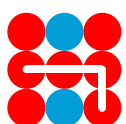
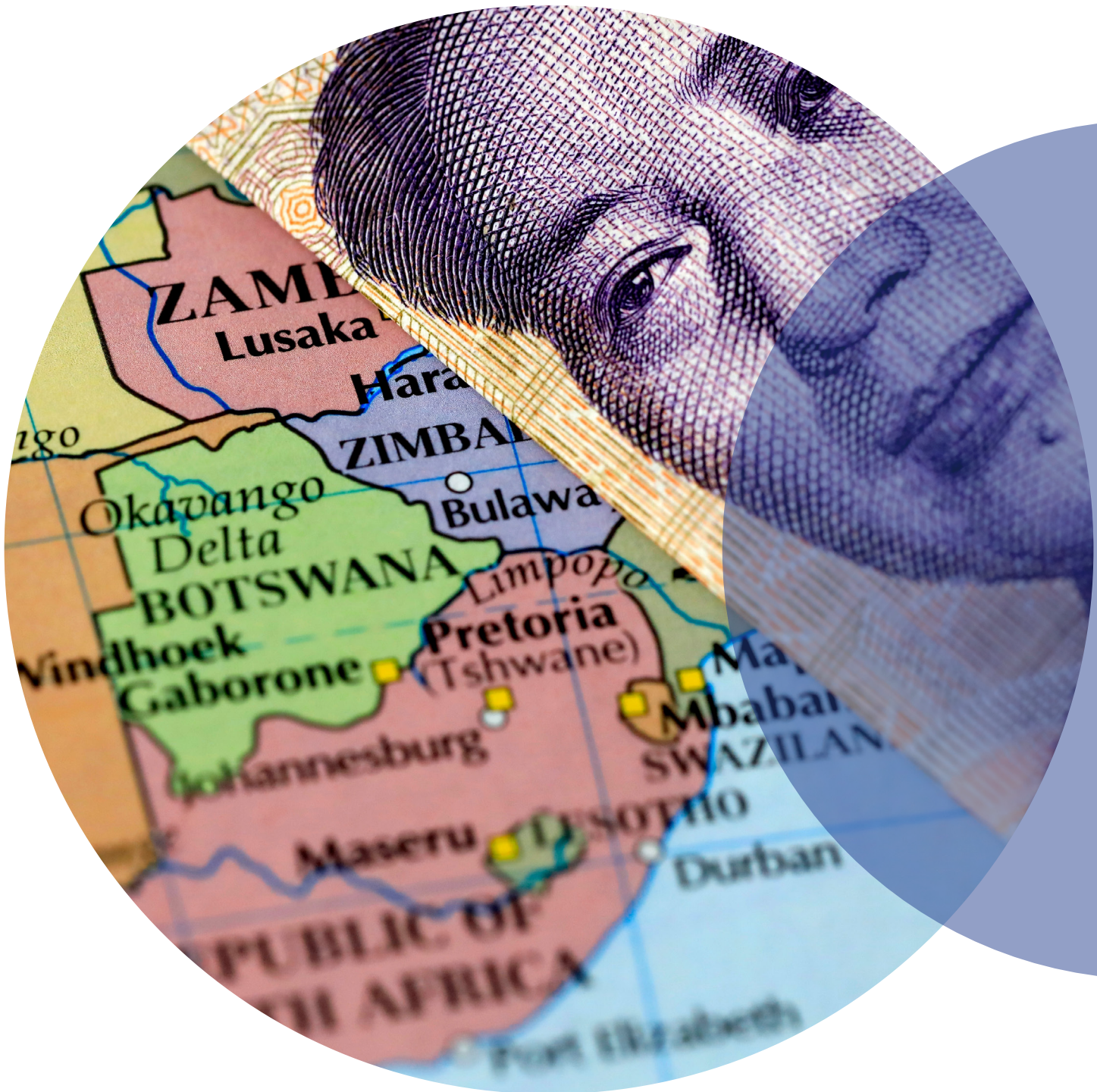


Strings attached: China's narrative influence in Sub-Saharan Africa



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1. Preface

This research report examines strategic narratives generated by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa through a hybrid threat lens, as conceptually defined by Hybrid CoE and the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre.¹

Data gathering for the research was conducted between 2021 and 2024 through desk research, fact-finding missions, and disinformation workshops organized by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Finnish embassies in Pretoria (South Africa), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Nairobi (Kenya), Abuja (Nigeria), and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). Fieldwork was also conducted in Senegal in 2023. The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Finnish MFA in this project.

Workshop attendees and expert interviewees included local journalists, academics, politicians, government officials, NGO employees, and members of the diplomatic community. While the report mainly focuses on Anglophone and Francophone countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, primary source data for the desk research was drawn from both international English- and French-language media, as well as Mandarin-language Chinese domestic state media. Qualitative methods were used to interpret and evaluate the data.

1 Giannopoulos, Giorgios, et al., ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model’, (Hybrid CoE and the European Commission, 2021).

List of abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CELAP	Central Party School in Beijing and China Executive Leadership Academy in Pudong
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CI	Confucius Institute
CMC	Central Military Commission
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DSR	Digital Silk Road
EU	European Union
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
ICT	Information and communication technology
ILD	International Liaison Department (of the CCP)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDC	National Democratic Congress
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPC	National People's Congress
PEACE	Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SACP	South African Communist Party
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organization
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USD	United States dollar

2. Executive summary

2.1 Strategies

The People's Republic of China (PRC), along with Russia, is the leading sponsor of Sub-Saharan-wide narrative campaigns. China perceives itself as engaged in “narrative warfare” against the Euro-Atlantic countries, and thus develops and disseminates anti-liberal democratic narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The geostrategic goal of the PRC is to advance Chinese interests and counter liberal influence. This is pursued by presenting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and, increasingly, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) as a model of cooperation among Sub-Saharan countries, while portraying North-South cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic countries and Africa as imperialistic.

Narrative influence strategies use the information domain (both legacy and social media), as well as a range of mechanisms, including Chinese state and non-state actors, across different domains. These mechanisms exploit existing political, economic, and cultural conditions in target countries to dominate perceptions and shape the overall information space in China's favour.

China supports local conditions that discourage challenges to the Chinese and Russian narratives. By creating conditions whereby local elites rely on opportunities provided by Beijing via cultural exchanges, economic dependencies, elite co-optation, security cooperation, and media influence, China in Sub-Saharan Africa ensures that its key strategic narratives remain uncontested, and that information is suppressed on issues deemed sensitive by

Beijing, effectively attaching strings to the overall Chinese offer.

In Sub-Saharan target countries, the Chinese approach focuses on normalizing Chinese narratives through ownership and control of media, information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, as well as the training of Sub-Saharan African journalists and socio-political elites. The presence of Chinese state media in Sub-Saharan Africa is strategically calculated, ideologically driven, and persuades locals to adopt Chinese perspectives on global affairs. China is also taking advantage of a nascent domestic disinformation ecosystem, including local influencers who communicate in local languages.

Throughout the region, China creates positive visibility for the Chinese presence, while enhancing the status of African political elites by granting them international recognition as equal and respected members of the global community. This recognition can be utilized domestically, often within an authoritarian setting. Particularly in Francophone West Africa, China, alongside Russia, is deploying a narrative influence strategy, which weakens the public perception of France and the US,² while pushing for political, diplomatic, economic and security partnerships with regional countries.

What differentiates widely accepted normative public diplomacy from Chinese coercive hybrid threat strategies is the use of mis- and disinformation (e.g., about the role and influence of liberal democracies) in developing and promoting strategic narratives. These undermine the Euro-Atlantic community and support

2 Idayat Hassan and Kyle Hiebert, ‘Illiberal Influence Fuels Disinformation in West Africa’, Centre for Democracy and Development, 2024, <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/reports/illiberal-influence-fuels-disinformation-in-west-africa/>.

the PRC's worldview. However, the degree of falsity of Chinese narratives has a wide spectrum and thus remains difficult to fact-check and debunk.

2.2 Narratives

China's strategic narratives create the impression of great power rivalry between the traditional (US, UK, EU) and emerging partners (China, Russia) of Sub-Saharan African countries.³ By presenting partial facts, the narratives frame global events through the lens of a conflict between China and liberal democracies. This persuades target audiences to internalize the conflict and to "support perceived friends and sever ties with perceived enemies".⁴

In this context, China presents itself as a preferred economic partner for Sub-Saharan African countries. Chinese narratives promote pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule and anti-democratic sentiment, thereby supporting authoritarian ruling parties and highlighting the perceived hypocrisy and failures of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Chinese narratives of "mutual benefit", "non-interference", "south-south cooperation", and "win-win cooperation" construct a façade of positive development, while actively promoting authoritarian governance norms and

undermining the Euro-Atlantic community in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The main appeal of the Chinese narratives lies in their developmental aspects and decolonial sentiments. Beijing depicts China as an equal partner to Sub-Saharan Africa, advocating developmental models that it claims are better suited to the needs of developing countries, while Euro-Atlantic states are portrayed as oppressors.

The narratives, however, do not overtly promote Chinese political values, such as the restriction of individual freedoms, as this would be less appealing to local sensibilities. Although China offers an authoritarian governance model, and uses party-to-party influence to promote Chinese political values, for example, this is not visible in public-facing narratives. The aim is to present a façade of agency for Sub-Saharan African countries.

Given the maltreatment of both Chinese ethnic minorities and Africans in China,⁵ the narratives of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation propagated by China lose credibility. Chinese activities, such as flooding local markets with cheap Chinese products⁶ and engaging in illegal mining, further undermine the credibility of these narratives.⁷ This situation is exacerbated when China openly protests against African countries' attempts to address these issues.⁸

3 Daouda Cissé et al. 'China's Footprint in Africa: Unpacking Beijing's Influence on Politics, Societies, and Economies', Megatrends Afrika Working Paper No. 5, 2023, <https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/publikation/megatrends-working-paper-05-chinas-footprint-in-africa>.

4 Isabel Lu, 'To subdue the enemies without fighting: Chinese state-sponsored disinformation as digital warfare', *Digi War*, volume 3, (2022): 96–106, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-022-00052-7>.

5 Human Rights Watch, 'China: Covid-19 Discrimination Against Africans', 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/china-covid-19-discrimination-against-africans>.

6 Viktor Kiprop, 'The cheap Chinese shop at the centre of Kenya row', BBC, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64809423>.

7 ADF staff, 'Illegal Chinese Gold Mining Leaves an Open Wound in Ghana', 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/12/illegal-chinese-gold-mining-leaves-an-open-wound-in-ghana/>.

8 BBC, China protests at Zambia mining arrests, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40158093>.

Sino-Russian narrative convergence is most prevalent in highlighting “Western double standards”, as many Chinese and Russian narratives refer to global US hegemony. In some Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Nigeria, the cultural preference is for the underdog. This provides a rationale for portraying both China and Russia as victims of Euro-Atlantic hegemony in order to gain local acceptance and sympathy for such narratives.⁹

2.3 Mechanisms

Chinese narrative warfare is multi-domain in nature, taking a networked form that permeates different levels of target societies. In this context, the information domain plays a key role, while other domains – political, economic, social, and defence – play supporting roles. This means that China uses legacy media, social media, and non-state proxy actors to disseminate its narratives, while in other domains Chinese state and non-state actors promote, support, amplify, and – ideally – act in accordance with the narratives.

Effectively, by cooperating or pledging cooperation in the political, economic, defence, and social domains, China creates a positive buzz in the media that supports and amplifies its strategic narratives.¹⁰ On the other hand, by using emerging technologies to dominate data and communications in the political, economic,

and social domains, Beijing promotes Chinese companies, authoritarian norms, its governance model, and strategic narratives as a whole.¹¹ In addition, Chinese exchange programmes on the mainland for African social and political elites, as well as journalists, cultivate influential interlocutors who help to propagate Chinese narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa across various domains.

The interlocutors are used to build horizontal networks, which form another key aspect of the façade of reciprocal dialogue and collaboration between a multitude of societal actors. Beijing provides platforms for networking and integration into local societies, for instance through the so-called Civic and Police Cooperation Centres, as well as Confucius Institutes.

The activities carried out by these entities explicitly emphasize mutual understanding and engagement with local counterparts. However, their approach remains top-down and state-centric, reinforcing Chinese narratives. While the networks provide professional opportunities for local people, they also serve as tools of coercion for Chinese actors as they demand and imply self-censorship by restricting the participation of the local populace. In other words, the networks promote consensus and suppress information among locals while providing mutually beneficial economic opportunities under China’s umbrella.

9 Source: expert interview.

10 In the past, China had a poor track record of fulfilling these pledges, and unmet promises, particularly in the economic domain, led to a backlash against China in the information and political domains, for instance in Central and Eastern Europe. See Pepjin Bergsen and Valdone Sniukaite, ‘Central and Eastern Europe become hawkish on China’, Chatham House, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/central-and-eastern-europe-become-hawkish-china>.

11 John Hemmings, ‘Reconstructing order: The geopolitical risks in China’s Digital Silk Road’, *Asia Policy*, volume 15, Issue 1 (2020): 5–21.

2.4 Impact and harm

China's narrative warfare hampers the development of democracy on the African continent. It reduces transparency, the rule of law, and accountability in Sub-Saharan Africa. China-originated narratives undermine democratic processes, encourage coups, stoke anti-Western sentiments, and spread confusion about climate change science.¹²

By supporting and tapping into a nascent nexus between the domestic and external dis- and misinformation industry, Chinese narrative strategies have gained traction among local actors by mixing false and sensationalized information, often disguised as credible criticism of the Euro-Atlantic community. The result is growing information insecurity in Sub-Saharan countries.

The proliferation of authoritarian narratives and norms also complicates the development of strategic partnerships between Sub-Saharan

African and Euro-Atlantic institutions and states. When normalized, Chinese narratives contribute to the spread of technologically driven illiberalism that undermines democratic norms and the ability to establish cooperation with regional states, as they increasingly embrace authoritarian Chinese norms while rejecting liberal democratic governance.

Achieving 'perception dominance' – the ability to influence and control how situations, events, or narratives are perceived by others – helps China to normalize its claims over Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Building narrative power in Sub-Saharan Africa concretely supports the diversification of Chinese critical supply lines away from liberal democracies. If successful, this will reduce the impact of potential economic sanctions against China, should they be required as a result of Chinese actions in East and Southeast Asia, or its support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

12 Paul Nantulya, 'China Escalates Its Political Party Training in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-escalates-its-political-party-training-in-africa/>; Paul Nantulya, 'China's Strategy to Shape Africa's Media Space', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-strategy-africa-media-space/>; Paul Nantulya, 'China's "Military Political Work" and Professional Military Education in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-pla-military-political-work-pme-africa/>; Paul Nantulya, 'China's United Front Strategy in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-united-front-africa/>.

3. Introduction

In Beijing's worldview, China is engaged in "narrative warfare" with the Euro-Atlantic community. While Sub-Saharan African countries prefer to see themselves in the context of the non-aligned movement, China's key objective is to draw countries outside the traditional Global North closer to its orbit. The aim is therefore to counterbalance the perceived US and NATO strategy to contain China's rise. To achieve this, the PRC employs de-securitized strategic narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as "win-win cooperation", which, however, are neither apolitical nor benign.¹³

In addition to the de-securitized win-win narratives, China's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa has increasingly included political and security narratives, especially following Russia's attack on Ukraine. Concurrently, Beijing's recently announced "Global Development Initiative", "Global Security Initiative", and "Global Civilization Initiative" have further contributed to more security-oriented narrative building. These initiatives increasingly promote the idea of forming an alliance with the Global South, including Sub-Saharan Africa.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of China's narrative strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa, which focuses not only on promoting a positive image of China, but also on coercively amplifying existing grievances in the region, deliberately undermining the Euro-Atlantic community.

The report notes that many of the grievances, such as colonial ones, are legitimate. There is also genuine willingness in Sub-Saharan

Africa to build a more balanced international system, whereby local countries exercise agency and choose strategic partners according to their preferences. China, however, is amplifying resentment against the liberal democratic governance system for allegedly failing to deliver benefits. In contrast, China presents itself as delivering concrete development in terms of roads, bridges and airports. The notion that Euro-Atlantic states merely preach and moralize while China delivers much-needed social goods is gaining increasing traction.

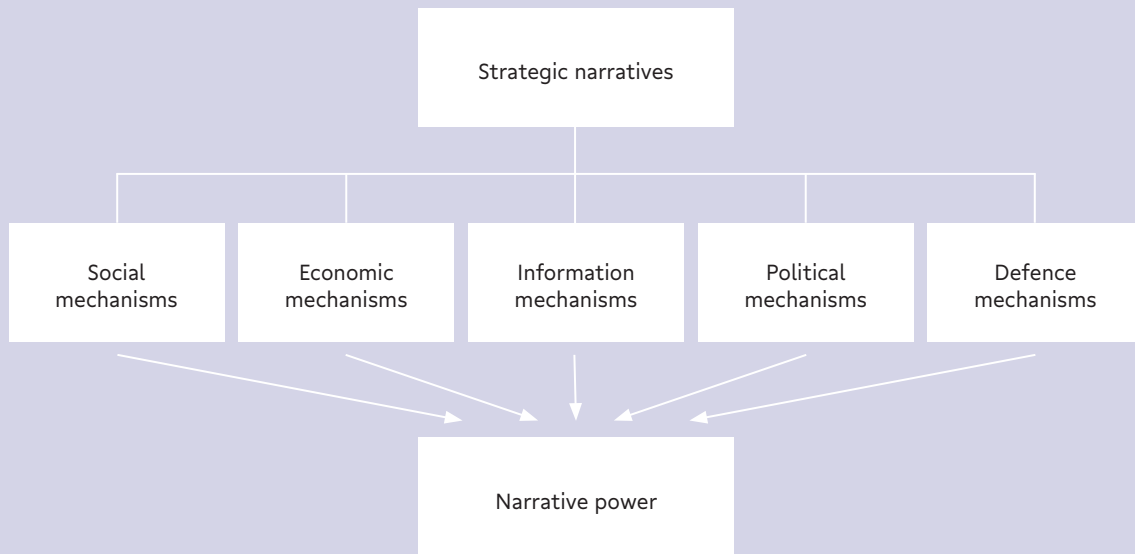
This report examines China as a threat actor, focusing specifically on Chinese strategic narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴ It addresses the following questions: 1) What are the underlying drivers behind Beijing's engagement in coercive narrative influence? 2) What is the content and appeal of Chinese strategic narratives? 3) Through which key mechanisms does Beijing disseminate these narratives? and 4) What are the impact and implications of Chinese narrative influence for Sub-Saharan Africa and the Euro-Atlantic community?

The report argues that China perceives itself as engaged in narrative warfare against Euro-Atlantic countries and, as a result, develops and disseminates anti-liberal democratic narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa. This narrative influence proliferates not only through the information domain via legacy and social media, but also through various other mechanisms, including Chinese state and non-state actors, across different domains. In building narrative

13 Malgorzata Jakimów, 'Desecuritisation as a soft power strategy: the Belt and Road Initiative, European fragmentation and China's normative influence in Central-Eastern Europe', *Asia Europe Journal*, volume 17 (2019): 369–385, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00561-3>.

14 The overall footprint of China in Africa is not the focus of this research report. For a comprehensive overview, see e.g., David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China's relations with Africa. A new era of strategic engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

Figure 1. Conceptual links between narratives, mechanisms, and power, as analyzed in this report.



power, these mechanisms exploit existing political, economic, and cultural conditions in target countries to establish perception dominance and to shape the overall information space in a manner favourable to China. In fact, exploiting local conditions, particularly socio-political cleavages, has been a key tactic for Beijing in influencing public opinion since the 1950s.¹⁵

In this context, the report discusses various mechanisms that either directly contribute to the proliferation of specific narratives, create conditions favouring their promotion, or ensure they remain uncontested through information suppression or self-censorship. In effect, these mechanisms establish China's strategic narratives as the norm in Sub-Saharan Africa, thereby building its narrative power, as depicted in Figure 1.

The report concludes that local elites and media in Sub-Saharan Africa use China-originated narratives for their own political gains, whether domestically or internationally. Consequently, Chinese actions hamper democratic development locally and hinder cooperation

between the Euro-Atlantic community and Sub-Saharan African countries. In effect, Beijing's strategic narratives amplify sentiments antagonistic to the Euro-Atlantic community, rather than merely creating them, meaning that Sub-Saharan states co-produce strategic narratives favourable to China and unfavourable to the Euro-Atlantic states.

The report begins by examining the underlying drivers behind China's use of strategic narratives, as well as their content. This distinguishes Beijing's narrative warfare from traditional and internationally recognized public diplomacy and country image-building behaviour. It then highlights China's main mechanisms for shaping the overall information space to achieve perception dominance across specific domains, such as information, politics, and the economy. Finally, it presents a generalized modus operandi of China's narrative warfare, discussing its impact on local societies in Sub-Saharan Africa and its implications for the Euro-Atlantic community.

15 Zhen Han, T V Paul, 'China's Rise and Balance of Power Politics', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 13, Issue 1, (2020): 1–26.

4. China's use of strategic narratives

The PRC's quest for stronger international status, coupled with its inability – thus far – to directly challenge the Euro-Atlantic community, has led Chinese leaders to adopt a strategy rooted in Mao Zedong's doctrine of "encircling the cities from the countryside". This approach involves building strength on the periphery initially and then gradually encircling and weakening the centre.

As a result, China has actively employed narrative influence, particularly in the Global South, seeking to secure local countries as allies in its efforts to compete against and undermine cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community. Alongside Russia, African countries are potential partners in what is often referred to as "cognitive warfare" or "narrative warfare" by China.¹⁶ In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the PRC's engagement is accompanied by decolonial narratives, Chinese presence and narratives have been welcomed to some extent and supported.

For the PRC, narrative warfare and influence entail using strategic narratives to shape international opinion and the information environment to support China's overall agenda. The strategy is influenced by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) concept of "three warfares", a framework for holistic information influence encompassing public opinion warfare, psycho-

logical warfare, and legal warfare.¹⁷ According to the key PRC narrative, China, together with Sub-Saharan political elites, aims to build a more "balanced" world order and a "broader international security perspective",¹⁸ thereby undermining and countering the international rules-based order.

Through de-securitized "win-win" narratives that emphasize economic benefits while downplaying security concerns, China uses strategic narratives to promote trade, investment, and aid for the benefit of Sub-Saharan Africa, while simultaneously advancing its political and strategic interests across the continent. The Chinese argument maintains that the PRC applies public diplomacy solely to pursue its legitimate economic interests in the region.¹⁹

Beijing's strategic narratives depict Sub-Saharan African countries as partners in the creation of a more "democratic" and "multipolar" new world order, aimed at bringing about the decline of US hegemony. These narratives also propagate the claim that liberal democratic state actors are hypocrites, while simultaneously portraying the Chinese political system as superior to liberal democracy.²⁰

The underlying drivers and aims of the PRC's narrative influence efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa are discussed below.

16 See e.g., Peggy-Jean Allin et al., 'How China Conducts Influence Operations by Leveraging Culturally Nuanced Narratives in Three Southeast Asian Countries', <https://www.sto.nato.int/publications/STO%20Meeting%20Proceedings/STO-MP-HFM-361/MP-HFM-361-P11.pdf>.

17 Peter Mattis, 'China's "Three Warfares" in Perspective', War on the Rocks, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

18 Chen Qingqing, 'China-Africa security forum injects positive energy into global peace', *Global Times*, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1297125.shtml>.

19 Zhengrong Hu et al., 'From the outside in: CCTV going global in a new world communication order'. In *China's media go global* ed. Daya Kishan Thussu et al. (London: Routledge, 2018).

20 Joshua Eisenman, 'Locating Africa in China's Community of Shared Future for Mankind: A Relational Approach', *Journal of International Development*, volume 35, number 1 (2023): 65–78.

4.1 Underlying drivers

The PRC leadership aims to align China's voice in international issues with its economic and military growth. This objective is echoed in Beijing's quest for "narrative power" – the ability to shape the global order and institutions to its advantage by building consensus around an alternative vision for international order. Chinese leaders believe that the US is able to dominate the international system because it exercises "narrative hegemony" in agenda-setting along with its allies, enabling them to shape global governance, values, and norms. Consequently, the perception in Beijing is that China needs to enhance its narrative power to counter Western influence.²¹ This strategy was elevated to a top priority in Xi Jinping's speech on national image building on 19 August 2013.²²

Chinese state media discourse often portrays international politics as a conflict in which liberal democracies dominate the information space with strategic narratives that demonize China, forcing it into a defensive normative position. According to this perspective, there is a conflict between the "corrupt and hypocrit-

ical West" and a "benign" China, surrounded by Western bad-faith actors. This narrative is promoted both in the PRC's international English-language state media²³ and in the Chinese domestic media space.²⁴

China's strategic engagements in Africa should be viewed in the context of this broader PRC quest to prevail in a great power competition with a view to establishing a new international order. The key underlying driver is to gain legitimacy and support for China's one-party governance model, while undermining the US, NATO and, increasingly, the EU.

4.2 Aims

In recent years, China's narrative influence in Sub-Saharan Africa has pursued four main goals: 1) promote a positive view of the CCP and China; 2) advocate CCP policies and Chinese culture; 3) counter foreign influence; and 4) normalize China's claims over Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, the South China Sea, and other contested issues, such as human rights violations.²⁵

21 Kenton Thibaut, 'Chinese discourse power: Ambitions and reality in the digital domain', In-Depth Research & Reports, Atlantic Council, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinese-discourse-power-ambitions-and-reality-in-the-digital-domain/>.

22 PRC MFA, 'Xi demands greater initiative, innovation in publicity work', 2013, http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/News/201308/t20130821_1582132.htm.

23 Yuwei Hu and Xuanzun Liu, 'How US military-industrial complex orchestrates narrative campaigns against China and pushes Philippines to forefront', *Global Times*, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202409/1320215.shtml>; Editorial, "'China decline' narrative is the West's futile attempt of self-rescue', *Global Times*, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1306007.shtml>; Editorial, 'Repeated Western narratives of China's nuclear "threat" are what lead to a dangerous world', *Global Times*, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202406/1314282.shtml>.

24 See e.g., 'Zhongguo zheng da ying dui mei "xushi zhi zhan", yulun zhan de shouduan bianle, zhongguo de jihui laile' [China is winning the 'narrative war' against the US. The means of public opinion warfare have changed, and China's opportunity has arrived], Wang Yutian Says, Blog, 2020, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/I9C4B21P0552P8Z9.html>.

25 See David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 194–210.

The overarching aim, therefore, is to establish narrative hegemony across various domains. For instance, Chinese state media seeks to influence perceptions, local media landscapes, and media consumption through positive coverage of China. Through its state media presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, the PRC aims to counter and control local media coverage of China.²⁶ To this end, local media portrayals of China subsequently shape local opinion and Sub-Saharan African news consumers' perceptions of China, Africa-China relations, and Africa's other external partners.²⁷

Furthermore, in the political domain, narrative influence works in combination with interpersonal exchanges. The aim is to create long-lasting bilateral and networked collaboration with contemporary and future socio-political elites. The approach utilizes a combination of narratives, favours, and hospitality to foster feelings of belonging, solidarity, gratitude and indebtedness to inspire or strengthen recipients' positive attitudes and actions towards China.²⁸

4.3 Conceptual understanding of narrative warfare

According to the PLA, China should develop "narrative warfare" capabilities to strategically shape international public perception and the information environment in ways that favour China.²⁹ In practice, Chinese narrative warfare campaigns globally utilize "suggestive half-lies to mobilize alliances and silence enemies".³⁰

The concept of narrative conflict should be understood as part of a broader strategy of indirect warfare, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese strategic thought. In PLA doctrines, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has gained even more traction in recent years.³¹ *The Art of War* advocates indirect means of warfare. Imperatives such as "subdue the enemy without fighting", "know oneself and the enemy", and "seize the initiative to impose your own will on the enemy" embrace approaches known in China as "indirect methods".³²

26 Emmanuel Dogbevi, 'China in Africa's Media: A Case Study of Ghana', The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr100_politicalfrontlines_june2022.pdf; Nadège Rolland, Ed, *Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022.

27 Yanqiu Zhang and Jane Muthoni Mwangi, 'A perception study on China's media engagement in Kenya: from media presence to power influence?', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, Volume 9, Issue 1, (2016): 71–80, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17544750.2015.1111246>.

28 Richard, H. Solomon, *Chinese Political Negotiating Behavior, 1967–1984: An Interpretive Assessment*, The Rand Corporation, R-3299, 1985; Jean Pierre Cabestan, 'Party-to-Party Relations and Political Training', in *Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022): 25–38.

29 Wenke Shen and Yanxing Xue, "'Xushi zhan": Junshi jingzheng de huayu wuqi' ["Narrative War": A discourse weapon in military competition], China Military Network, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-12/07/content_304715.htm.

30 Isabel Lu, 'To subdue the enemies without fighting: Chinese state-sponsored disinformation as digital warfare', *Digi War*, volume 3, (2022): 96–106, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-022-00052-7>.

31 Andrea Ghiselli, 'Revising China's Strategic Culture: Contemporary Cherry-Picking of Ancient Strategic Thought', *The China Quarterly*, volume 233, (2018): 166–185.

32 John Friend and Bradley Thayer, *How China Sees the World: Han-Centrism and the Balance of Power in International Politics*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

The overall conceptual framework for information operations was officially adopted by the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2003.³³ It is based on the PLA's holistic information influence strategy, the so-called "three warfares", a concept touched upon earlier in this report. This is a tool used by the PLA to project influence abroad through "legal warfare", "public opinion warfare", and "psychological warfare".³⁴ These concepts can be used in both wartime and peacetime, encompassing psychological operations as well as other overt and covert media manipulation targeting overseas audiences. As in the case of the PLA, public opinion guidance and management have long been core components of the PRC foreign ministry and other outward-facing bodies.³⁵

In the PLA's strategy, these three warfares are mutually reinforcing, with public opinion warfare being particularly significant. Strategic narratives are firstly propagated through different mechanisms to influence both domestic and foreign audiences. By using the media, social networks, and other platforms, they build a favourable information environment, normalize

pro-Beijing narratives, legitimize China's actions, and discredit opponents.

At the same time, Chinese officials have long sought to influence legal norms at the international level, seeking to justify Beijing's actions by arguing for "information sovereignty".³⁶ Sovereignty in this context means that Beijing has an inherent and indisputable right to control the international information space, sanitize it, and proactively attack critics. For example, in 2019, the PRC's security apparatus engaged in a holistic narrative warfare campaign against pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong.³⁷

Thus far, however, the PLA has relied on a quantity-over-quality strategy in practice. While Chinese disinformation is often clumsy, its proliferation involves Chinese state media, which now operates internationally in multiple languages. It also includes the so-called Chinese 50 Cent Army, consisting of millions of Chinese online citizens recruited by the PLA to troll and spread strategic narratives and pro-China messaging throughout social media platforms and the internet at large, systematically defending Beijing's strategic narratives and attacking anyone critical of them.³⁸

33 Michael Raska, 'China and the "Three Warfares"', *The Diplomat*, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics-2/>.

34 Gill Bates and Benjamin Schreer, 'Countering China's "United Front"', *The Washington Quarterly*, volume 41, Issue 2, (2018): 155–170.

35 See e.g., Stefan Müller et al., 'Discourse wars and "mask diplomacy": China's global image management in times of crisis', *Political Research Exchange* 6, number 1, (2024): 2337632.

36 See e.g., Min Jiang, 'Authoritarian Informationalism: China's Approach to Internet Sovereignty', *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 30, (2010): 71–89.

37 See e.g., Echo Huang, 'China's Hong Kong narrative is confusing its own people', *Quartz*, 2019, <https://qz.com/1702455/chinas-hong-kong-narrative-is-confusing-its-own-people>.

38 Idayat Hassan and Kyle Hiebert, 'Illiberal Influence Fuels Disinformation in West Africa', CDD, 2022, <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/reports/illiberal-influence-fuels-disinformation-in-west-africa/>; Krassi Twigg and Kerry Allen, 'The disinformation tactics used by China', BBC, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/56364952>; Alexander Bowe, 'China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States', US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GOVPUB-Y3-PURL-gpo154476>.

5. China's narratives in Sub-Saharan Africa

Since the Hong Kong protests and the Covid-19 pandemic, the PRC has increasingly waged narrative warfare against the Euro-Atlantic community in Sub-Saharan Africa. Following these events, there appears to have been a shift within the Chinese state bureaucracy towards a more security-oriented approach.³⁹

Beijing employs this strategy by weaponizing certain narratives or narrative bundles. The unifying theme among these narratives is the argument that, irrespective of how the international situation develops, mutual respect, understanding, and support will always be the foundation of China-Africa friendship. This implies that, should the conflict between authoritarian and liberal democratic states escalate, China and Russia expect Sub-Saharan African countries to either remain neutral or align with the authoritarian camp.

The PRC's foreign policy strategy is encapsulated in the idea of a "community of shared future for mankind", which embodies Xi Jinping's comprehensive vision for managing international relations.⁴⁰ The concept represents China's global governance framework for international relations, presented as being based on a façade of de-securitized notions of cooperation, mutual

respect, and peaceful coexistence. In reality, China expands its military capabilities, including its nuclear arsenal,⁴¹ and conducts aggressive military exercises around Taiwan⁴² and, more recently, in Europe alongside Belarus and Russia.⁴³

Below, the most important narrative bundles aimed at African audiences are discussed. These include themes such as "shared colonial legacy", "Chinese exceptionalism", "emerging new global order", "the US as a hegemonic bully", "China and Russia as champions of multipolarity", as well as "Western incompetence and hypocrisy".

5.1 Shared colonial legacy

The shared colonial past is an often-used narrative in China's official discourse. It seeks to portray colonial experiences as common to both China and Africa, fostering a sense of solidarity and affinity. This narrative presents African nations as equals to China, and as "friends" or "brothers", emphasizing a "community of shared destiny" for Africa and China.

For instance, President Xi Jinping has stated that: "Over the past 65 years, China and Africa have forged unbreakable fraternity in our struggle against imperialism and colonialism."⁴⁴

39 Source: expert interview.

40 Jinghan Zeng and Zeng Jinghan, 'Slogan of "community of shared future for mankind"', *Slogan Politics: Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts* (2020): 111–130.

41 Noah Robertson, 'China leading "rapid expansion" of nuclear arsenal, Pentagon says', *Defence News*, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/10/24/china-leading-rapid-expansion-of-nuclear-arsenal-pentagon-says/>.

42 Rupert Wingfield Hayes and Ayeshea Perera, 'China "punishes" Taiwan president remarks with new drills', *BBC*, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgd4yn45qlo>.

43 Anushka Saxena, 'China's Show of Force With Belarus Amid NATO Concerns', *The Diplomat*, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/chinas-show-of-force-with-belarus-amid-nato-concerns/>.

44 In his keynote speech at the 8th Ministerial Conference on the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation. See PRC MFA, 'Carry Forward the Spirit of China-Africa Friendship and Cooperation and Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era', 2021, http://au.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/sghd_1/202112/t20211216_10470666.htm.

In fact, Chinese leaders often use expressions such as “together with African brothers”⁴⁵ to not only present Chinese and Africans as victims but also to stress shared agency and a common cause. Similar phrases frequently appear in speeches by Chinese leaders, such as “looking forward to realizing the vision of modernization together” and “walking hand in hand on the road to building a high-level China-Africa community with shared destiny”.⁴⁶

This narrative is often reinforced by PRC officials portraying China as a developing nation. For example, in 2023, Xi stated in Johannesburg that China “has been, is now, and will forever be a member of the developing world”.⁴⁷ This indicates that no matter how prosperous China is or will be in the future, Beijing will continue to identify China as part of the developing world.

The BRI is often presented as an example of China’s commitment towards African countries. China is portrayed as driving development and modernization on the continent, and the BRI is described as a “historic opportunity to modernize; to break the chains of underdevelopment” – chains claimed to have been forged by West-

ern colonialism.⁴⁸ This narrative highlights not only the past injustices perpetrated by former colonial powers, but also amplifies the lingering colonial attitudes attributed to the US, France and the UK.⁴⁹ At the same time, China is portrayed as a trusted ally of African countries in their efforts to counter former colonial powers.

The aim is to link China and Africa while deepening divisions with the US and the EU by portraying China-Africa cooperation as a “partnership of equals”.⁵⁰ As Xi Jinping noted in 2021: “China-Africa cooperation has all along been a banner for opposing hegemony and power politics, practising multilateralism, and defending the common interests of developing countries.”⁵¹ In this way, Beijing promotes the narrative that China is a developing country that seeks only the common good of the group.

5.2 Chinese exceptionalism

While the PRC wishes to present China as an equal partner to the Global South countries, it simultaneously portrays itself as their natural leader. The justification for this is based on the narrative of Chinese exceptionalism,

45 *People’s Daily*, ‘Xijiping tong gangguo (jin) zongtong qi sai ke di ju hang huitan’ [Xi Jinping held talks with Congolese President Tshisekedi], 2023, <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/40000224>.

46 Xinhua, ‘Xiandaihua daolu shang xieshou xiang qian gong zhugao shuiping zhong fei mingyun gongtongti’ [Working together on the road to modernization to build a high-level community of shared future between China and Africa], 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202402/content_6931819.htm.

47 CGTN, ‘Xi says China will always be a member of the developing world’, 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-08-24/Xi-says-China-always-member-of-developing-world-1mx6GUstLVu/index.html>.

48 *Global Times*, ‘Western media spreads anti-China sentiment on soil of colonial history’, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1297344.shtml>.

49 *Global Times*, ‘West still harbors colonial attitude toward Africa: former South African diplomat’, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1266445.shtml>.

50 *Global Times*, ‘Mali blasts Macron over ‘neocolonial’ attitude’, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1271931.shtml>.

51 In his FOCAC speech of December 2021. See PRC MFA, ‘Carry Forward the Spirit of China-Africa Friendship and Cooperation and Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era’, 2021, http://au.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/sghd_1/202112/t20211216_10470666.htm.

which highlights China's allegedly superior policies and moral qualities.

A well-known case of this exceptionalism narrative is the so-called doctrine of a "community of common destiny for mankind", which has been a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy for a number of years in various iterations. While the doctrine pledges Chinese commitment to so-called global unity, it also underlines opposition to perceived Western imperialism, hegemonism, and colonialism.⁵²

By consistently presenting China as a champion, defender, and de facto figurehead of the Global South, PRC narratives convey the message that China is both acting on behalf of and as a model for these nations. For instance, in sharing experiences and practices in urban and rural sustainable development, China's contributions to Africa are depicted as "Chinese wisdom and programmes".⁵³

Another strand of PRC messaging is the saviour narrative, which promulgates the idea that, out of benevolence, China and Chinese companies are sharing the latest green technology with African countries. In this narrative, China is depicted as the leading producer of green technology, enabling African countries to achieve leapfrog development without the

challenges typically associated with early industrial stages.⁵⁴

The so-called saviour narrative contrasts China with the US and the EU by claiming that it harbours no colonial aspirations towards Africa.⁵⁵ China is thus depicted as an actor that understands the priorities of the Global South, building a reputation as a global power that respects other cultures.⁵⁶ Beijing is falsely presented as a partner willing to provide funding without any strings attached, in contrast to Western countries.⁵⁷ In reality, however, cooperation with China comes with conditions, including providing political support for the PRC internationally.⁵⁸

Another version of the saviour narrative depicts China as a benevolent friend, protecting Africa from becoming a battleground for great power rivalry. While the liberal democratic critique often accuses China of exploiting African countries and pursuing narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, PRC narratives counter this by accusing the US-led collective West of pursuing self-serving interests and instigating great power rivalry in Africa.

For example, according to *China Daily's* chief international commentator, writing under the pseudonym Zhong Sheng, "Africa is not

52 For a full discussion, see Stella Chen, 'Community of Common Destiny for Mankind', China Media Project, 2021, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/community-of-common-destiny-for-mankind/.

53 Sun Yue, 'Zhongguo jingyan zhuli feizhou guojia ke chixu fazhan' [China's experience helps African countries develop sustainably], Xinhua, 2023, http://www.81.cn/ss_208539/16230231.html.

54 Ibid.

55 CGTN, 'No strings attached with Africa deal – China's Xi Jinping', 2023, <https://africa.cgtn.com/no-strings-attached-with-africa-deal-chinas-xi-jinping/>.

56 Mehari Maru, 'Why Africa loves China', Aljazeera, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/1/6/why-africa-loves-china>.

57 CGTN Africa, 'No strings attached with Africa deal – China's Xi Jinping'.

58 Marc Oberhauser, 'The Chinese belt and road initiative: development project with strings attached?', *International Journal of Development Issues*, volume 23, number 2, (2024): 212–244, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-03-2023-0073>.

for great power rivalry and the US is trying to exploit the continent for its own geopolitical interests, which is disrespectful to African countries and their people”.⁵⁹ Similarly, China’s top diplomat, Wang Yi, has stated that China has always believed that Africa should be “a stage for international cooperation, not an arena for great power rivalry”.⁶⁰

5.3 A new global situation

The PRC’s main narrative regarding Africa emphasizes that, regardless of how the international situation develops, mutual respect, understanding, and support will always form the foundation of China-Africa friendship. This narrative aims to draw African countries into China’s orbit.

The PRC depicts the current international situation as a turning point in international relations, with the West losing its position and China gaining greater leverage. In recent interactions between Xi Jinping and various African leaders, Chinese discourse includes frequent references to a “new situation” and the “current international situation”.⁶¹

According to the PRC, one manifestation of the current international situation is the “crisis in Ukraine”. Former Foreign Minister Qin Gang stated that the “crisis in Ukraine” has developed to this point due to a “profound historical background” and “complex practical reasons”.⁶² As is often the case, Chinese newspapers are more outspoken. The official newspaper of the Communist Party, *People’s Daily*, claimed that the root cause of the Ukrainian situation is the persistent US “Cold War mentality” and the constant push for NATO expansion in Europe. According to this narrative, the US is escalating the crisis in Europe to “provoke ideological confrontation and deepen Europe’s strategic dependence on the US”.⁶³

This argument was also used in relation to the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in late spring 2023. According to Beijing, “US provocations” are the root cause of such incidents, escalating tensions and complicating future peace talks. In this narrative, the US is accused of continuously downplaying China’s role and significance in peace efforts: “In addition to targeting Russia, the United States has repeatedly disseminated false information, smeared and

59 *People’s Daily*, ‘Feizhou bu shi daguo boyi de jing’ [Africa is not the arena of great power competition], 2022, http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2022-08/18/content_78377042.shtml.

60 PRC MFA, ‘Wang Yi: Feizhou shi guoji hezuo da wutai, bu shi daguo boyi jingji chang’ [Wang Yi: Africa is a great stage for international cooperation, not a great power game arena], 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/fz_677316/1206_678356/xgxw_678362/202101/t20210106_9321540.shtml.

61 *People’s Daily*, ‘Xi Jinping tong gangguo (jin) zongtong qi sai ke di ju hang huitan’ [Xi Jinping held talks with Congolese President Tshisekedi].

62 Qin Gang, ‘Tuidong guoji shrhui xingcheng jiejie wukelan weiji de zuida gongyue shu’ [Promoting the formation of the greatest common denominator in the international community to resolve the Ukraine crisis], PRC MFA, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/202304/t20230427_11067544.shtm.

63 Jiao Yuan, ‘Gushou lengzhan siwei pohuai guoji anquan hezuo (zhong sheng) – cong wukelan weiji kan meishi baquan’ [Adhere to the Cold War thinking to undermine international security cooperation – American hegemony from the perspective of the Ukraine crisis], *People’s Daily*, 2022, http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2022-04/07/content_78151901.shtml.

slandered China, and distorted China's responsible position of advocating peace talks."⁶⁴

According to the narrative, under the new situation, the common interests between China and Africa have grown, requiring stronger solidarity and cooperation than ever before. This is argued to be not only in the common and long-term interests of China and Africa, but also in the interests of international fairness and justice.⁶⁵ The narrative asserts that China and Africa should oppose all forms of hegemonism and power politics, as well as interference in other countries' internal affairs and unilateral sanctions.⁶⁶ While this may sound ironic given the extent of Beijing's involvement in the continent, the narrative has likely been crafted in anticipation of a future Taiwan-related conflict, which Beijing considers an internal issue.

According to the PRC, the world has now drifted into a "comprehensive information war", intensified by advances in information technology.⁶⁷ Beijing points to "Western efforts to undermine China" as the most obvious example, including the alleged Western demonization of China's efforts in the Global South.⁶⁸ The PRC claims that the current media ecosystem is dominated by powerful Western media outlets

that suppress divergent voices. It therefore advocates the creation of a new media ecosystem that would not be "dominated by the West" but would instead incorporate "reliable and unbiased" outlets from "all corners of the globe".⁶⁹

Chinese leaders have also increasingly used the phrase "China-Africa community with a shared future" alongside or in place of "community with a shared future".⁷⁰ This shift can be interpreted as a narrative tactic underlining the commonality between China and the Global South countries. It also conveys the message that the aid and assistance offered by Beijing is unequivocally superior to that of Western countries, which neither belong to nor are willing to create such a future with the Global South.

5.4 China and Russia as champions of multipolarity

One of China's key narratives, not only in the context of Africa but also globally, is the alleged need for a more multipolar international system. According to this narrative, the current global order has been shaped by Western, specifically US, hegemony, which has led to a unipolar world

64 Ibid.

65 *People's Daily*, 'Xi Jinping tong eliteliya zongtong yi sa ya si ju hang huitan' [Xi Jinping held talks with Eritrean President Isaias], 2023, <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/32686902>; *People's Daily*, 'Xi Jinping tong jiapeng zongtong bang ge ju hang huitan' [Xi Jinping held talks with Gabonian President Bongo], 2023, <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/32668788>.

66 *People's Daily*, 'Xi Jinping tong eliteliya zongtong yi sa ya si ju hang huitan' [Xi Jinping held talks with Eritrean President Isaias].

67 Chandran Nair, 'Opinion: China's rise will give a voice to developing world', Xinhua, 2023, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0605/c90000-20027698.html>.

68 *Global Times*, 'China should fight Western smears by using UN mechanisms', 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202211/1280352.shtml>.

69 Chandran Nair, 'Opinion: China's rise will give a voice to developing world'.

70 Yin He, 'To build high-level China-Africa community with a shared future', *People's Daily*, 2024, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0125/c90000-20126539.html>.

order where “certain countries are at the table while others are on the menu”.⁷¹

This narrative paints a picture of an all-around better world for marginalized countries of the Global South and smaller states that, as Beijing argues, have lacked a voice in the US-dominated global order. Xi Jinping often underlines that China and Africa should work together to practise “true multilateralism” by safeguarding the common interests of developing countries and promoting a more “just and reasonable direction of development” internationally.⁷²

In this regard, the PRC positions China as a benign benefactor working towards a multipolar international system, which, unlike the current one, is depicted as truly equal and just. The equality of the multipolar world is concurrently explained as a system in which all countries are treated as equals, hegemonism and power politics are rejected, and international affairs are no longer dominated by a handful of countries.

The need for a more multipolar world is often brought up in contexts where China and Russia are presented as the true proponents and “saviours” of multilateralism. As generally acknowledged, the difference between these two concepts is that multilateralism refers to a coalition of multiple countries pursuing a common goal,

whereas multipolarity describes the distribution of power between a few major countries.⁷³

The Chinese and Russian narratives, however, purposefully confuse the concepts of multipolarism and multilateralism, as can be seen by observing their attitudes towards Ukraine and Taiwan. In their visions, multipolarity is presented as the true form of multilateralism. Consequently, China’s aim is a multipolar world divided between the major actors – China, Russia, and the US – where smaller countries, including those in the Global South, are not genuinely recognized as equals.

In any case, the BRICS platform (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is used to amplify this narrative by showcasing its expansion as a step towards a so-called more just and equal global governance system. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for instance, described the BRICS group as a “growing force for peace and increasing international support for justice”, seeking to unite the Global South for a “truly multilateral and just global order”.⁷⁴

This PRC narrative is increasingly used in tandem with the Kremlin’s narratives. Together, they portray China and Russia as champions of the Global South and as drivers of a just global order, in contrast to the US-led “fake multilateralism”.⁷⁵ This signals the emergence of

71 Amy Hawkins, ‘China pledges to deepen Russia ties and criticises US “obsession” with suppressing Beijing’, *The Guardian*, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/07/china-pledges-to-deepen-russia-ties-and-criticises-us-obsession-with-suppressing-beijing>.

72 *People’s Daily*, ‘Xi Jinping tong nanfei zongtong la ma fu sa tong dianhua’ [Xi Jinping talked on the phone with South African President Ramafosa], 2023, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2023-06/10/nw.D110000renmrb_20230610_2-01.htm.

73 For a textbook definition, see Britannica, “Multilateralism”, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/multilateralism>.

74 *Global Times*, ‘Global South is key force for reforming international order; 2024 expected to be fruitful year for cooperation: Wang’, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308385.shtml>.

75 *Global Times*, ‘Only true multilateralism can benefit the world’, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1260019.shtml>.

an anti-liberal democratic front, the so-called “world majority”,⁷⁶ rising against the “unjust and hegemonic West”. In fact, Russia identifies this as a long-term strategic task in an official white paper.⁷⁷ Thus, while the argument is purely geopolitical, it reflects a coordinated effort to create a united authoritarian front to weaken the influence of liberal democracies, which are seen as an ideological threat to authoritarian regimes domestically.

Not surprisingly, China and Russia support and amplify each other’s narratives of being unfairly treated by the US and the EU. According to Chinese officials, the US is repeating “its old tactics of waging proxy, low-intensity, and drone wars” in Ukraine,⁷⁸ while Chinese state-backed media is calling for a more balanced view of the Putin regime amid a supposed “Russia rejection” in US politics.⁷⁹ This joint effort to establish a “just world order” and the shared task of “upholding global strategic stability”⁸⁰ is further supported by portraying the relationship between Russia and China as one based on a high degree of mutual trust.

In joint discussions on Russia’s war in Ukraine, Chinese and African leaders tend to underline that their position on the “Ukrainian crisis” is

consistent support for peace talks. It is often pointed out that “all parties” involved in the conflict should “accumulate favourable conditions for resolving the crisis through dialogue”.⁸¹

5.5 Western incompetence and hypocrisy

The PRC’s final key narrative bundle relates to the alleged Western hypocrisy. The aim of this narrative is to counter accusations of Chinese neo-colonialist practices in Africa. Chinese state media often frame China and Africa-China relations within the context of geopolitical rivalry and competition.

From Beijing’s viewpoint, the US is portrayed as a hegemonic bully whose colonial practices remain unchanged. Western media is often depicted as hysterical and hypocritical in its coverage, commentaries and opinions decrying China’s presence in Africa.

The so-called debt trap argument is frequently cited as an example of Western hypocrisy. It claims that China uses the BRI framework to grant loans to African countries that they can ill afford, which are then used as leverage to interfere in domestic politics or seize national assets. Chinese officials categorically deny such

76 Angela Stent, ‘Russia, the West and the “World Majority”’, *Russia Matters*, 2024, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russia-west-and-world-majority>.

77 Sergei Karaganov et al., ‘Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority’, National Research University, 2023, <https://www.mid.ru/upload/medialibrary/c98/cjmfdf73760bme0y99zqlj51zzllrvs/Russia%E2%80%99s%20Policy.pdf>.

78 PRC MFA, ‘US Hegemony and Its Perils’, 2023, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202303/t20230302_11033825.htm.

79 Qi Wang, ‘Carlson interview enables American public to form a more balanced view of Russia amid deep Russia rejection among US politicians: experts’, *Global Times*, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1306963.shtml>.

80 Cao Desheng, ‘Xi’s Russia visit promotes global strategic stability’, *China Daily*, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202303/22/WS641b1f42a31057c47ebb5f4c.html>.

81 *People’s Daily*, ‘Xi Jinping tong nanfei zongtong la ma fu sa tong dianhua’ [Xi Jinping talked on the phone with South African President Ramafosa].

accusations, with Chinese leaders emphasizing that China-Africa relations are based on cooperation between developing countries, namely South-South cooperation, support, and assistance.⁸² Moreover, from the Chinese perspective, these loans are seen as essential for Africa to “break the chains of underdevelopment”⁸³ caused by Western colonialism.

According to the PRC narrative, the debt trap diplomacy argument purposefully overlooks the root causes of poor economic development in Africa. In Mandarin discourse, the word “trap” is often replaced with the similarly sounding word “pie” to evoke a more positive connotation. Ultimately, it is up to the Africans themselves to determine whether cooperation with China is a “pie” or a “trap”.⁸⁴

Chinese officials and pundits often use this argumentative trick to ridicule the original idea by swapping words. Wang Yi, for instance, recently claimed that the debt trap is not a fact, but rather Western malign speculation.

He therefore framed it as a “discourse trap” created by those that do not want to see Africa develop. Wang further noted that the only traps in Africa are “poverty traps” or “backward traps”, referring to the low level of development, which China is striving to eliminate.⁸⁵ This discursive trick has since been regarded as a part of Chinese officials’ strategic narrative.⁸⁶

In Chinese narratives, the West – understood as the US and its allies – has increasingly been depicted in recent years as an unjust and hegemonic actor, or as a “bully”,⁸⁷ focused solely on its own goals. These narratives claim that the West has created “fake multilateralism, fake rules, fake human rights and fake democracy”⁸⁸ to justify US-led hegemony.

The alleged “top-down position” of the US and its allies regarding the Global South is emphasized in narratives accusing them of “double standards on international rules”.⁸⁹ Hence, the aim is to create an image of Western hypocrisy when it comes to liberal democratic

82 Xin Liu et al., ‘BRI genuinely brings shared benefits to China, Africa’, *Global Times*, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1297409.shtml>.

83 *Global Times*, ‘Western media spreads anti-China sentiment on soil of colonial history’, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1297344.shtml>.

84 China-US-focus, ‘Zhongguo dui fei tou rongzi hezuo shi “xian bing” haishi “xianjing”?’ [Is China’s investment and financing cooperation with Africa a “pie” or a “trap”?], 2022, <http://cn.chinausfocus.com/m/42679.html>.

85 Observer Network, ‘Suowei “zhaiwu xianjing” shi “huayu xianjing”, shi bu xiwang kan dao feizhou fazhan de shili suo zhizao chulai de’ [The so-called “debt trap” is a “word trap”, which is created by forces that do not want to see the development of Africa], 2022, https://www.guancha.cn/internation/2022_01_07_621404.shtml?s=zwxyxgtjdt.

86 PRC MFA, ‘Zhongguo bu shi feizhou guojia “zhaiwu xianjing” de yuantou, er shi bangzhu feizhou deng guangda fazhan zhong guojia baituo “pinkun xianjing” de huoban’ [China is not the source of the “debt trap” of African countries, but a partner that helps Africa and other developing countries get out of the “poverty trap”], 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/sp_683685/wjbfyrlxjzh_683691/202304/t20230410_11057031.shtml.

87 *Global Times*, ‘Why the US and West are so keen to act as “victims”’, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1297428.shtml>.

88 Yucheng Le, ‘Acting on the Global Security Initiative To Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility’, PRC MFA, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202205/t20220506_10682621.html.

89 PRC MFA, ‘US Hegemony and Its Perils’, 2023, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtd/202303/t20230302_11033825.htm.

values. Chinese narratives suggest that the US is seeking only to divide and conquer, or to prosper while denying development opportunities to other countries.⁹⁰

Chinese narratives also accuse the West of monopolizing the concept of democracy and of portraying Western liberal democracy as the only true form of democracy. They argue that this is accomplished by fabricating a false dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism. According to these narratives, the West aims to create alliances based on this false understanding of values and to form exclusive clubs, excluding countries it deems non-democratic.⁹¹

The Western hypocrisy and failure narrative is amplified by Chinese state-backed media when discussing the African American population in the US, for example – a tactic with long-standing traditions in PRC propaganda. Chinese narratives suggest a continuous disregard for the Black population by US political elites.⁹²

Another narrative strand in depicting Western hypocrisy relates to development aid. According to Beijing, Chinese aid on the African continent is superior to Western aid, which is described as ineffective or rife with past colonial attitudes. Similarly, Western governance

models and means of development are depicted as failing to support African development effectively or even as actively hindering it. For instance, Chinese state television CGTN Africa (China Global Television Network) presents Western democracies and existing multilateral institutions as “at best ineffective and at worst active hindrances to the continent’s development”.⁹³ By contrast, BRI projects and initiatives are portrayed not only as viable alternatives but also as “the best way to ensure Africans’ prosperity”.⁹⁴

Yet another narrative strand depicting Western hypocrisy relates to the inability of the US and France to successfully defeat insurgency in Africa. The underlying suggestion is that, instead of relying on the West as a security partner, local countries would benefit more from switching to partnerships with China and Russia in fighting extremism.⁹⁵

The narrative of Western failure in upholding security is echoed by some African states. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – countries influenced by Russian disinformation campaigns⁹⁶ – have accused the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) of being “under the influence of foreign powers” and failing to defeat extremism or assist member states in dealing

90 *Global Times*, ‘China’s diplomatic character more prominent against turbulent world’, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308455.shtml>.

91 Sheng Zhong, ‘US hegemonic, domineering, bullying practices exerting grave harm’, *China Daily*, 2023, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/23/WS63f6bcc6a31057c47ebb0580.html>.

92 Ngina Karanja, ‘The legacy of black US intellectuals’, *Global Times*, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1307806.shtml>.

93 Etienne Soula, ‘The World According to CGTN Africa’, German Marshal Fund, 2024, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/the-world-according-to-cgtn-africa/>.

94 Ibid.

95 *Global Times*, ‘Mali junta says it thwarted coup attempt supported by Western state’, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1265867.shtml>.

96 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa’, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>.

with the threat.⁹⁷ This narrative is further amplified by disinformation campaigns suggesting that countries that have abandoned the path to liberal democratic governance are economically successful.

Concurrently, the alleged failure of Western countries to defeat insurgency follows a similar pattern in Chinese state media. Using pro-China academics or politicians who reiterate Chinese narratives verbatim, Chinese media claims that the West's failure to combat insurgency in Sub-Saharan Africa is a direct result of colonial practices.⁹⁸ According to this argument, the intensification of terrorism in the Sahel region over the past decade can be blamed on Western colonialism. At the same time, Western military presence, operating "under the pretext of counterterrorism" is seen as "the last stage of imperialism",⁹⁹ enabling Western countries to implement neo-colonialism.

In other words, Western powers are depicted as undermining African sovereignty and using their military presence to interfere in African

countries' internal affairs, which has led to greater political instability. This relates directly to a broader narrative arguing that the US places excessive emphasis on military power at the expense of diplomacy.¹⁰⁰

Chinese state media often points out that it is not only governments but also citizens who wish Western troops to leave their country. According to Chinese media, increased insecurity has fuelled dissatisfaction and heightened anti-Western sentiments among local populations.¹⁰¹

As evident from the above discussion, the narrative bundles often overlap and complement each other. That said, the narrative of the West's failure to defeat insurgency largely encapsulates Chinese strategic narratives, with the withdrawal of US and French troops interpreted as a sign of a global "new situation", as discussed earlier. Indeed, this has been referred to as Africa's "awakening" and the emergence of an independent foreign policy for Africa in the current "multipolar world".¹⁰²

97 Otiato Opali, 'Bloc says Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger remain its "important members"', *China Daily*, 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/30/WS65b65865a3105f21a507eb40.html>.

98 Xinhuanet, 'Feizhou guojia weihe yaoqiu xifang zhujun cheli' [Why African countries ask for the evacuation of Western garrisons], 2024, <http://www.news.cn/world/20240428/6bcccf2118146c58602ca07c403da6d/c.html>.

99 Global Magazine, 'Feizhou jujue xifang zhujun you shenyi' [Africa's rejection of Western troops has profound implications], (2024), http://www.news.cn/globe/2024-06/05/c_1310776165.htm.

100 *Global Times*, 'Waning influence, hidden benefit explain why US is trapped in endless wars', 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202406/1314715.shtml>.

101 *Global Times* staff reporters, 'Why are Western troops in West Africa being given the "boot" one after the other? Dishonorable discharge', 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1311283.shtml>.

102 Global Magazine, 'Feizhou jujue xifang zhujun you shenyi' [Africa's rejection of Western troops has profound implications], 2024, http://www.news.cn/globe/2024-06/05/c_1310776165.htm.

6. China's mechanisms of narrative influence

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the various mechanisms that the PRC uses to shape the information space and to achieve perception dominance, namely information suppression through the dissemination of the above-analyzed narratives.

In addition to undermining the Euro-Atlantic community and propagating non-liberal norms, China's strategic narratives aim to provide justification for its presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The dissemination of these narratives cuts across multiple domains, using various mechanisms through which Chinese actors in key domains create conditions favourable to this messaging. For instance, PRC state media activities in the information domain interact with and support the activities of Chinese actors in the economic, political, and cultural/education domains, often by generating expectations and media buzz initially, followed by amplifying successes. Discussion of failures, however, is suppressed by the PRC's authoritarian governance practices, based on economic incentives and self-censorship.

Below, the different mechanisms employed by Chinese actors in these respective domains to directly propagate narratives – or to create conditions that ensure they remain uncontested – are discussed. While these activities, carried out by a wide range of actors across different domains, may appear scattered to some extent, they converge within a broader perspective in a coherent and holistic manner to wage the PRC's narrative warfare.

6.1 The information domain

Chinese state media activity in the Sub-Saharan information domain largely consists of a push-back strategy aimed at countering pro-Western narratives in Africa's media landscape, with the PRC's narratives putting a positive spin on China's presence in the continent.

The PRC's collaboration and partnerships with African media houses and journalists are aimed at bringing the CCP-defined China closer to African news consumers. Chinese media and telecommunications companies engage with African countries using four different mechanisms: direct investment, content production and distribution, training and education, as well as infrastructure development,¹⁰³ all of which are discussed below.

6.1.1 Direct investment and partnerships

Beijing has developed an institutionalized approach to exporting its news media practices to Africa. To this end, China has invested in media infrastructure, and established partnerships with private, public, and state media, alongside funding its own state media agencies and companies.

Chinese state media companies use partnerships and collaboration as strategies to enter the local media market, while acquiring ownership of official and semi-official news outlets in specific African countries in order to influence their editorial practices in alignment with China's top-down model.

103 Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales, 'The limits of Chinese interference in Africa's media landscape', *The Asia Dialogue*, 2018, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/10/16/the-limits-of-chinese-interference-in-africas-media-landscape/>.

Chinese media companies also purchase advertising space in local media houses. Such a strategy enables media houses to generate revenue (as their subsidies are scarce and small) and to disseminate narratives favourable to China. In Kenya, for instance, Chinese state-linked companies place paid inserts in media outlets at least once a week.¹⁰⁴

In other instances, given that journalism does not always provide a sustainable wage in Africa, local journalists may resort to receiving funds from Chinese sources. This makes them more likely not only to follow and disseminate Chinese narratives, but also to self-censor on topics that undermine Chinese narratives. This practice, known locally as “brown envelope” journalism, is common across the continent and is often exploited by China.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, hiring journalists and editors by offering a competitive salary package, compared to local media houses, helps to establish personal contacts and build relationships with local journalists, editors, media owners, and directors. In Kenya, for instance, PRC narratives are relayed and amplified by locals who are friendly to China and the CCP.¹⁰⁶

In general, two types of Chinese staff are present in African media outlets: Chinese actors, often CCP cadres posing as professional journalists, and actual journalists. The role of CCP cadres is to evaluate content from a political point of view. They are frequently tasked with making

editorial decisions, while overseeing the work of both Chinese and African journalists. They also determine which content is suitable for public dissemination and which is deemed sensitive, reserved solely for distribution to relevant government and party actors.¹⁰⁷ This political oversight of journalists systematically undermines the principle of independent journalism, while posing as such.

6.1.2 Content production and sharing

Content produced in Beijing and subsequently disseminated in Sub-Saharan Africa serves as another mechanism for Chinese actors to spread their narratives. Many countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Zambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, have signed media cooperation and content-sharing agreements with official Chinese state media agencies. These agreements facilitate the proliferation of Chinese political narratives within these countries. In some cases, Chinese state media disseminate content in Africa that could be classified as misinformation or even blatant disinformation, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁸

In effect, Chinese actors, together with local interlocutors, develop capabilities to appeal to Sub-Saharan African audiences. For instance, while Beijing deploys its state media agencies in South Africa to disseminate Chinese narratives, there are also Chinese media operations run by Chinese residents in the country, which focus on

104 Angeli Datt and Anonymous, ‘Beijing’s global media influence’, Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kenya/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

105 Source: expert interview.

106 Datt and Anonymous, ‘Beijing’s global media influence’.

107 Emeka Umejei, *Chinese Media in Africa: Perception, Performance, and Paradox*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020): 76–77.

108 See e.g., *The Conversation*, ‘Vaccine hesitancy in South Africa: COVID experience highlights conspiracies, mistrust and the role of the media’, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/vaccine-hesitancy-in-south-africa-covid-experience-highlights-conspiracies-mistrust-and-the-role-of-the-media-198002>.

adopting narratives suitable for local South African audiences. In some cases, local independent media run copies of news directly from Chinese sources. Notably, the aim of such content is not to direct criticism towards African leaders, but rather to target Western elites.¹⁰⁹

Messaging is therefore tailored to local audiences and often underlines positive social and economic developments in African countries, attributed to China.¹¹⁰ The activity builds on disseminating narratives of economic prosperity, as well as disinformation – for instance, relating to Covid-19 in the information domain. In some instances, the economic and colonial messaging is partly factual, whereas other compelling messaging relies on blatant mis- or disinformation.¹¹¹ Such practices impact the information environment in a rather sophisticated manner, as regular consumers often take the content at a face value, without a critical understanding of the context.

Chinese media claim to practise “constructive journalism”, which draws on positive psychology to guide audiences towards finding solutions to societal problems, contrasting with the critical crisis-focused approach of standard media in liberal democratic states. However, Chinese media often blur the line between constructive journalism and mere positive reporting, undermining the journalistic merits of the news

production. For example, CGTN’s (formerly CCTV) reporting on the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2015 predominantly amplified the voices of elites, disregarding the viewpoints of those directly affected. The coverage avoided attributing failures to government officials, focusing instead on their successes. Notably, almost one-fifth of the reports mentioned China’s positive role in combatting Ebola.¹¹²

6.1.3 Training and education

PRC officials train and build capacity for African journalists with fully funded trips to workshops, immersion seminars, and degree programme scholarships in China. The aim is for participants to later communicate narratives favourable to China, while benefitting financially and professionally from the programmes by strengthening their local credibility.¹¹³

African journalists are selected for training from local state media or leading independent media organizations. They are invited to travel to Beijing with all expenses covered, where they participate in socio-cultural education, including controlled positive exposure to Chinese society, cuisine and traditional culture, as well as other soft power assets. The programmes include lectures on why China supports Africa, talking points on why Sino-African relations are a cornerstone of a common Global South, as well as

109 Emeka Umejei, *Chinese Media in Africa: Perception, Performance, and Paradox*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020): 76–77.

110 Xiangyang Chen, ‘It is the right time for China to promote the “Greater Neighbourhood Strategy”’, China Foundation for International Studies, 2015, <http://comment.cfisnet.com/2015/0116/1300445.html>.

111 See e.g., *The Conversation*, ‘Chinese and Russian disinformation flourishes in some African countries – anti-US sentiment helps it take hold’, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/chinese-and-russian-disinformation-flourishes-in-some-african-countries-anti-us-sentiment-helps-it-take-hold-238101>.

112 Vivienne Marsh, ‘Tiangao or tianxia? The Ambiguities of CCTV’s English-language news for Africa’, in *China’s Media Go Global*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu, et al. (Routledge, 2018).

113 Marsh, ‘Tiangao or tianxia?’.

ideological justification for China's presence in Africa,¹¹⁴ effectively reflecting CCP narratives.

The training also includes coaching on how to avoid criticizing Chinese and African political elites. While participating in the programmes in China, African journalists and editors are expected to publish positive news articles on China in their local African media. It should be noted, however, that not all participating journalists do so.¹¹⁵ Upon returning to their home country, they are expected to continue making a China-positive impact, influencing their respective newsrooms, and providing colleagues with material and topics from Chinese state media actors. The training programmes also include substantial financial incentives and trips back to China. In a media context where salaries are either meagre or non-existent, such incentives have proved to be a powerful mechanism of PRC media influence.

The coaching also aims to set boundaries on what can and cannot be said about China in the media, promoting Chinese media practices and norms among journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to CCP training, China is engaged in narrative warfare against the West, making top-down information control crucial for China and, by extension, for Africa. In other words, due to this warfare and conflict with the West, criticism of Beijing is not allowed in China and should likewise be avoided in Africa.¹¹⁶

Journalists and media companies that disseminate information unfavourable to PRC narratives and Chinese officials are targeted by Beijing's state-controlled media. Advancing an editorial stance that emphasizes negative reporting on the US and the EU while portraying China in a positive light often involves enticing, cajoling, and even intimidating local journalists.¹¹⁷

In effect, Chinese authoritarian practices are gradually spreading in Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by the rapid expansion of Chinese state-controlled media. In Kenya, the Chinese embassy and Chinese companies have pressured media outlets over perceived critical reporting. While most newspapers have withstood the pressure, many journalists are reluctant to jeopardize their relationship with Chinese officials, who offer sponsored trips and gifts, among other incentives.¹¹⁸

Such an approach has also been adopted in Kenya, where government and local officials pressure journalists not to report on their dealings with Chinese officials, managers and entrepreneurs if such coverage might have negative connotations. Along with the expansion of Chinese media into Africa (including Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, China Central Television, China Global Television Network, and China Radio International, among others), norms restricting freedom of speech, freedom

114 Raksha Kumar, 'How China uses the news media as a weapon in its propaganda war against the West', Reuters Institute, 2021, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-china-uses-news-media-weapon-its-propaganda-war-against-west>.

115 Source: expert interview.

116 See Joshua Eisenman, 'China's Media Propaganda in Africa: A Strategic Assessment', United States Institute of Peace, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/chinas-media-propaganda-africa-strategic-assessment>.

117 Eisenman, 'China's Media Propaganda'.

118 Datt and Anonymous, 'Beijing's global media influence'.

of expression and press freedom have become more widespread, effectively supporting the CCP's narrative warfare.

For instance, in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, state officials emulate Chinese government practices targeting journalists, activists, dissidents, and opponents, facilitated by Beijing's political influence and digital expansion across the continent. China's political influence in Africa contributes to the export of repressive practices that undermine freedom of speech, expression, the press, and access to information, particularly in countries with authoritarian regimes and weak democratic institutions.

6.1.4 Infrastructure development and digital transformation

Another mechanism for Beijing to create local conditions for the acceptance of its strategic narratives is the export of Chinese information technology to Africa. The PRC promotes digital authoritarianism, which other countries have adopted at a rapid pace. This includes the provision of digital infrastructure that can be used to suppress freedom of expression and dissent. Chinese technology, combined with governance norms, facilitates the control of digital information through the use of online censorship, the blocking of websites and internet access,

as well as the capability to shut down the internet during elections or other political events. In Tanzania, for instance, there are indications of such developments, with local government adopting Chinese repressive norms and governance narratives.¹¹⁹

China is not only promoting political illiberalism through investments in digital infrastructure, but also by providing a model for using legal frameworks and censorship techniques to establish an authoritarian state enabled by technology.¹²⁰ Digital expansion also involves the manipulation of ideas, political perceptions and electoral processes. Digital infrastructure and policies, such as data localization, will play an increasingly crucial role in building narrative power.¹²¹

For their part, Chinese telecommunications companies play a significant role in importing surveillance and monitoring tools, such as in Tanzania and Nigeria. Other control mechanisms focus on gaining access to sensitive information, with instances of Chinese technology being used for covert surveillance.¹²²

Through the Digital Silk Road (DSR), China deploys its subsea cables in Kenya to connect Africa to Asia, improving the region's internet connectivity. Huawei is a shareholder in the Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) cable, which extends from Asia to

119 Shinn and Eisenman, *China's relations with Africa*.

120 Cheney Clayton, 'China's Digital Silk Road: Strategic Technological Competition and Exporting Political Illiberalism', Working Paper, Pacific Forum, 2019, http://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/issuesinsights_Vol19-WP8FINAL.pdf.

121 Ian Bremmer and Nicholas Thompson, 'The AI Cold War That Threatens Us All', Wired Magazine, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-cold-war-china-could-doom-us-all/>.

122 US Department of State Global Engagement Center, 'How the People's Republic of China seeks to reshape the global information environment', US Department of State Global Engagement Center Report, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/gec-special-report-how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-seeks-to-reshape-the-global-information-environment/>.

Africa and then to Europe.¹²³ The aim is to reduce dependency on US- and EU-linked cables while enabling control over the flow of data.

The proliferation of connected mobile devices and the transformation of the media space through digital technologies for broadcasting and publishing present opportunities for Chinese state media agencies to reach an increasing number of news consumers with CCP narratives. The provision of sophisticated information technologies is often a key selling point for partnerships between African and Chinese news media establishments.¹²⁴ In fact, digital transformation, along with technological changes in broadcasting and publishing, is driving the rollout of Chinese media in the digital space. In this context, China's interest in digital media aligns with its quest for global media outreach on digital platforms in Africa.¹²⁵

Moreover, expanding the presence of Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts on global social media platforms has become a highly visible priority in Beijing's strategic narrative efforts and recent investments¹²⁶ to counter information unfavourable to Chinese narratives on issues such as human rights in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Kenya, Chinese diplomats have used social media to promote disinformation and to dismiss factual yet unfavourable information about China reported by other media, labelling it as misinformation.¹²⁷ While China's strategy is to intervene only in topics closely connected to its core interests, Beijing's narrative power on social media spans the use of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship.¹²⁸

6.2 The political domain

In the political domain, the PRC utilizes party-to-party exchanges to promote its narratives and the purported virtues of its authoritarian governance model. This model appeals to local political elites – namely ruling parties – from a practical standpoint, as it claims to provide a partnership without the conditions typically imposed by liberal democracies. However, this is not an accurate depiction given that cooperation with China often comes with strings attached, such as supporting its claims in the South China Sea.

In any case, the International Liaison Department (ILD) has conducted over 600 exchanges with more than 60 political parties in

123 Kate Barlett, 'Kenya gets Huawei-linked Chinese communications cable', Voice of America, Africa, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kenya-gets-huawei-linked-chinese-communications-cable/6508395.html>; Submarine Cable Networks, Submarine cables in Kenya, <https://www.submarinenetworks.com/en/stations/africa/kenya>.

124 Bob Wekesa, 'Interview by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies', 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-influence-on-african-media/>.

125 Ibid.

126 Sarah Cook et al., 'Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience', Freedom House, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/BGMI_final_digital_090722.pdf.

127 Datt and Anonymous, 'Beijing's Global Media Influence'.

128 US Department of State Global Engagement Center, 'How the People's Republic of China seeks to reshape the global information environment'.

Sub-Saharan Africa. Its aim is to establish strong and lasting personal relationships with current and future African elites. The cultivation of personal relations at various levels creates conditions whereby the narratives remain uncontested.¹²⁹ These interpersonal connections are often linked to economic incentives and are expected to yield China-positive stances and support for PRC narratives. Additionally, the PRC views political parties as key direction setters capable of influencing millions.¹³⁰

The following sub-sections discuss key mechanisms such as bi- and multilateral exchanges, interparliamentary exchanges, cadre training, opposition party outreach, as well as material and expertise support.

6.2.1 Bi- and multilateral exchanges

China's ILD conducted over 600 exchanges with more than 60 political parties in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2002 and 2022. The number of visits rose moderately until the onset of Covid-19. Besides the growing number, it is noteworthy that since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, the proportion of hosting delegations in China has increased compared to the proportion of outbound visits. Hosting is more cost-effective, even though the ILD covers all expenses for visiting delegations. It reduces the time and costs associated with travel and minimizes the risk of

Chinese officials being exposed to unauthorized activities during trips.¹³¹

More importantly, "host diplomacy" offers several advantages compared to "travel diplomacy" in influencing African political elites: hosting party delegations provides an excellent "home field advantage", allowing the host to set the agenda, strengthen its say in international fora, and shape the discursive environment to disseminate narratives, or arguments favouring narratives. Some of the visits include educational aspects, with the ILD arranging study tours, including lectures on specific topics, orientation in traditional Chinese culture, and field trips to local governments and the countryside.¹³²

Again, the content is designed to support PRC narratives, highlighting China's economic success and technological achievements. On the other hand, excursions to the countryside reinforce the notion that, despite successful reforms, China is still a developing country,¹³³ a central theme in many CCP narratives.

The ILD also organizes multilateral party meetings, training workshops, and international fora to discuss specific political issues such as poverty alleviation and developmental policies. These multilateral exchanges serve as a useful tool for exerting an influence on several parties at the same time. More importantly, they enable

129 Yun Sun, 'Political training: China's ideological push in Africa?', Brookings, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/political-party-training-chinas-ideological-push-in-africa/#:~:text=In%20December%202015%2C%20the%20International%20Department%20of%20the,time%20led%20by%20the%20Communist%20Party's%20chief%20treasurer.>

130 Song Tao, 'Interview by China News Weekly', 2016, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200125025853/http://www.idcpc.org.cn/bzhd/mtzf/201912/t20191216_107362.html.](https://web.archive.org/web/20200125025853/http://www.idcpc.org.cn/bzhd/mtzf/201912/t20191216_107362.html)

131 Shinn and Eisenman, *China's relations with Africa*.

132 Ibid.

133 See e.g., Philippe Benoit, 'China Is Developing and Developed at the Same Time', *Foreign Policy*, 2023, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/23/china-is-developing-and-developed-at-the-same-time/.](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/23/china-is-developing-and-developed-at-the-same-time/)

the PRC to position itself as a “central node” in its relational network, fostering a “group-think” effect among different political parties. In this way, the PRC effectively reinforces and normalizes CCP narratives and its interpretations of international affairs.¹³⁴

Multilateral meetings and fora are often arranged around specific topics, but also with groups that have some kind of common denominator. In particular, FOCAC and its associated media coverage serve as clear avenues for propagating Chinese narratives. To illustrate this further, in 2023 the ILD hosted a multilateral meeting with delegations from former liberation movements of Southern Africa, and young leaders of political parties from Portuguese-speaking African countries.¹³⁵

The ILD aims to develop good relations with Africa’s future leaders. Young and promising politicians are targeted, particularly through the triennial Africa-China Young Leaders Forum. The forum brings together hundreds of young politicians from dozens of political parties, laying the groundwork for the future when they assume political office in their respective countries by promoting PRC narratives in the present. Other forums organized by the ILD include the CCP and World Marxist Political Parties Forum and the CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties.

6.2.2 Interparliamentary exchanges

Although the ILD is responsible for most of the political engagement in Africa, interparlia-

mentary exchanges have played an increasingly important role in the PRC’s political outreach, conducted through the National People’s Congress (NPC) and its bilateral friendship groups. While the NPC is nominally the highest organ of state power in China, it is dominated by the CCP and therefore reflects party influence.

In effect, interparliamentary exchanges complement ILD engagement and serve as an important tool for connecting with non-ruling parties to achieve perception dominance in narrative warfare. For example, in South Africa, the ILD and the NPC have cooperated to establish contacts with opposition parties. In countries where legislative bodies are dominated by a single ruling party, the NPC, together with the ILD, has hosted African party delegations. The NPC has also formed bilateral friendship groups with parliaments in 35 African countries and established platforms for regular exchanges with parliaments in South Africa and Kenya.¹³⁶

6.2.3 Cadre training

In addition to multilateral and parliamentary exchanges, the PRC trains over 2,000 African political cadres and several hundred local government officials annually.¹³⁷ One key goal is to shape the information environment. The most active parties in these training programmes have been the liberation parties from Southern Africa.¹³⁸ Along with lectures on China’s governance and development models and Marxist-Leninist philosophy, cadre training programmes

134 Shinn and Eisenman, *China’s relations with Africa*.

135 International Department of the Central Committee of the CCP, ‘Li Mingxiang Meets with a Delegation of Young Leaders of Political Parties of Portuguese Speaking Countries in Africa’, 2023, https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/english2023/lldt/202304/t20230404_159994.html.

136 Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa*.

137 Nantulya, ‘China’s United Front Strategy in Africa’.

138 Ibid.

have included field trips to local governments to gain first-hand experience in the implementation of policies, and introductory courses on Chinese traditional culture.¹³⁹ Marxist-Leninist ideas occupy very prominent positions and significantly influence academia and labour unions in many targeted countries, where China and Russia are cited as prime examples of adopting socialist economic and governance principles.

Some training sessions take the form of seminars and conferences, which provide the ILD with a tool to promote narratives on state governance, party management and developmental models.¹⁴⁰ The content of the seminars is tailored to each party's needs and preferences, with popular topics including poverty alleviation, organizational skills such as party leadership and management, media relations, internet censorship, and monitoring opposition on social media. Seminars often also include ideological education and topics concerning China's international relations. The most advanced training is provided at CCP leadership schools, such as the Central Party School in Beijing and the China Executive Leadership Academy in Pudong, Shanghai (CELAP). These training courses typically last one to four weeks and usually cover the same topics as seminars but at a more advanced level.¹⁴¹

6.2.4 Opposition party outreach

Most party exchanges in Africa take place between the CCP and ruling parties, particularly in Southern and East Africa. The CCP is cautious about jeopardizing good relations with long-standing ruling parties. For example, while Sudan is not technically part of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sudanese case aptly illustrates China's approach to opposition party outreach. The ILD had no contact with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) until 2005, when the SPLM and the NPC signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and formed the government of national unity. Exchanges with the SPLM occurred exclusively within the framework of the CPA and the government of national unity.¹⁴² After South Sudan gained independence, the SPLM became the ruling party of the country.

Similarly, the CCP has maintained contact with the South African Communist Party (SACP) within the framework of the Tripartite Alliance, which allows the SACP to exist independently but prohibits it from contesting the ANC in elections. Members of the SACP are permitted to participate in elections on the ANC's electoral list. Generally, however, opposition party outreach is more common in democracies where ruling parties change more often and where the CCP can keep track of political changes in the country and establish firm relations with opposition politicians when they come to power.¹⁴³

139 Nantulya, 'China Escalates Its Political Party Training in Africa'.

140 For example, in March 2023, the CCP convened a global conference for political parties. Members of Senegalese political parties (from the governing APR party and its allies, and the opposition) took part in the event. During the conference, the CCP presented the conclusions of its 20th Congress and proposed its development model, particularly to political parties in developing countries. See CGTN français, 'Politique chinoise: le PCC dialogue avec les partis politiques sénégalais', CGTN, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tmg_KlfggNs.

141 Lina Benabdallah, 'Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-party Diplomacy in Africa', *African Studies Quarterly*, volume 19, number 3–4, (2020): 94–113.

142 Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa*.

143 Ibid.

6.2.5 Material and expert support

In addition to ideological support and training, the CCP also provides material support, most of which is directed through government channels. However, donations are often made indirectly and tailored to serve the needs of ruling parties and their leaders, including during elections. In fact, Chinese aid has been allocated disproportionately to regions associated with political leaders' birthplaces, with this bias increasing during election periods.¹⁴⁴

The ILD also provides direct support to political parties, including funding and expert consultations for establishing local cadre training centres. For example, the ILD has provided material, expertise and financial support for the construction of the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Kibaha, near Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

The school is a joint project between the CCP and six African ruling parties from South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola. It also trains civil society actors and politicians outside the ruling parties, aligning with Beijing's comprehensive strategy for perception dominance. The school organizes workers and left-wing movements while propagating CCP narratives and anti-Western sentiments. In 2022, it held its first workshop, titled *New Development in the New Era: Exploration by*

*and Exchanges between the CCP and the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa.*¹⁴⁵

Many African parties have initiated similar projects with direct or indirect links to China. The Namibian Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) launched its party school in May 2016,¹⁴⁶ followed by the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana in August 2017,¹⁴⁷ and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa in April 2019.¹⁴⁸ ZANU-PF's Chitepo School of Ideology was opened in Zimbabwe in 2017.

6.3 The economy domain

China's presence in Sub-Saharan Africa has challenged the EU and the US by offering an alternative to conventional liberal democratic development narratives. Providing African countries with an alternative economic developmental model gives China ample opportunities to disseminate narratives that capitalize on existing anti-Western sentiment and argue that liberal democracies are economically ineffective.

Acceptance of PRC narratives brings various economic benefits to Sub-Saharan African states: 1) access to unconditional soft loans and capital, 2) quick delivery of services and cheap goods, 3) funding for peacekeeping operations, and 4) promotion of the relevance of an alternative development model.

144 Axel Dreher et al., 'African leaders and the geography of China's foreign assistance', *Journal of Development Economics*, volume 140, (2019): 44–71.

145 Mara Hvistendahl et al., 'A Global Web of Chinese Propaganda Leads to a US Tech Mogul', *The New York Times*, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/05/world/europe/neville-roy-singham-china-propaganda.html>.

146 Xinhua, 'Ruling party of Namibia to open ideology school', 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2016-05/22/content_38510121.htm.

147 Graphic Online, 'NDC launches social democracy school', 2017, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ndc-launches-social-democracy-school.html>.

148 See OR Tambo School of Leadership, 'About Us', <https://www.ortamboschool.org.za/about-us/>.

This means that China has been able to provide a narrative vision for development that is attractive on several levels: cooperation with China reduces pressure from global institutions to adhere to liberal democratic norms and standards, while promising quick results and maintaining the notion of a peacekeeping presence.¹⁴⁹ Through its overseas political economy agenda, the PRC integrates business and political objectives into its narrative warfare through BRI architecture and telecom companies, as discussed below.

6.3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative architecture

The most obvious mechanism for propagating Chinese narratives within the economic domain is the PRC's grand initiative of economic diplomacy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initially, the BRI focused on three areas: 1) trade and investment, 2) people-to-people exchange, and 3) financial cooperation. The combined focus of all three areas, however, has increasingly centred on the development of major infrastructure.

As a result, infrastructure projects have provided a framework for bilateral trade and investment, generating a need and a demand for 'people-to-people' connectivity, including

'cultural exchanges' and public diplomacy programmes. As a whole, this BRI architecture has come to function as a platform for PRC narrative proliferation. Through the BRI, the PRC promotes narratives favourable to a China-centric order on the continent via economic development initiatives, digital governance, as well as academic and cultural exchanges.

Since the Russian attack on Ukraine, the BRI has included more political and security-focused messaging compared to prior years.¹⁵⁰ The announced *Global Development Initiative*, *Global Security Initiative*, and *Global Civilization Initiative* have further contributed to a more security-oriented narrative-building within the context of development and the BRI. These newly formulated narratives emphasize security and domestic growth over economics. Increasingly, China's BRI narratives include the idea of forming an alliance with the Global South against the West.¹⁵¹

Regional economic cooperation organizations serve as a secondary mechanism for narrative proliferation, with the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) being the most prominent. In addition to promoting cooperation, the FOCAC aims to provide "equal consultation, enhancing

149 Mehari Maru, 'Why Africa loves China', Aljazeera, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/1/6/why-africa-loves-china>; Kudzai Mashininga, 'Beyond BRICS: The shaping of new development narratives', University World News. Africa Edition, 2023, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20231002145405429>; Jan-Ole Voss and Daniel Fabian, 'China and Tanzania in the New Era: A complicated relationship', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022, <https://www.kas.de/documents/273738/18804617/China+-+Africa+Relations+Final.pdf/7acc8c0d-0def-1d8e-ab9f-5ac7375e9b70?version=1.0&t=1661775809552>.

150 Alicia García-Herrero, 'China's good relations with Africa rely more on narratives than economic impact', Bruegel, 2023, <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/chinas-good-relations-africa-rely-more-narratives-economic-impact>.

151 Alicia García-Herrero, 'The Belt and Road Initiative transformation makes it a more – not less – useful tool for China', Bruegel, 2023, <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/belt-and-road-initiative-transformation-makes-it-more-not-less-useful-tool-china>.

understanding, expanding consensus, and strengthening friendship”¹⁵² In addition to the BRI, China also organizes a multitude of China-Africa economic and trade expos, using the events as concrete platforms for PRC narrative proliferation.¹⁵³

6.3.2 Chinese telecom companies in Africa

The Digital Silk Road (DSR), announced in 2017, is a response to the perceived Western dominance in global IT infrastructure, viewed by the PRC leadership as “network hegemony” conducted by the US. As a consequence, the Chinese IT industry is generally mobilized to improve overall national power by creating a new technological IT architecture favourable to the PRC. In Beijing, this is believed to be critical for maintaining Chinese core values and controlling its strategic narratives.¹⁵⁴

Given the lack of financial institutions and telecommunications companies to develop ICT infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa, China’s engagement in the continent’s ICT industry is mainly based on projects financed through loans from Chinese policy banks and projects run by Chinese telecommunications companies (particularly Huawei and ZTE). By 2019, 137 loans worth 12.8 billion USD had been issued for such projects.¹⁵⁵

This market development aligns with Beijing’s Africa strategy, which supports Chinese compa-

nies in expanding their operations in overseas markets. The two largest Chinese telecom companies (ZTE and Huawei) play key roles in the expansion of Chinese investments abroad and in executing China’s political economy strategy overseas, operating in line with Beijing’s geo-strategic objectives. Huawei and ZTE are also actively displacing European companies from markets in cooperation with local states, for instance in Tanzania.¹⁵⁶ Their competitive advantage stems from improved technical capacities linked to low production costs, access to state funding, and state political support – resources not available to independent telecom companies.¹⁵⁷

The role of the Chinese government in the telecom sector is clear: China aims to expand telecom cooperation with African countries in line with its narrative influence. Building competitive brands and internationally renowned companies falls under China’s 12th Five-Year Plan, which encourages innovation among Chinese transnational companies. This also contributes to global brand awareness of Chinese telecom companies among customers in Africa who are unfamiliar with ZTE or Huawei.

China’s investment in Africa’s telecom industry comes with preferential loans to governments for acquiring Chinese telecom equipment and infrastructure. Financially supported by Beijing’s central financial institutions (China Exim Bank, China Development Bank, and the

152 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, ‘The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation’, http://www.focac.org/eng/ltjj_3/ltjz/.

153 Rédaction Africanews, ‘The China-Africa Trade Biennale bears fruitful results’, Africa News, 2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/03/the-china-africa-trade-biennale-bears-fruitful-results/>.

154 Shinn and Eisenman, *China’s relations with Africa*.

155 School of Advanced International Studies, ‘Chinese loans to Africa database’, China-Africa Research Initiative, SAIS-CARI, 2022, <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>.

156 Source: expert interview.

157 Amy Tong, ‘China’s ICT Engagement in Africa: A Comparative Analysis’, *The Yale Review of International Studies*, Essays/Winter Issue, 2021, <http://yris.yira.org/essays/4702>.

China-Africa Development Fund), Chinese telecom companies' operations in Africa also involve tied loans between the Chinese and African governments. These loans require African governments to buy equipment exclusively from Chinese telecom companies to develop their telecom equipment and services. These vendor-guaranteed loans are provided directly by the Chinese companies, which receive credit lines from Chinese financial institutions to invest in Africa.¹⁵⁸

There are strong linkages between the PRC's Africa strategy and Chinese telecom businesses. Chinese telecom companies enter the African market and establish partnerships with governments to build e-government networks for ministries and organizations, enabling them to provide information and services to citizens.¹⁵⁹ Through strategic partnerships with major African network providers, such as MTN and Orange, Huawei and ZTE gain access to their technical expertise, networks, customer databases, data, and other resources. This has obvious implications in terms of dependencies, data security, and privacy, given the potential for PRC authorities to access and control this data.

6.4 The social domain

China's cultural engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa is based on PRC narratives that promote an understanding of CCP-defined Chinese culture. These narratives often emphasize

solidarity, a shared destiny, win-win cooperation, and partnership between China and the Global South.

Chinese actors also engage in cultural diplomacy to drive cultural expansion, set the cultural agenda, and gain perception dominance and acceptance regarding their narratives. This includes undermining Western culture and the liberal democratic worldview. Within the social domain, Beijing uses education programmes and education cooperation as a key mechanism, including various institutes, most notably Confucius Institutes (CI), as discussed below.

6.4.1 Cultural and educational programmes

International education cooperation with Africa is important for Beijing, as it is seen as a means of contributing to human capital development with an eye to expanding China's narrative power.

Before Beijing's aggressive re-engagement in education, African students were primarily attracted to Western universities. China's promotion of education through the allocation of scholarships, short-term training, and capacity development for African students and professionals has helped build cultural bridges between Beijing and African countries. To strengthen relations, China has established mechanisms focused on human resource development, training and exchange, and knowledge production.¹⁶⁰ However, China does not take a

158 Melanie Hart and Jordan Link, 'There Is a Solution to the Huawei Challenge', Center for American Progress. Foreign Policy and Security, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/10/14/491476/solution-huawei-challenge/>.

159 Pichamon Yeophantong and Sandy Wang, 'Chinese Telecommunications Investment in Africa: Bad News for Development?'; Australian Outlook, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2019, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/chinese-telecommunications-investment-in-africa-bad-news-for-development/>.

160 Li Anshan and Funeka Yazini, 'Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: The Politics of Human Resource Development', Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2013.

blanket approach to promoting its narratives through cultural diplomacy, education, and training exchanges. Instead, it prioritizes strategic countries where it has vested interests.¹⁶¹

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) serves as a platform to highlight the prominence of culture, development, and education in Africa-China relations.¹⁶² A large proportion of the scholarships are awarded through the FOCAC framework. Data from the *China Education Yearbook* shows that since the launch of the FOCAC in 2000, the number of scholarships awarded to African students has increased sevenfold, reaching 8,470 scholarships in 2015.¹⁶³ As early as the 2018 FOCAC, China made a significant commitment by pledging to provide 50,000 scholarships to African students over a three-year period, equivalent to about 16,500 scholarships a year.¹⁶⁴

In addition, China has announced two major initiatives to further Sino-African cooperation in the domain of education, with both serving as platforms to promote Chinese narratives in Africa. The first, the *China-Africa Universities*

100 Cooperation Plan, includes several pilot exchange programmes with partner institutes in both China and Africa. The second, the *Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development*,¹⁶⁵ is designed to train local professionals working in academia on an annual basis, focusing on both Mandarin and professional skills. In addition, “20,000 government officials and technicians” are expected to be invited to participate in various workshops and seminars designed,¹⁶⁶ among other objectives, to educate them on CCP narratives.

In effect, Chinese officials see investment in education as a way to promote the emulation of China’s model of development among African students. These students are expected to act as ambassadors of the model and to disseminate Chinese narratives once they return home after completing their studies, thereby building cultural bridges between Beijing and Africa.¹⁶⁷

In Kenya, for example, in addition to Chinese scholarships provided through the Kenyan government, Kenyan students have opportunities for other scholarships through partnerships

- 161 David Monyae, ‘The Role of Culture and Education in South Africa–China Relations’, In *South Africa–China Relations*, ed. Chris Alden and Yu-Shan Wu, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 221–234, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54768-4_11.
- 162 Tebogo Lefifi and Carine Kiala, ‘Untapping FOCAC higher education scholarships for Africa’s human capital development: lessons from haigui’, *China International Strategy Review*, volume 3, (2021): 177–198, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-021-00074-y>.
- 163 Anshan Li, ‘African Students in China: Research, Reality, and Reflection’, *African Studies Quarterly*, volume 17, issue 4, (2018): 5–44, https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/2_Li_Anshan.HD-ed-2.pdf.
- 164 *China Daily*, ‘FOCAC promotes common development of China and Africa’, 2021, http://www.focac.org/eng/zfzs_1/202101/t20210107_7087438.htm.
- 165 Kudzai Mashininga, ‘Beyond BRICS: The shaping of new development narratives’, University World News. Africa Edition, 2023, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20231002145405429>.
- 166 Adams Bodomo, ‘Africans in China: The Experiences from Education and Training’. Paper presented at the international conference ‘China and Africa Media, Communications and Public Diplomacy’, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) (Norway) in cooperation with Institute of Journalism and Communication Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 2014, <https://www.cmi.no/file/2911.pdf>.
- 167 Eliud Kibii, ‘Education diplomacy’, *The Star*, 2023, <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2023-11-20-invest-knowledge-gained-in-china-at-home-kenyan-students-told/>.

between Kenyan and Chinese universities, as well as Chinese companies and institutions. Such programmes focus on capacity development, technical training, and professional collaborations. The growing popularity of China as a destination for both short- and long-term training for Kenyans, along with the increasing interest in learning Chinese, is closely tied to China's broader involvement in East Africa.¹⁶⁸

6.4.2 Confucius Institutes and language teaching

In parallel with funded degree and exchange programmes, China has established numerous Confucius Institutes (CI) and Confucius Classrooms. Beijing sees Confucius Institutes as a pragmatic strategy that straddles Chinese language-based cultural and educational diplomacy, making them a key component of its narrative warfare.¹⁶⁹

The first CI in Africa was established in Kenya in 2005, with the most recent opening in Djibouti in 2023. Africa now hosts 62 CIs in 47 countries, with South Africa and Kenya hosting the most – six and four respectively. In addition, there are 48 Confucius Classrooms all over the continent, targeting students in primary and secondary education.¹⁷⁰

Through cultural programmes, exhibitions, film screenings, and cultural conferences, among other activities, Confucius Institutes promote China, its culture, values, and narratives. Sensitive issues such as Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet are censored or narrated from the Chinese point of view.¹⁷¹ Hence, CIs occupy an important space in African societies, often serving as the only source of knowledge about China for locals, thereby shaping the narratives and local understanding of international affairs.

In Africa, CIs have been integrated into the local education system through the hosting partner. CIs are typically joint ventures between a Chinese university and a local university, although other organizations can also establish partnerships. In Eritrea, the local partner is the National Board for Higher Education. In Angola, the Chinese partners are Harbin Normal University and CITIC Construction, a subsidiary of the Chinese state-owned conglomerate CITIC Group.

The joint venture model has several advantages over the stand-alone model. First, the local partner's expertise in the political and cultural environment provides information on operating effectively within the country. Second, the local partner is a source of credibility and legitimacy. Third, a joint venture is a

168 Kenneth King, 'China's cooperation in education and training with Kenya: A different model?', *International Journal of Educational Development*, volume 30, issue 5, (2010): 488–496, [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0738059310000362#:~:text=King%20\(2010\)%20notes%20that%20China%27s,business%20and%20foreign%20direct%20investment](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0738059310000362#:~:text=King%20(2010)%20notes%20that%20China%27s,business%20and%20foreign%20direct%20investment).

169 Anita Wheeler, 'Cultural diplomacy, language planning, and the case of the university of Nairobi Confucius Institute', *Journal of Asian and African studies*, volume 49, issue 1, (2013): 49–63, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0021909613477834>.

170 Ari Rickman, 'Can Mozambique Learn to Love China?', *The Diplomat*, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/can-mozambique-learn-to-love-china/>.

171 Falk Hartig, 'Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China's Strategic Narratives', *Politics and Society*, vol 35, issue 3–4, (2015): 245–258, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9256.12093>.

cost-efficient way to establish and maintain CIs. Undoubtedly, this is also one of the reasons why China has been able to expand the CI network so effectively over the years.¹⁷²

The asymmetry in funding means that Sub-Saharan African universities lack the authority over CIs that universities in Europe and North America have. The Chinese side has more say when it comes to hiring personnel and designing curricula. Chinese actors predominantly control the power structures of CIs in Africa. In Ethiopia, for instance, local directors play only a symbolic role.¹⁷³

Chinese actors censor teaching materials and suppress teaching personnel, preventing them from addressing sensitive issues with students. In some cases, this censorship extends to other departments within the hosting university. As a result, China's narratives are normalized and critical views stifled. This is often possible because universities either calculate that the benefits of hosting a CI outweigh the harms, or they simply lack the leverage to refuse.¹⁷⁴

What is more, unlike CIs in liberal democratic countries, CIs in Sub-Saharan Africa have integrated themselves into local societies. Through promoting open activities, they target all segments of society. By participating in CI activities, students become members of networks, which connect them to a wide variety of actors from educational institutes to business and politics. For example, students may be offered internships or entry-level jobs in Chinese firms

through these networks and with the help of CI staff.¹⁷⁵

Motivation for participation in CI activities does not stem solely from the attractiveness of Chinese culture or language, but also from the networks and opportunities they offer. For the CCP, this not only produces foreign citizens who are sympathetic to China but also provides an opportunity to co-opt and cultivate talented students. Some of these students go on to careers in politics, business, or government, advancing the CCP's aims of achieving perception dominance from within local societies.¹⁷⁶

6.5 The defence domain

In the defence domain, the CCP's narrative power is accomplished largely through security cooperation, namely through the networked connections that this cooperation enables. These hierarchical and vertical networks include local Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centres, which serve as platforms for interpersonal and ideological exchanges, creating opportunities for shaping the local, security-specific information space.

Security cooperation has become a key aspect of China's presence in Africa, often involving private Chinese security companies. Beijing's security engagement is linked not only to narrative power, but also to political influence in general, an expanded logistical footprint, military professionalization, improved operational readiness, increased military access,

172 Ibid.

173 Maria Repnikova, 'Rethinking China's Soft Power: "Pragmatic Enticement" of Confucius Institutes in Ethiopia', *The China Quarterly*, volume 250, (2022): 440–463, doi:10.1017/S0305741022000340.

174 Lina Benabdallah, 'Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-party Diplomacy in Africa', *African Studies Quarterly*, volume 19, number 3–4, (2020): 94–113.

175 Ibid.

176 Ibid.

and the protection of commercial interests and investments.¹⁷⁷ China also cooperates in telecommunications technologies, surveillance, intelligence sharing, and information security.¹⁷⁸ However, the main mechanism for narrative warfare in the security domain revolves around the police centres, as discussed below.

6.5.1 Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centres

Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centres, also known as Chinese Civic and Police Cooperation Centres, or more recently as Chinese Safety and Civil Cooperation Centres (hereafter referred to as Centres), have been steadily increasing across the African continent since 2004, when the first such Centre was established in South Africa.

The Centres were formally established with the intention of creating a community policing model, helping and supporting the local Chinese community and solving criminal cases involving Chinese individuals. Their growth has been particularly rapid in South Africa, which now hosts 15 Centres, but they have also expanded to other African states.¹⁷⁹

The Centres have integrated slowly but successfully into local societies, normalizing the

presence of Chinese law enforcement personnel in Africa. In fact, they serve as a means of influence projection within local societies, as well as a tool for disseminating Chinese narratives.

Several Sub-Saharan African countries have cooperation and police engagement with Chinese security officials. This also has narrative implications. Often, police training schools and police cooperation centres aim to create thriving local communities for overseas Chinese, who would then be more likely to stay and invest in local economies. The schools and centres are marketed as public welfare organizations designed to support local governance, law enforcement, and local people by fostering economic growth. To this end, however, they also promote Chinese norms and narratives about the Chinese governance model.¹⁸⁰

According to Chinese officials, the Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centres are non-governmental public welfare organizations managed by Chinese civilians living overseas. In theory, the Chinese (civil) community is supposed to help and support its own members. At the same time, the Centres are not supposed to represent foreign police stations (despite their name). Chinese officials have even made strong statements dismissing any such insinuations as

177 Robert Bociaga, 'Is China strengthening its grip on Africa's security landscape?', *The Africa Report*, 2023, <https://www.theafricareport.com/325024/is-china-strengthening-its-grip-on-africas-security-landscape/>.

178 Paul Nantulya, 'Chinese security firms spread along the African Belt and Road', *African Center for Strategic Studies Spotlight*, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinese-security-firms-spread-african-belt-road/>.

179 Alida De Beer, 'Chinese CPF Inaugurated to assist their community', *George Herald*, 2023, <https://www.georgeherald.com/News/Article/General/chinese-cpf-inaugurated-to-assist-their-community-202304251129>; Yong Yu, 'The So-Called "13 Chinese police stations in South Africa" Is Totally Fake News', PRC MFA, 2018, http://capetown.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/201811/t20181116_6968483.htm.

180 For a wider discussion, see Paul Nantulya, 'China's Policing Models Make Inroads in Africa', *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-policing-models-make-inroads-in-africa/>.

“complete fake news” and as violations of basic journalistic principles.¹⁸¹ By nurturing the idea of a non-governmental public welfare organization, rather than a police and surveillance entity funded by the Chinese government, the Centres are more likely to be accepted by local communities and governments alike.

Nonetheless, the Centres maintain ties to the Chinese government and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, as is clear from Chinese reporting on their activities. The Centres have, on several occasions, emphasized the importance of building close relations with local law enforcement, government personnel, and all sectors of local societies.¹⁸² According to various estimates, the Centres can be seen as part of an international Chinese secret police station network, which has attracted media attention, par-

ticularly in the US and the EU in recent years.¹⁸³ The Centres have been recognized for their usefulness by various Chinese government bodies, such as the Chinese Consulate General in South Africa and the Ministry of Public Security.¹⁸⁴ Two directors of the Centres have held official positions within the United Front Work body, which is often regarded as the “major conduit for covert PRC influence” abroad.¹⁸⁵

The Centres have established a close working relationship with local African law enforcement communities, assisting the police in investigations or in crime reduction efforts, and initiating an information exchange mechanism with local law enforcement,¹⁸⁶ sometimes even taking part in joint policing operations.¹⁸⁷

Since 2013, the Centres have also offered various classes and workshops for police and other

181 PRC MFA, ‘The So-Called “13 Chinese police stations in South Africa” Is Totally Fake News’, 2018, https://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx_4/hpaq/201811/t20181121_8091040.htm.

182 China Overseas Chinese Network, ‘Nanfei xin bao huaren jing min hezuo zhongxin chengli Zhuang Songlin ren zhongxin zhuren’ [The Chinese Police-Citizen Cooperation Center in New Fort, South Africa, was established with Zhuang Songlin as the director], 2016, <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2016/08-16/99378.shtml>.

183 US Department of Justice, ‘Two Arrested for Operating Illegal Overseas Police Station of the Chinese Government’, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-arrested-operating-illegal-overseas-police-station-chinese-government>.

184 Overseas Chinese Network, ‘Lixinzhu dangxuan nanfei huaren jing min hezuo zhongxin di qi jie zhuren’ [Li Xinzhu elected as seventh director of the South African Chinese Police-Citizen Cooperation Centre], 2018, <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2018/03-24/183314.shtml>.

185 Matt Schrader, ‘“Chinese Assistance Centers” Grow United Front Work Department Global Presence’, Jamestown, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-assistance-centers-grow-united-front-work-department-global-presence/>.

186 Overseas Chinese Network, ‘Nanfei qiao ling wu shaokang: Qiao tuan shi qiaobao xinzhong “gongdao” suozai’ [Wu Shaokang, the leader of overseas Chinese in South Africa: The overseas Chinese group is the “justice” in the hearts of overseas Chinese], 2014, <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2014/06-11/6122.shtml>.

187 Overseas Chinese Network, ‘Nanfei huaren jing min zhongxin jiji rongru shequ lianhe jingfang zhifa’ [The South African Chinese Police Center actively integrates into the community and cooperates with the police in law enforcement], 2017, <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2017/02-15/126735.shtml>; Overseas Chinese Network, ‘Nanfei yue bao huaren shangcheng quyu kaizhan lianfang xunluo daji ge lei fanzui’ [Joint defence patrols carried out in the Chinese Mall area of Yoburg, South Africa to combat various crimes], 2018, <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2018/06-26/194077.shtml>.

law enforcement personnel, as well as Chinese language courses.¹⁸⁸ Other training sessions and workshops have included subjects such as police combat tactics, the use of police equipment, as well as lessons in Kung fu and Chinese culture,¹⁸⁹ thereby concretely connecting the Centres to CCP narrative warfare.

In effect, efforts have been made to build contacts and provide donations to both local police and the wider community, including senior citizens' homes and local schools. The Centres have also established themselves as indispensable within local Chinese communities, and as having great importance both locally and abroad.¹⁹⁰

Moreover, the Centres have focused on furthering cooperation with local civil society, for example through joint training courses with the Community Policing Forum and strengthened cooperation with governance parties.¹⁹¹ A case in point is the 2014 agreement between the local Chinese community and the Johannesburg ANC that was signed at the local Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centre.¹⁹²

At the same time, the Centres provide a platform for careful and long-term network building

within local law enforcement and government communities. The aim is to normalize the Chinese security presence and narratives, thereby legitimizing China's growing influence and presence in Sub-Saharan Africa.

6.6 Conclusions

This report has explored issues in the realm of international relations that are, or are expected to be, relevant from the perspective of hybrid threats. The increasing Chinese narrative influence in Sub-Saharan Africa has potential hybrid threat implications for both Sub-Saharan Africa and the Euro-Atlantic community. Chinese actions undermine liberal democratic norms and promote an authoritarian governance model, creating the potential for hybrid threat building, both domestically in Sub-Saharan Africa and, by extension, in the Euro-Atlantic community. China's narrative power building also complicates the strategic partnerships between Sub-Saharan Africa and the countries of the Euro-Atlantic community. Activating an effective response to counter Chinese narrative efforts poses challenges and requires political will and cohesion at the Euro-Atlantic level. Against this backdrop,

188 Overseas Chinese Network, 'Nanfei huaren jing min hezuo zhongxin chengli shi zhounian zhu nan shiguan dao he' [The Chinese Embassy in South Africa celebrates the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the South African Chinese Police-Citizen Cooperation Centre], 2014, <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2014/06-26/7859.shtml>.

189 Overseas Chinese Network, 'Zhongguo jingcha jiaoguan tuan wancheng dui nanfei jingcha de peixun renwu' [Chinese police instructors completed the training mission for South African police], (2017), <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2017/04-20/137948.shtml>.

190 Overseas Chinese Network, 'Lixinzhu dangxuan nanfei huaren jing min hezuo zhongxin di qi jie zhuren' [Li Xinzhu elected as seventh director of the South African Chinese Police-Citizen Cooperation Centre].

191 Overseas Chinese Network, 'Nanfei kua na sheng shequ jing wu zhongxin zhongguo wenhua yanxiu ban kai ban' [Chinese Culture Training Course Opens at the Community Police Center of Kwana Province, South Africa], (2017), <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2017/10-23/165548.shtml>.

192 Overseas Chinese Network, 'Yue bao fei guo da dang bu yu nanfei huaren shequ daibiao qianshu hezuo' [The party department of the ANC in Johannesburg signed a cooperation agreement with representatives of the Chinese community in South Africa], (2014), <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2014/12-19/30558.shtml>.

the main arguments of the report are summarized in the sections below.

6.6. 1 China's multi-domain narrative influence

In order to understand Chinese narrative warfare, it is crucial to grasp its multi-domain nature. In the domain of culture, for example, similarities between African and Chinese civilizations are conveniently used to build feelings of reciprocity, mutual optimism, and acceptance of China's narratives. These, in turn, are then used to increase China's economic, political, and security presence in Africa.

In fact, China primarily competes with the perceived long-term Euro-Atlantic presence in Africa. To this end, China uses narratives emphasizing cultural similarities with individual countries and problematic aspects of Western influence in African history to prevent local populations from perceiving the potential benefits of cooperation with the US, UK, and the EU.

On the other hand, in the political domain, China's influence goes hand in hand with its economic influence. BRI projects play a role in China's public diplomacy as they promote Chinese narratives among local populations and strengthen political ties between Chinese and local actors. The BRI architecture is explicitly used for economic gain, while concurrently building China's narrative power as part of its overall influence.

In the information domain, Chinese state media organizations contribute to Beijing's global political and economic influence by conveying a perspective favourable to China's

expanding international influence. The growing cultural, political, and economic ties duly serve to increase China's narrative power. China also attempts to use its state media to suppress negative stories about issues related to debt, corruption, lack of transparency, governance, and sustainability surrounding BRI projects in Africa.

In the security domain, China's engagement in Africa addresses the triple challenges of security, development, and governance. While the publicly stated security cooperation aims include regional peace, prosperity, and long-term stability, a more important goal is to oppose any interference by "outside" countries. Civic and police cooperation centres are used as platforms for "cultural exchanges", which, in practice, function as tools for narrative warfare that supports the exclusion of US, UK, and EU actors.

6.6.2 The networked nature of China's influence

China uses civic and police cooperation centres, as well as Confucius Institutes, to build both hierarchical and vertical influence networks in Sub-Saharan Africa. Both emphasize partnership, mutual understanding, open dialogue, and a willingness to engage with organizations and people from all sectors of society. At the same time, the content that they disseminate and represent is state-centric, delivered in a top-down manner, and only nominally open to interpretation.

In essence, the networks provide opportunities for both elites and the local population at large. Yet they also serve as potential tools

of coercion for Chinese actors, demanding or implying self-censorship by limiting participation. Chinese actors restrict the topics open for discussion, and stakeholders sign contracts pledging not to damage China's national interests, thereby ensuring strict narrative control.

6.6.3 Domestic and Chinese information manipulation

In Sub-Saharan Africa, China is taking advantage of a nascent domestic disinformation ecosystem, including local influencers. In effect, "citizen journalists", who report on various events to their followers on social media, along with commercial influencers, are entangled with domestic political disinformation. The expansion of Chinese state media on digital platforms and through content sharing agreements supports this nexus between domestic and foreign information manipulation in local societies.

This means that China is sponsoring online influencers and recruiting prominent voices among political elites and journalists to share pro-China narratives. This nascent industry is driven more by commercial interests than ideology, and has formidable potential for foreign information manipulation if more effectively harnessed by external malign actors.

Another key aspect linking domestic and foreign information manipulation relates to narratives that portray the PRC's authoritarian governance model as a success. Accompanied by strategic narratives of effective PRC governance, Chinese surveillance norms, including the misuse of ICT tools, have supported

state repression and control of the internet in many Sub-Saharan countries. This is exerted by officials, particularly in countries with limited freedom of speech and with either partially democratic or authoritarian governments, with the assistance of Chinese economic actors and government officials.¹⁹³

6.6.4 Modus operandi of China's narrative influence

To ensure that the general information environment is favourable to Chinese narratives, China's overall modus operandi can be summarized in terms of a number of key goals:

- Make the target economically dependent
- Co-opt economic and political elites
- Build vertical networks across multiple domains
- Blur the line between elite and national interests
- Influence independent media through financial and other incentives
- Target the overall information ecosystem to introduce self-censorship

The main aim is to change the cost calculus and introduce self-restraint when a target country could potentially respond to issues affecting the PRC's strategic interests. Self-censorship also means that views and opinions that conflict with China's strategic narratives are not made public, thus ensuring that the information environment of a target country does not become critical of China's interests. If this fails, China

193 Daouda Cissé, 'Chinese telecommunications companies in Africa', Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief number 7, 2022, https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB07_Cissé_China_ICT_Africa_final.pdf.

can resort to more coercive measures, as it has done elsewhere, most recently in Lithuania.¹⁹⁴

6.6.5 Policy responses

In waging narrative warfare, China can utilize a wide range of actors across multiple key domains. Euro-Atlantic actors, in contrast, face greater challenges in mobilizing such support for their messaging. This is due to the pluralistic nature of liberal democracies, where co-opting the non-state sector to fulfil the state agenda is neither possible nor desirable.

What the Euro-Atlantic community can do, however, is ramp up its strategic communication efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa. Establishing effective cooperation in the region requires a working strategic communications strategy to counter Chinese and Russian influence. This requires long-term commitment and resourcing.

While a detailed plan for improving Euro-Atlantic strategic communication efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa falls outside the scope of this report, a general framework for the next steps is outlined below as a starting point for further research.

Firstly, it seems that the EU suffers from a serious visibility dilemma. In Sub-Saharan Africa, local awareness of both NATO and the EU is low, but in general, NATO is seen as an aggressor, whereas the EU is regarded as little more than an afterthought. This may be due to a lack of situational awareness within the Union and NATO, hampering their strategic messaging. The EU's substantial economic, financial, and development contributions to Sub-Saharan Africa should be made more visible. The EU

should also refine its messaging by incorporating greater nuance and tailoring narratives according to specific countries.

Secondly, given that both China and Russia tap into, utilize, and often amplify the domestic disinformation landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa, supporting local actors who challenge this nexus is crucial. Engaging with local strategic communication actors at the grassroots level is particularly important. This would include simplifying procedures to enable local civil society actors to cooperate with their counterparts abroad in fact-checking and debunking malign narratives.

Chinese narratives present a particular challenge for local democratic actors, as such narratives can be difficult to debunk. Apart from clear-cut mis- or disinformation that can be fact-checked, Chinese narratives tend to be subjective, partially fact-based, and complex.

Crucially, instead of individual training, Euro-Atlantic actors should support locals in building fact-checking communities and developing platforms that would create synergies and legitimacy for local actors and organizations. Through these established communities, the impact of fact-checkers could exceed the sum of their individual efforts. Community building could also help protect individual fact-checkers from attacks and the backlash originating from China, Russia, or domestic actors.

This, again, would require long-term thinking and listening to local actors. One potential avenue is to start funding initiatives aimed at institutionalizing civil society collectives and

194 See e.g., Matthew Reynolds and Matthew Goodman, 'China's Economic Coercion: Lessons from Lithuania', Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-economic-coercion-lessons-lithuania>.

providing them with funding and prestige. Many fact-checkers in Africa, while motivated and skilled, are not prioritizing Chinese narrative warfare and have little interest in debunking it. Their focus tends to be on home-grown, politics-related disinformation. Supporting their goals, however, will also contribute to countering Chinese and Russian narratives, if implemented with strategic patience.

A key issue facing fact-checkers in Sub-Saharan Africa is the lack of adequate resources and tools to respond to foreign information manipulation and interference. There are few incentives for fact-checkers to engage in the challenging work of countering narratives, particularly given the difficult nature of China's narrative warfare. Efforts to counter malign narratives from China and Russia should be incentivized to sustain motivation.

Thirdly, Chinese and Russian narratives often depict Western elites as hypocritical. Hence, when engaging partners in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to articulate goals and acknowledge mistakes openly, to effectively challenge and discredit such narratives. In many Sub-Saharan African countries, talk of mutual respect is

often considered hollow without action, which, in the long-term, may also work against China. From local perspectives, Chinese engagement often appears tokenistic. While Beijing's narratives underline solidarity between China and Africa, they can also come across as condescending, with an underlying hegemonic subtext. Chinese actors also integrate and interact poorly with local societies; Chinese expats tend to isolate themselves and actively segregate from locals, creating vulnerabilities that echo neo-colonialism.

Finally, China's narratives on the economy leave unanswered questions about how the lack of reciprocity in trade will benefit African countries. Despite this, local states and governments remain enthusiastic about adopting China's developmental model. Beijing also rarely acknowledges the negative aspects or the many strings attached to its developmental cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa. These apparent vulnerabilities in Chinese strategic narratives could be better addressed in counter-narratives and with proactive strategic communications planning.

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