) have set up successful operations across Latin America, with offices in Caracas, Havana, and Buenos Aires. Through such initiatives, Russia runs campaigns lambasting “NATO aggression,” “anti-Russia bias,” and the “West's neo-colonial foreign policy.” These networks not only promote pro-Russia content, but also false narratives on a variety of issues, such as Ukraine's desire to be “saved by Russia.” Social media platforms like Twitter, meanwhile, play an important role in spreading those same narratives to the region's younger generation, with notable results.

Anti-Americanism has surged in tandem with a new “pink-tide” of leftist politics in the region, while a lack of attention from Washington, as well as endemic conflicts and societal tensions, have led many Latin American countries to engage with—and become influenced by—non-Western powers.

U.S. RESILIENCE

Not all is lost, however. Although America may appear to be losing ground in the region, it still maintains strong economic and military ties with multiple nations there.¹⁰ Since the 2000s, though, these connections have been underutilized. Instead, U.S. policy has focused overwhelmingly on combating drug-trafficking and undocumented migration, while the responses – among



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them the curtailing of migration during the Trump era, as well as an open-ended war on drugs spanning multiple administrations – have left many in the region resentful of American policies.¹¹ The resulting situation is deeply sub-optimal. While the United States remains the biggest provider of foreign aid to Latin America, its high-profile contacts with regional states have dwindled, and now rank in third place (behind those of China and Russia).

Even so, the United States remains first in terms of military engagement with the region. Colombia is our closest security and military partner in the region, and has been since Plan Colombia went into effect in 2000, launching a joint campaign against the terrorist organization FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and drug trafficking in the region writ large. The U.S. also has military bases in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Soto Cano, Honduras, along with military access to nine other nations. By contrast, neither Russia nor China have permanent military bases in Latin America.

The United States likewise continues to be Latin America's largest trading partner overall, although China has gradually taken the lead in several countries. Significantly, Latin American trade is much more important for the United States than it is for China, representing only 7% of the latter's overall imports while almost 20% of America's.

ARRESTING THE DRIFT

Latin America is an extremely vulnerable region, and one that is moving away from the United States and toward non-Western powers such as Russia and China. Although the United States remains dominant in the region, especially with regard to military engagement, its soft and economic power have been slowly eroding, for a multitude of reasons. Nevertheless, the U.S. still has room to regain its lost influence – as long as it amends a number of its policies.

First and foremost, American policymakers must do something they have long avoided, and acknowledge the importance of the region to U.S. interests. Thereafter, they will need to design a long-term strategy that promotes more economic and diplomatic engagement with Latin America and regional populations.

Second, the U.S. needs to continue its efforts to combat drug trafficking from the region, while at the same time developing better responses to the growing influx of Latin American migrants. Better channels and legislation to combat undocumented migration and drug trafficking can transform how the United States and its citizens view Latin America, from a burden into an asset and strategic ally. In turn, by focusing on these issues with traditional security partners, such as Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and Peru, it will enable those nations to improve their own standing and thereby become less vulnerable to Chinese and Russian influence.

Lastly, Washington should prioritize strengthening security and economic relations with key partners in the region, such as Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. Doing so will allow the United States to begin to seriously regain ground in an increasingly-inhospitable region.

Latin America is a region extremely rich in culture and natural resources, and full of potential which the United States cannot afford to ignore. Its geographic location provides the United States with an enormous advantage, but in the wrong hands – or under the wrong influence – the region could easily become a danger.



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How to Contest Beijing's Gains in the "Global South"

Michael Sobolik

Could China's presence in Africa and the "Global South" writ large predispose Beijing to overextension? On paper, the possibility may appear remote. At the time of this writing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has one official foreign military base in Djibouti, while the United States has hundreds of bases across dozens of countries and territories. Even so, from the Solomon Islands and Kiribati to Equatorial Guinea and Argentina, Beijing seems to view its Belt & Road as a blueprint for establishing a global military presence, particularly across the Global South.

The PLA admits as much in its military textbooks. Consider this excerpt from a 2018 handbook published by China's National Defense University in 2018:

Our military is 'going out' into the world and integrating into the global economy systematically... The military follows in the footsteps of civilian entities as they spread. The military then provides protection for civilian entities wherever they go. As the pace of "One Belt, One Road" construction and our military's march outward quicken, the trend is for our internal military-civil fusion strategy to extend out beyond our borders... When expanding outward, we must use a range of tactics, pushing straight ahead and around the flanks. [We will] concurrently use methods direct and indirect, hard and soft, to realize a comprehensive security umbrella over "One Belt, One Road" countries.¹

The book, *Realizing the Deep Development of Military-Civil Fusion in our Overall Setup*, is part of a series on Xi Jinping Thought. It is also the clearest articulation to date of how the CCP views the fusion of BRI civilian projects with PLA military expansion.

It is an old story in international politics: as foreign economic interests accumulate, military power grows

proportionally to protect those interests. For China, though, its military expansion could easily devolve into strategic overextension. According to the text, the PLA is "pushing straight ahead and around the flanks" and using "methods direct and indirect, hard and soft" to protect the Party's interests. In other words, it is rejecting a choice between symmetric and asymmetric competition and opting for both – in effect, a "kitchen sink" strategy. This all-encompassing practice is beset with an overriding weakness: if everything is a priority, then nothing is.

As China's economic growth continues to slow, this reality will as well. In the process, it will provide the United States with ample opportunities to exploit Chinese overreach. Indeed, it already has.

THE CORRUPTION GAME

In *Casino Royale*, the famed author Ian Fleming painted his signature character, James Bond, as indifferent toward gambling: "Bond didn't defend the practice. He merely maintained that the more effort and ingenuity you put into gambling, the more you took out."² Although casinos are banned within the PRC (with the notable exception of Macau), the Chinese Communist Party shares Bond's philosophy and has instrumentalized illicit activity in increasingly creative ways. Typically, rogue regimes and terrorist groups use gambling to launder dirty money. The CCP has taken it a step further, and has leveraged land leases for casinos to blunt the U.S. Department of Defense from expanding its capabilities in the Pacific.

Beijing has displayed this Bond-like cunning in the Republic of Palau, an archipelago-nation located a thousand miles east of the Philippines. For decades, Palau has complicated the CCP's ambitions to project power into the Pacific. Along with the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, Palau freely associates with the Unit-

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ed States. This means, among other things, that Washington determines the defense policies of these Pacific Island nations, which enables the U.S. military to permanently establish surveillance and tracking capabilities near East Asia and the South China Sea.³ Palau serves as a highway for America and a speed bump for Beijing.

In 2017, as U.S. concerns about the PRC's expansion and aggression in the South China Sea were rising, Washington approached Palau with a proposal to establish a Tactical Multi-Mission Over the Horizon Radar (TACMOR) at two sites.⁴ Parking a TACMOR so close to the South China Sea would increase America's capacity to respond to early warning signals of PRC aggression against Hanoi, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, or Jakarta. This development presented clear problems for Beijing, not just in the South China Sea, but also in the Southern Pacific where it was courting the Solomon Islands and Kiribati.⁵

Shortly thereafter, the CCP came knocking on Palau's door, but the emissary was not a diplomat or a general. It was Wan Kuok Koi, also known as "Broken Tooth," a high-profile chief of the criminal underworld. The U.S. government describes Wan as "a leader of the 14K Triad, which engages in drug trafficking, illegal gambling, racketeering, human trafficking, and a range of other criminal activities." More importantly, it pegged Wan as a member of the CCP's Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a central body in the Party's global "united front" propaganda work.⁶ In other words, this "Broken Tooth" gangster leveraged his political sway in Beijing not only for his criminal activities, but also to advance the Party's foreign policy. How did he do this? By asking for a 99-year-lease for a casino on the exact same plot of land slated for the TACMOR radar.⁷

Beijing's effort to displace U.S. military capabilities in Palau reveals the CCP's cunning and creativity. Notably, Wan promised his Palauan hosts that the casino was a certified and approved BRI project, a common tactic of overseas Chinese actors to conceal their illegal activity.⁸ The fig leaf concealed Wan's biggest weakness. His company in Palau, the "Palau China Hung-Mun Cultural Association," was a front in a larger criminal network: "Dongmei Group" in Hong Kong, and "World Hongmen History and Culture Association" in Cambodia – not to mention the "Dong-

mei Group," which had investments in Burma.⁹

Blunting his overtures in Palau was easy enough for Washington, and it provided the perfect opportunity to hit Wan's entire criminal network. In December 2020, the Treasury Department did just that. It announced sanctions against Wan's Southeast Asian empire and blacklisted its branches in Palau, Hong Kong, and Cambodia. It didn't take long for ripples to cascade into a wave. Mere months later, Malaysian authorities conducted over 70 raids of homegrown criminal networks with links to Broken Tooth, busted the crime syndicates, and arrested 68 individuals.¹⁰ At the time of this writing, the TACMOR radar is on track to go online in 2026.¹¹

The episode was a success, one that the United States should replicate at a broader level. Targeting BRI-affiliated criminal networks is good, but the entities most deserving of Washington's punishment are the illicit corporations directly engaged in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Just like Broken Tooth's crime empire, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) routinely engage in corrupt practices to win foreign contracts, either in the form of bribes or kickbacks. According to a 2021 report from Arachnys, a London-based consulting group, "a reported 60-80% of Chinese firms [paid] bribes to speed up projects, especially in Africa and South Asia."¹² The United States should view the CCP's corrupt practices as an opportunity to target Xi's national champions and cripple the BRI.

THE INFORMATIONAL FRONT

Arresting the global activity of corrupt Chinese enterprises, important as it is, punishes past behavior. For America

China is rejecting a choice between symmetric and asymmetric competition and opting for both—in effect, a “kitchen sink” strategy. This all-encompassing practice is beset with an overriding weakness: if everything is a priority, then nothing is.



to gain a decisive advantage against the CCP, Washington must anticipate where Beijing plans to move next, and head it off at the pass. To borrow the strategy of ice hockey legend Wayne Gretzky, we need to skate to where the puck will be, not where it is right now. Thankfully, the Party has telegraphed its next moves.

In 2021, the Department of Defense's annual report on China's military power identified thirteen possible candidates for PLA bases: Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan. The report likewise flagged lines of communication to the Strait of Hormuz, Africa, and the Pacific Islands as "[k]nown focus areas." The Pentagon also issued this warning: "A global PLA military logistics network and PLA military facilities could both interfere with U.S. military operations and support offensive operations against the United States as the PRC's global military objectives evolve."¹³

Before decision-makers can act, they need reliable threat assessments. Threat assessments, at their core, are estimates of an enemy's capabilities and conjectures of their intent. By that simple measure, the United States was well equipped to understand where Beijing could move next, and why it was important to blunt its plans. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. America was surprised three times over the course of eighteen months, as news broke of planned PLA bases in the United Arab Emirates, Equatorial Guinea, and the Solomon Islands – key locations in all three of the "known focus areas" the Pentagon identified. The Biden administration managed to dissuade Abu Dhabi from inking the deal, but the PLA secured port access for its naval vessels in Honiara and appears to be making progress with Malabo.¹⁴

The administration's response to the Solomon Islands was especially telling. When news broke in March 2022 that the PRC and the Solomon Islands had finalized the agreement, senior Biden administration officials rushed to Honiara to convince its leaders to scrap the deal. Daniel Kritenbrink, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, walked a thin line between gentle pressure and veiled warnings: "If steps were taken [by China] to establish a de facto permanent military presence... then we would have significant concerns and we would very naturally respond to those concerns."¹⁵ When journalists asked whether such responses could include military action, Kritenbrink refused to rule it out.¹⁶ Earlier in 2022, then-Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the prospect of a People's Liberation Army military base in the Solomon Islands a "red line."¹⁷

The issue with the administration's response wasn't its concern with the deal, but its lack of foresight in preventing it. Rumors had been swirling since mid-2021 that a Beijing-Honiara agreement could be in the works.¹⁸ Washington's haphazard response revealed America predisposition to take small countries like the Solomon Islands for granted.

The same is true of the Seychelles, one of the thirteen DoD-identified nations on Xi's wish list. Situated a thousand miles west of Diego Garcia, the location of a secretive and highly strategic U.S. military base, a PLA presence in the Seychelles would provide Beijing with a central location in the heart of the Indian Ocean. The United States, however, has no physical diplomatic presence. The State Department describes its embassy in Victoria, the Seychelles' capital, as "virtual."¹⁹ Until recently, America had little strategic motive to overcome the inconvenience of on-the-ground diplomacy in a remote island-nation. That motive now exists with great urgency, but Washington appears, once again, slow to engage.

If the United States manages to shift gears from defense to offense, Washington will discover a multitude of options to complicate the PLA's expansion abroad. The Belt and Road Initiative often spells trouble for local populations in partner countries, who are at times subject to land seizures and often edged out for employment by Chinese workers.²⁰ Nor does the BRI spare the environment. According to the World Wildlife

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Fund, BRI corridors run right through regions with 265 threatened species and intersects with Key Biodiversity Areas.²¹ It should come as no surprise that the regime which wreaked havoc in the South China Sea's coral reefs and sea life is also upending the ecosystems of its neighbors.²² Perhaps of greatest significance, governments who open their doors to the PLA have, on the whole, failed to reap material rewards. Djibouti, the site of China's first overseas military base, is also home to a PRC-funded port at Doraleh. What should translate into a commercial boon for the Djiboutian people has somehow morphed into a cash cow for Beijing. According to Thierry Pairault, a scholar at France's National Center of Scientific Research, "Chinese money has had very limited impact for Djiboutians," and the port has been "mainly outward-looking."²³

The game, then, is not guns and bullets, but narratives and stories. In the words of Craig Singleton, a China expert at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, "I think too often we forget about the importance of shaping and influence operations. It's a muscle memory from the Cold War that we have really lost."²⁴ At its prime, the United States competed masterfully in the information domain against the Soviet Union, particularly during the 1980s. By virtue of our democratic system and open society, America had a distinct advantage over Moscow: telling the truth made our regime stronger, not weaker. Hence, a great deal of America's influence operations during the Cold War was simply telling the truth about the Soviet Union's attempts to undermine free societies.

The State Department did this to great effect in October 1981 in "Special Report No. 88," which called out the Kremlin's "Active Measures" of disinformation, manipulation, and blackmail from Panama and El Salvador to France and the Netherlands.²⁵ The report caused such a stir that Mikhail Gorbachev complained to then-U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz and pressed the Reagan administration to back away from its information offensive.²⁶

To be sure, the media environment is far more complicated today than it was forty years ago. Social media

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platforms and encrypted messaging apps serve as highways for propaganda and disinformation, and often strangle the truth before it can raise its voice. To make it a fair fight, the United States needs to take the basic step of funding information operations and breathing renewed life into this priority. AFPC Senior Vice President Ilan Berman underscored this necessity in my conversation with him:

Washington is more than happy ninety-nine percent of the time to spend as much money as possible to throw good money after bad. I would say that the public diplomacy sphere is a little bit of an exception to that rule... in real dollar terms, the U.S public diplomacy apparatus has effectively remained flat for something like two decades... the end result is that you have a public diplomacy apparatus in Washington that's fairly lackluster, and it's under-resourced by any objective measure, especially when compared to the money that Beijing is spending.²⁷

Realistically, proper funding levels only begins to scratch the surface of America's challenges in the information domain. In the past twelve years, the post of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, America's chief messenger, has remained vacant roughly half the time. Officials at the Voice of America, the principal pub-



lic diplomacy arm of the United States, are privately exasperated by the lack of willingness from both Republican and Democratic administrations to engage VOA and take the time to explain U.S. policy to foreign audiences.²⁸

Much work remains to be done. Whereas the infrastructure for exploiting BRI corruption already exists, the framework to counter Beijing's exploitation is decrepit. Here, congressional attention would go a long way toward revamping America's offensive advantages in the information domain. If we enter the fight in earnest, we will find a plethora of options awaiting our use to turn prospective and current PLA bases into money pits.

PYRRHIC IMPERIALISM

The BRI has always been seen by Beijing as a means to displace the United States as global hegemon. For that to happen, though, the BRI must be resilient enough to withstand countervailing pressure. This question is the Achilles' Heel of the entire project, for the Belt and Road is riddled with weaknesses that will not disappear even if it succeeds in building trade corridors and, eventually, military bases. These vulnerabilities are intrinsic to Beijing's political situation and unique to China's strategic culture.

As the current arbiter of China's foreign policy, the CCP is grappling with these longstanding weaknesses – weaknesses that prior dynasties have wrestled with and often failed to mitigate. From economic exploitation to military overstretch, the BRI's success depends on China doubling down on potentially self-defeating behavior in order to retain the Mandate of Heaven. Even if it avoids plateauing economically, Beijing could find itself stuck with a pyrrhic victory – but only if the United States shakes off its lethargy. No half-measures will do. Winning will require America to leverage its economic policy and public diplomacy to expose the CCP's intrinsic relationship with corruption and deceit.

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