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Policy Brief

BRI Colonialism in Africa

China's Exploits Can Help the West Reengage the Continent

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is making a geostrategic bid for resource dominance and political influence in Africa through their flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the September 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing, Chinese president Xi Jinping proudly declared, "China-Africa relations are at their best in history."[1] Indeed, the CCP's drive to displace the West on the continent has proven quite successful. If the West does not recalibrate its engagement with Africa, China's goal of surpassing the United States as the leading global power will be realized. How can the West reengage Africa? What are the avenues, and where are opportunities for effective engagement?

Due to the bureaucratic incompetence of the CCP, China's newfound power on the continent has been wielded haphazardly, providing a pathway for the West to establish stronger relations with African nations. In 2011, China included Africa in the BRI. But as multibillion-dollar BRI railways hemorrhaged capital across Africa, the Chinese saddled poor nations with crippling debt, and the CCP itself was unable to recoup the cost of their initial considerable investments. Poor risk management and debt predation has proved devastating for the Chinese, but it has also created a vital opportunity for Western reentrance into Africa. China's failures in Africa are instructive. They demonstrate the necessity of rigorous free-market competition instead of state-driven mercantilism; of human capital programming for local population as opposed to imported labor; and of gradual infrastructural developments rather than costly megaprojects that are never completed. The new epoch of Western partnership in Africa should capitalize upon Chinese failures, delivering tangible results where the CCP could not.

Despite CCP failures in infrastructure and human capital development, Chinese state-owned mining and oil conglomerates have successfully captured large swaths of Africa's rare-earth minerals, crude oil, and mining opportunities. This engagement with Africa closely replicates the strategic foundations of France's colonialism less than a century prior. The FrançAfrique empire (1895–1958) is most aptly characterized as nationalistic, state-driven mercantilism, achieved through social stratification, assimilation, and direct political control over indigenous populations. China has similarly cultivated a robust African command economy with CCP-coordinated market oligopolies that are motivated by the capture of rare-earth resources, crude oil, and geostrategic port access. To securitize these interests on the continent, the CCP has mounted an extensive campaign of interference into Africa's political ecosystems in a move that is profoundly reminiscent of France's colonial-era elite capture.

The popular narrative of Chinese benevolence in Africa is not empirically substantiated. It rests on fraught assumptions of a robust Chinese private sector operating abroad and a decentralized funding apparatus for the African BRI projects.[2] This conventional wisdom has prevailed because of the scale and nature of Chinese State-Party–coordinated secrecy and obfuscation, which allows for distortions pertaining to the flow of capital, terms of Chinese imposed debt, and allocation of true developmental assistance versus commercially exploitative infrastructure and mining investments. The narrative of a Chinese-African partnership obscures the asymmetric relationship and predation that has rapidly regressed some of the marginal but hard-fought economic gains of African nations since the early 2000s.

This brief explores the malign presence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the African continent. It considers the French colonial experience and finds remarkable similarities. Part I delves deeply into the economic development and mismanagement spurred by the Chinese, both in the PRC's vigorous pursuit of resource monopolies in unstable states and in the catastrophic failures of their flagship African BRI projects. Part II explores elite capture, political concessions, and the exportation of Xi Jinping thought onto the African continent through both a CCP school in Tanzania and the dissemination of digital surveillance technologies to pro-China African autocrats. The third and final section provides policy recommendations for three key initiatives: supplementing Europe's human capital programming on the continent ahead of Africa's projected demographic boom in the coming decades; strengthening the European Union-Africa economic and infrastructure partnership; and puncturing China's governance chokehold on African nations.

PART 1: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, (MIS)DEVELOPMENT, AND CORRUPTION

The CCP utilizes a distinctive set of state-backed financial institutions to penetrate African industries and dominate the continents' vast resource reserves.[3] Scholars have rightfully compared this robust state-coordinated foreign extraction enterprise to nineteenth- and twentieth-century European colonialism.[4] From 1895–1960, Colbertism served as the organizing principle of French colonialism in Africa, a program of nationalistic, state-driven mercantilism first inaugurated in the seventeenth century by Jean Baptiste-Colbert, the controller-general of finances under Louis XIV, the "Sun King" (1643–1715), of France.[5] Colbert looked toward the French colonies of his day in North America, the West Indies, and the Caribbean Sea as vessels pumping blood to sustain the reign of the Sun King back in Versailles. While Colbert's doctrine was suppressed during the French Revolution, the French leadership of the late nineteenth century found itself unable to control and extract resources from newly acquired African colonies absent draconian state control and state-erected market oligopolies. As such, Colbertism, once again, became France's doctrine for colony management and extraction.[6]

China is the contemporary face of seventeenth-century Colbertism, but its success with the doctrine has yet to be seen in Africa. Colbertism requires the projection of authoritarian state power into a foreign arena to strengthen the economic and political interests of the motherland.[7] The state creates foreign markets, and it dictates which extraction schemes should be cultivated. And if sustained, Colbertism is a testament to the robustness of state power. Like Colbert and Louis XIV, Xi understands economic power as inseparable from the preservation of absolute authoritarianism. But the bureaucratic incompetence of the CCP hobbles the full projection of PRC power over a foreign arena, preventing total dominance over African resource enclaves and lucrative markets.

CHINESE POLICY BANKS AND DISTINCT CASH FLOW TO THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Cash flow to the African continent is highly centralized and directed by the CCP, and characterized by predatory financial entanglement with African borrowers.[8] This flow of capital is principally orchestrated through two state-backed banking institutions, the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim) and the Development Bank of China (DBC).[9] While these enterprises are classified as independent legal entities, they were instituted by and report to the State Council of the People's Republic of China, the highest administrative organ of the CCP.[10] Exim and DBC source funding from other State Council–operated entities including the People's Bank of China, the Chinese foreign exchange reserve of $3.2 trillion, and sovereign wealth funds composed of $1.35 trillion in assets.[11] In 2013, Exim announced that China will have provided $1 trillion in financing to Africa by 2025. Exim's chief risk analyst, Zhao Changhui, said that Exim, a branch of the CCP's State Council, will account for 70 to 80 percent of the total $1 trillion.[12]

The Chinese State-Party deliberately conceals their financial entanglement on the African continent. Discernibly, the State Council routes capital through multiple distinct channels.[13] The first is Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as strictly concessional funding given to a developing nation to "promote and specifically target the economic development and welfare of developing countries."[14] ODA includes the construction of hospitals, poverty alleviation efforts, agricultural assistance, roads, airports, and school construction. Globally, the largest ODA donors are members of the OECD, which mandates documentation and transparency of the scale and distribution of development aid.[15] Conversely, the State Council, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), and Chinese policy banks consider Chinese ODA a state secret and thus refuse to share reports on the total scale or distribution of their concessional loan program by country or project.[16] In 2021, estimates placed Chinese ODA to Africa at a meager $3.2 billion.[17] The Other Official Flow (OOF) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), as opposed to ODA, constitute the overwhelming majority of Chinese financing to Africa[18] and are almost always motivated by geostrategic objectives, such as resource acquisition, elite capture, or critical supply chain infrastructure.

Chinese ODA helps recipient nations, but ODA does not, by a long shot, constitute the bulk of Chinese financing to Africa, even though scholars often wrongly depict it as a litmus test for PRC aspirations on the continent. Dreher and coauthors analyze a dataset of Chinese ODA funding distribution and conclude that "China does not take commercial self-interest or natural resource acquisition considerations into account when it allocates ODA. Chinese ODA flows to Africa are strongly oriented towards poorer countries, suggesting that Beijing considers humanitarian needs when making allocation decisions."[19] While the distribution of Chinese ODA appears akin to Western models, its implementation is completely distinct. This mode of ODA emphasizes rapid industrialization and infrastructure, a model that the nation credits with their own leapfrogged development in the 1980s.[20] The Chinese herald themselves as the pinnacle of development, preaching to African nations that the implementation of Chinese ODA will produce better results than the framework promoted by traditional, Western donors and the World Bank.[21]

"PRIVATE" CHINESE ENTERPRISE

In recent years, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) has inflated the presence and impact of private-led foreign direct investment in Africa, likely to sidestep allegations of predatory resource extraction by Beijing. MOFCOM maintains that "Chinese private companies account for 90% of the total number of Chinese companies investing in Africa, and 70% of the value of Chinese FDI."[22] MOFCOM creates the designation of "private" versus "public" companies, which allows them to incorporate, for example, large CCP-approved Huawei investments into their tabulation of private enterprise.

Undoubtedly, an element of Chinese economic flows to Africa is largely private, wholly commercially driven, and uncoordinated. Yet this is confined only to comparatively small and medium-sized business ventures. Moreover, under Xi, private Chinese firms can no longer be considered fully autonomous agents at home or abroad. The license to operate for Chinese firms in Africa is wholly contingent on continued compliance with Party-State directives on data sharing and intelligence collection, as outlined by the PRC's National Security Law of 2017.[23] Credible and nuanced data on the operational independence of "private" Chinese firms in Africa does not exist. However, it is evident that the quasi-private firms represent a negligible amount of total Chinese financing to Africa and that this is deliberate; the State Council has blocked private participation in most BRI projects, in the majority of critical resource ventures, and countless major contract deals with African borrowers.

OTHER OFFICIAL FLOWS

The final and most consequential flow of Chinese financing to Africa is called "Other Official Flows." The OECD defines Other Official Flows (OOF) as "official sector transactions that do not meet official development assistance (ODA) criteria."[24] China's OOF flows emanate from the PRC's state policy banks and take the form of nonconcessional loans, export credits, and mixed credit lines. OOF funds should be conceptualized as funds emanating directly from Party-State coffers, and as such, the allocation reflects State Council priorities and aspirations in Africa. The State Council, MOFCOM, and Exim conceal the total sum and distribution of Chinese OOF to the African continent.[25] Independent tabulation of total OOF funds are somewhat hindered by Exim's refusal to publicize loan agreements and tendency to package together ODA, FDI, and OOF, a practice that is intended to obscure the distribution of development aid versus export credits to any given nation.[26] However, recent public-sourced research initiatives like AidData at William and Mary university have had success in compiling China's overseas spending projects, gradually pulling back the veil that had concealed the CCP's OOF flows.

These breakdowns of Chinese OOF flows in Africa demonstrate a near exclusive concentration in the infrastructure, extraction, and transportation industries via expansive, highly publicized projects.[27] These geostrategic infrastructure projects are composed of multibillion-dollar railways, ports, and highways, which will often create critical export supply chains to and from Chinese resource ventures.[28] Beyond physical infrastructure, OOF funds are also used to invest into nations' mining or oil refineries, acquire maritime ports equipped with dual-use naval capabilities, and invest in security partnerships with pro-China African elites.

OOF funds, not foreign aid, are also the principal instruments used to mire African nations in debt, undermine their state sovereignty, and create dependencies on Chinese money and construction.[29]

The CCP's Exim Bank outpaces every nation in the world for deploying OOF funds. The rapidity of China's deployment of OOF export credits to Africa is a unique advantage of a communist system that has trillions in state sovereign wealth funds and a unitary party state. In comparison, the US Exim-Bank has supported nearly $20 billion in African projects over the *last 20 years*; this is only half of what Chinese policy banks have spent in the nation of Angola alone.[30] Comparing Chinese spending to that of any nation with rule of law is really quite unfair, but it is necessary to demonstrate the distinctive OOF-driven character of China's economic strangulation on the continent.

STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are government-created legal entities that partake in commercial or market activity at the behest of the state. SOEs prove essential to the PRC's neocolonial project in Africa. China's official policy on BRI implementation even explicitly states that the flagship initiative would be mainly government driven and SOE led.[31]

A century prior, this very state-coordinated financial organization was deployed in the creation and maintenance of colonial extraction projects. The economy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French West Africa is most correctly characterized as a centrally planned mercantilist oligopoly.[32] Colonial administrators established national accounts resembling sovereign wealth funds, cornered and stabilized the market via government-backed banking institutions, and empowered state-backed firms to formulate market oligopolies.[33] And by the Colbertist framework, all wealth accumulated by the colonial economy was directed to serve the French state and its supremacy.[34] The PRC, through its SOEs, has similarly cultivated a command economy with centrally planned oligopolies driven by the capture of rare-earth resources. This is a clear and striking parallel to France's praxis for colonial dominance in the nineteenth century.

CRITICAL RESOURCE ACQUISITION AND COLLATERALIZED OOF LOANS

As China laments the ills of European colonization, they simultaneously rely on, to a substantial degree, the very colonial market organization inaugurated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to source their vital energy needs. The French treated their colonies in West Africa as "estates," a term deployed by historian Olatunji Oluruntimehin to describe swaths of land that became profitable through accelerated exportation.[35] When independence gripped French West Africa in 1960, economic changes were minimal.[36] While the French retreated, their extractive models and institutions remained firmly grounded. A majority of African nations did not diversify their extractive-based colonial economies following independence and are now reliant on natural resource industries for state revenues.[37] OOF funds are the instrument through which the CCP replicates colonial-era access to Africa's critical mineral and resource hubs under the facade of commercial exchange and reciprocal, even-footed relations.

Experts project that by 2030, up to 80 percent of Chinese crude oil will be foreign sourced.[38] This dependence, coupled with a domestic oil demand surge, has forced Chinese SOEs to vigorously pursue overseas extraction opportunities. And indeed, Chinese National Oil Companies (CNOCs) have found Africa very lucrative, with economies already organized around primary commodity exports, resulting in low costs and few barriers to entry.[39]

Against this backdrop, the mechanisms for extraction are collateralized loans, a key feature of the State Council's OOF platform. Resource-for-infrastructure loans allow for the penetration of Exim export credits into sometimes untapped resource markets while eluding many comparisons to colonial-era resource scrambles.[40] While resource-backed loans were pioneered by Western banks in the '80s and '90s, Chinese policy banks have expanded the model, accelerating the scale and extraction while shrouding key features of the loan (interest rates, repayment safeguards, and debt restructuring) in secrecy.[41] The essence of these agreements is, "If you have the resources, we have the infrastructure." This collateralized format offers resource-rich African borrowers with major infrastructure bottlenecks access to quick, Chinese-built infrastructure.

Chinese policy banks have arranged multibillion-dollar resource-backed infrastructure agreements in practically every single resource-rich African nation:

- $2.79 billion in the development and extraction of Zimbabwe's lithium[42]
- $1.3 billion investment in the Zambian copper sector[43]
- $2 billion bauxite-backed loan in Ghana[44]
- Estimated $3–6 billion in oil-backed loans in Sudan[45]
- Cumulative $4.6 billion investment in Namibia's uranium mines[46]
- $6 billion, cobalt- and copper-backed loan in the Democratic Republic of the Congo[47]
- Cumulative $8 billion oil-backed loan in South Sudan[48]
- $10 billion joint venture extraction of oil in Uganda[49]
- $20 billion bauxite-backed loan in Guinea, more than 200 percent of the nation's GDP[50]
- $15–20 billion iron-ore project in Guinea, via joint venture[51]
- Cumulative $16 billion investment in Nigeria's oil sector; at least $4 billion of the investment is oil-backed infrastructure loans[52]
- Cumulative $40 billion crude oil–backed loans in Angola[53]

This noncomprehensive list of the largest resource-backed loans illustrates the striking magnitude of China's entanglement in Africa's extractive industries. Commodity-backed loans are an essential element of Chinese predation. The loans themselves should not be mistaken as cash influxes into African economies because the money will almost never see the inside of an African bank.[54] In most instances, after a commodity-backed loan is arranged, a Chinese state-owned mining or extraction conglomerate will be given access to multiple mines or oil fields within the African nation. Then, the revenue generated from Chinese SOE resource extraction serves as reimbursement for the loan.[55] As for the infrastructure component, it is exclusively Chinese SOEs that complete the agreed-upon collateralized infrastructure (as opposed to a "private" Chinese company or an African organization).[56] Ostensibly, the money in the Exim-issued loans to Africa never even leaves the sprawling web of Chinese SOEs but is rather transferred between different state-owned entities working on the extraction and infrastructure.[57]

The asymmetric nature of this arrangement should be very apparent: the only benefit reaped by the Africans is infrastructure that is reportedly poorly built and often deemed nonessential by local communities. Moreover, mounting evidence now suggests that commodity-backed loans are, at times, used by Chinese SOEs to finance infrastructure that is ancillary to their own resource extraction (e.g., ports, roads, and railways to and from a mine or oil field.)[58]

Perhaps the most consequential takeaway is that African resource extraction can continue until reimbursement parity is reached. Recall, however, that the loans can total up to billions of dollars, which means that extraction, in some instances, can continue, and has continued, for decades.[59]

RAILWAYS, RESOURCES, ASSETS, AND ARBITRATION

The construction of railways constitutes a large sum of Chinese OOF flows to Africa and remains of considerable interest to Chinese firms. The railways tend to be exercises in building out critical supply chains to accelerate the transportation to and from Chinese resource ventures. Ostensibly, almost every African nation with a major Chinese-constructed railway is linked or is planned to link to a Chinese SOE resource venture and a deep seaport also built by Chinese SOEs. The clearest examples include:

- **Lagos-Kaduna-Kano Railway, Nigeria (cumulative $8.3 billion):** A 1,343 km railway line from the coastal southwestern city of Lagos through centrally located Kaduna to the northern city of Kano. The railway has arteries that link to Port Harcourt on Nigeria's southern coast. Chinese SOEs hold ownership shares in the Dangote oil refinery in Lagos, a controlling stake in a Kaduna oil-refinery, and a 45 percent interest in a deep-sea oil field off of Port Harcourt. Port Harcourt is also the site of a Chinese SOE's $1 billion highway project to Lagos. Lagos is the site of a deep seaport constructed by a Chinese SOE.[60]

- **Khartoum-Port Sudan Railway, Sudan ($1.98 billion):** A 670 km railway line from the centrally located Khartoum to coastal Port Sudan, the site of a Chinese SOE–constructed port. A Chinese SOE owns a 50 percent stake in the largest petroleum company in Sudan, located in Khartoum.[61]

- **The Trans-Guinean Railway, Guinea (Exim loan not yet issued):** A 670 km rail being developed to transport the inland iron ore mined by Chinese SOEs to a Guinean deep seaport, also to be constructed by Chinese SOEs.[62]

- **Tazara Rail Line, Tanzania and Zambia (planned $1 billion):** A 1,860 km rail line connecting Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the site of a Chinese SOE–owned port, with Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia cutting through the epicenter of the Zambian copper belt, which is home to $1.3 billion in existing Chinese investment.[63]

Exim incurs an immense, prohibitive risk in loaning billions to African nations with abysmal national credit rankings. The Chinese do not incur this risk because they enjoy the challenge of trying to create profitable railway systems in impoverished countries. It is a resource-driven enterprise, but one that carries a high price tag. Exim seems to be hinging the recoupment of their railway investments on continued access and exportation in volatile resource-rich nations. However, the fragility of these export supply chains has created numerous opportunities for crippling financial loss, compounded by the bureaucratic inefficiency of the CCP state apparatus. The nationalization of African natural resources, hostile African elites, and the cancellation of Chinese mining licenses over human rights abuses have dramatically hindered Exim's exportation of natural resources.[64]

An additional issue is the financial hemorrhaging of the railways themselves, which spurs African requests to Chinese policy banks for extensive debt restructuring, refinancing, and even cancellation. In a 2018 BRI forum in China, a spokesperson from MOFCOM's insurance branch, Sinosure, shared the news of MOFCOM's losses of nearly $1 billion due to Ethiopian debt restructuring on the Addis Ababa-Djibouti freight railway.[65] The chief economist cited persistent power outages as the cause of revenue loss and restructuring: "Ethiopia's planning capabilities are lacking, but even with the help of Sinosure and the lending Chinese bank (Exim) it was still insufficient."[66] MOFCOM's perception of African planning deficiencies are really just expected hurdles to building infrastructure in developing nations. Power shortages, security challenges, domestic skill scarcity, and corruption all interfere with the Chinese railway–based extraction scheme but seem to have been unaccounted for in Exim's economic feasibility projections.

Both MOFCOM and Exim have been unable to substantially mitigate the crippling mega-infrastructure projects launched in African countries. Moreover, their oversized involvement in the BRI suggests that the CCP privileges high levels of dominance without commensurate levels of efficiency. And, despite the regime's initial calculus, China's critical export rail supply chain has not proved lucrative enough to offset the cost of the initial investment, landing both African borrowers and Chinese policy banks in a position of grave financial loss. In June 2024, China ceded operational control of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti and the Kenya-Nairobi railways to the governments of Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, respectively.[67] Of the African railway projects that were built or formerly operated by the Chinese, these two railways were the least tied to resource or extraction ventures and the least commercially profitable relative to the cost of the initial Exim loans.

The biggest oversight in the popular theory of China's "debt-trap diplomacy" is that it omits how China has landed *China* into its own debt distress alongside African borrowers. Supply chain insecurity, the serial failure of multibillion-dollar BRI projects, and continuous African requests for debt restructuring and cancellation suggest an extreme lack of foresight from the CCP, MOFCOM, and their policy banks. Moreover, it is highly unusual that a MOFCOM economist would publicly admit to such considerable Chinese losses in a highly visible BRI project. It is likely endemic of the BRI's mounting and debilitating costs shouldered by an unexpecting CCP.

The strength of Chinese sovereign wealth funds (SWF) seems to be at least partially correlated with the success of the BRI projects.[68] Following Xi's ascension to power, he began to use state sovereign wealth funds to service the construction of the BRI, replenishing state policy banks like Exim and DBC with SWF reserves.[69] The CCP also erected several new SWFs solely intended for BRI and overseas construction projects.[70] Now, ten years after the start of the BRI, new data estimates that the CCP lost an approximate $240 billion bailing out twenty-two countries around the world struggling to repay debts incurred from BRI contracts with Chinese policy banks.[71]

The Madaraka Express

Described as the most "politically visible Chinese railway in Africa," the Nairobi-Mombasa railway line, often referred to as the Madaraka Express, offers a paradigmatic case study of the contractual predation inherent in Chinese mega-infrastructure projects.[72] The line spans 609 km from coastal Mombasa to the south-central capital city Nairobi. The project has extended into other enclaves in the east African region, with tracks splintering off into Uganda, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, where there are a number of Chinese-owned resource ventures expected to be connected by the railway. This intricate and expansive web of railways penetrating East Africa's littoral hubs is financed by two Exim loans and entirely constructed by the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), which is a subsidiary of the Chinese Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which is a subsidiary of the Chinese Communications Construction Group (CCCG), which is an SOE directed by the CCP's State Council.[73]

In a rare move from the CCP, Exim publicly released the Buyer Credit Loan Agreement for the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway.[74] The most consequential feature of this contract is found in Article 15.5 in the sovereign immunity waiver, which was the subject of public outrage in Kenya in 2018.[75] Sovereign immunity waivers tend to be typical of international contracts because borrower countries need to be able to credibly commit to contractual terms instead of hiding behind state immunity. Article 15.5 of the loan agreement reads: "The Borrower (Kenya) irrevocably and unconditionally waives, any immunity to which it or its property may at any time be or become entitled . . . [and] enforcement of arbitral award. . . ."[76]

This waiver makes all Kenyan government property vulnerable to potential seizure should Kenya default on a loan, and the lender (Exim) chooses to engage in arbitration proceedings.[77] The sovereign immunity waiver appears in the vast majority of all public-sourced Chinese loan agreements.[78] It is not the case that these sovereign immunity waivers name specific assets (e.g., the Mombasa Port) in these nations as collateral for loan default; rather, the contracts broadly state that all government assets are vulnerable to seizure if arbitration is sought by the borrower.

The fear of Chinese seizure of African assets is at the center of China's alleged "debt-trap diplomacy." The Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka is utilized as the paradigmatic example of China's predatory lending practices to secure African infrastructure, placing it under Chinese control for a ninety-nine-year lease.[79]

Some analysts dispute claims of debt-trapping by citing China's refusal to actually seize African assets and Exim's willingness to sometimes restructure and refinance debt to African lenders in cases of imminent loan default.[80] For example, Deborah Brautigam, a leading expert on Chinese-Africa relations, writes that Chinese sovereign immunity waivers are characteristic of international contracts and, by extension, are nonpredatory.[81] There are a few features of Chinese loan agreements with Africa that are atypical, disconcerting, and inconsistent with Brautigam's stance:

- First, Chinese sovereign immunity waivers require borrower nations to waive immunity for both *arbitration* and *enforcement*. Waiving immunity for arbitration is the norm given that parties then proceed onto a neutral arbitral body for resolution. Including enforcement in the immunity waivers is not typical and should raise questions about CCP motivations.[82]

- Second, only China is deploying billions in OOF funds to the poorest countries on earth. While sovereign immunity waivers are typical of international contracts, they are contingent on whether the borrower will even default. In African BRI projects, the likelihood of default is astronomically higher than usual, which, by extension, raises the stakes of the sovereign immunity waiver.

- Last, in a majority of contracts, Exim requires that arbitration happens in Beijing at a court directly under the purview of the CCP's State Council.

In Articles 15.3 and 15.4 of the Kenyan Loan Agreement, there are "Submission to Jurisdiction" and "Waiver" clauses, respectively, which outline that the arbitration between the borrower and the lender must take place in Beijing and be conducted by the China International Economic and Trade Arbitration Commission (CIETAC).[83] CIETAC is outlined as the stated arbitration jurisdiction in the vast majority of all public-sourced Chinese Loan Agreements.[84] All CIETAC arbitration findings are subject to review by the Beijing Fourth Intermediate People's Court, which is the highest judicial organ for adjudication on foreign-related cases. The judges on this court are appointed by the CCP via the People's Congress.[85]

The regime has distorted any neutral arbitral capacity that CIETAC might have once enjoyed. It is disingenuous to suggest that Chinese arbitration, and by extension, Exim's sovereign immunity waivers, are at all comparable to the loan default system established by Western lenders given that they tend to rely on courts in Switzerland. Arbitration does not exist in China, and remarkably, the CCP has been able to put themselves beyond the law in almost all the sovereign African states within which they operate. The CIETAC-grounded arbitration is the preferred legal regime for Exim's foreign dealing because it completely insulates CCP actions from the purview of sovereign African states.

There has not been an instance of major African asset seizure by Exim succeeding CIETAC arbitration. This is unsurprising given that the seizure of critical infrastructure would sever the goodwill needed for China's continued resource extraction, market penetration, and favorable political ties with the African elite. Moreover, the global backlash in the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port cautioned the Party-State against such explicit displays of sovereign encroachment. This does not make the Exim immunity waivers and CCP-controlled "arbitration" any less troubling. Rather, it illuminates the mechanism with which the CCP quietly encroaches on the sovereignty of African borrowers.

PART II: ELITE CAPTURE

China's elite capture in Africa spans two primary domains: Party-to-Party exchanges including the exportation of the CCP governance model, and Chinese technological transfers to autocratic regimes.[86]

China captures African elites to manufacture consent for continued resource extraction and policy penetration. African elites who are interested in regime security and power retention are given CCP tools to repress dissidents, skew elections, and enlarge their personal wealth.

PARTY-TO-PARTY EXCHANGES: EXPORTING CCP AUTHORITARIANISM

In 1951, Mao Zedong authorized the creation of the International Liaison Department (ILD) within the CCP for the purpose of bolstering relations with other communist parties around the world.[87] The organizational mandate of the department has since evolved to the forging and fortifying of overseas relations with any friendly foreign political party. Under Xi, ILD has become the Party's principal mechanism for elite capture within foreign administrations. The department's most pronounced footprint is in Africa, where they have a near-total focus on regime survival for pro-China African elites, manufacturing elite consent for continued Chinese resource extraction ventures, and ensuring nations' continued acquiescence to CCP power and foreign policy. There is considerable dispute as to the relative power of the ILD within the Chinese foreign policy apparatus. Nevertheless, the basic policy formulations of the department emerge from the Politburo and State Council. As such, attempts to paint the actions and policy of the ILD as an aberration within the Party-State system would be strikingly inaccurate.

The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere School: Training Autocrats in Tanzania

Tanzania has the largest and most visible ILD project in the world.[88] In 2022, the CCP opened their first overseas school, the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School. The leadership academy was funded by a $40 million investment from the ILD, in partnership with the Central Party School (CPS), the organization responsible for training Chinese cadres on Maoist doctrine and party organization in Beijing.[89]

The Nyerere School provides political training to African cadres and elites from reigning political parties from six nations in southern Africa (Tanzania, South Africa, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Namibia).[90] This contingent of African parties is called the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa (FLMSA), and they have all reigned uninterrupted in their respective national contexts since independence. This is due in large part to the parties' aversion to open societies and tendency to participate in electoral violence, suppress dissidents, and skew election results.[91] Importantly, the ILD has a vested interest in ensuring the incumbency of these six liberation parties who, beyond ideological alignment, are overwhelmingly favorable toward Chinese resource ventures in their home countries and susceptible to pro-China policy penetration.[92] China seems to retain its dominant and diversified position in critical mineral mining and supply chains through decisive bureaucratic control over southern African elites.

Chinese companies have invested an estimated $3 billion in Tanzania's coal and iron ore;[93] a cumulative $40 billion in Angola's crude oil;[94] $2.8 billion in Zimbabwe's lithium;[95] $1.3 billion in Mozambique's coal industry;[96] and $4.6 billion investment in Namibia's uranium.[97] Importantly, however, these investments are punctuated by mounting domestic anti-Chinese populism from the opposition parties in many southern African states.[98] Colonial-era comparisons and accusations of Chinese "mineral theft" have gradually crept into the African public consciousness and opposition-party campaigns:

- In Zimbabwe, opposition-party candidates ran in the 2023 elections on a platform against Chinese lithium mining, alleging foreign mineral exploitation.[99]

- In Namibia, select government agencies suspended a Chinese company, Xinfeng Investments, from extracting and exporting the country's lithium, alleging unlawful and predatory exportation of raw minerals without adhering to Namibian law. The reigning pro-China party eventually intervened and reinstated the contract; however, the incident demonstrated growing anti-China sentiment within some governmental branches.[100]

- In Angola, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, civil society groups allege mass human rights violations, enslavement, and child labor in Chinese-owned-and-operated mines and oil refineries.[101]

Rifts of this nature pose a challenge to China's privileged resource access. Against this backdrop of growing contestation from African opposition parties and civil society, pro-China autocrats are needed to directly protect PRC mining and resource dominance. This is the likely motive for the Nyerere School in Tanzania. The CCP has presented the school as a benevolent avenue to improve the governing capacity of FLMSA parties and bolster Chinese cooperation with the bloc of southern African states.[102] Interviews with school alumni instead indicate that Beijing's lessons promote the superiority of the party, the fusion of party and government, and the need to eliminate institutional checks and balances on the party.[103] This includes Central Party School lessons on dissident-suppressing tactics, the benefits of a censorship regime, and the importance of extrajudicial disciplinary processes for rogue party members.[104]

Southern African states, though imperfect democracies, still retain multiparty, quasi-liberal ecosystems. As such, implementing the CCP's one-party blueprint is challenging. Beijing likely formed the Nyerere School with an acute awareness that opposition parties and vibrant civil societies in southern Africa posed a legitimate threat to their continued resource strangulation. The ILD recognizes the autocratic tendencies of FLMSA parties and capitalizes on this by imbuing reigning elites with the belief that they should (1) rule in perpetuity, (2) collapse their political systems into a one-party state, and (3) embrace CCP tactics for regime security in exchange for unfettered PRC access to national resources and preferential state foreign policy.[105]

Picking Winners: Empowerment and Social Stratification through Educational Institutions

China's pervasive political interference is designed to cultivate an acquiescent governing class that willingly securitizes foreign state power and economic interests. The ILD's decision to exclusively train FLMSA party members in the Nyerere School is a move to strategically empower and protect pro-China African elite while disenfranchising party factions that are resistant to Chinese economic strangulation and extraction.[106]

The Nyerere School constitutes political interference that directly harkens back to the elite capture of nineteenth-century French West Africa.[107] Colonial and neocolonial extraction schemes alike require decisive influence over the relevant indigenous political arena. The French recognized that coercion over African elites could be orchestrated through educational institutions and human capital programming. As such, colonial-era schools were designed to imbue a new class of African elites with the technical bureaucratic knowledge to retain power and govern the new colonial-era machinery.[108] Graduates from French educational institutions entered the pipeline of colonial bureaucracy conditioned on pledges of loyalty to the French administrators.[109] In this arrangement, African elites were able to enlarge their agency and power holdings in exchange for loyalty toward the foreign colonial entity. The new elites had to tacitly commit to complete bureaucratic capture or forfeit their position within the governing class. Moreover, admission to colonial educational institutions was based heavily on France's decision to strategically exclude and thus disenfranchise social factions that opposed their rule.[110] The northern aristocratic chiefdoms across West Africa waged intermittent resistance movements against French rule, which culminated in their exclusion from France's educational institutions.[111]

In the final moments of the FrançAfrique empire in the late 1950s, colonial administrators selected African heads of state who would adhere to the French colonial order even in the imminently approaching postcolonial epoch (notably, Guinea excepted).[112] These appointments were largely enabled by the French secondary schools, which, in the preceding decades, had trained a new elite class in the canon of French bureaucracy. Paris-approved African leadership after 1960 served to functionally consolidate postindependence West Africa into a set of dependent protectorates susceptible to the continued economic dominance of their former colonizer even into the contemporary era.[113] The palpability of the French legacy felt in West Africa today differentiates twentieth-century French colonialism from its European counterparts; while Britain and others largely relegated their former African dominions to the periphery, France has continued to reap the rewards of the intensive indigenous social stratification that they engineered during the FrançAfrique empire.

Amid the collapse of twentieth-century African colonialism, the French provided a blueprint to circumvent the newfound problem of African sovereignty using elite capture and political manipulation. It is, ostensibly, a lesson that the Chinese are eager to replicate through the Nyerere School. The existence of a Chinese Communist Party school outside of the territorial bounds of the PRC is in itself an unprecedented action. But it is still yet to be seen whether the Chinese have substantially penetrated the domestic political landscapes in the targeted southern African bloc to enjoy lasting influence in regions of interest. Compared to the French, the Chinese schooling efforts are far less widespread, but it is important to note that they are supplemented by Chinese surveillance and repression technology, which nearly guarantees the continued incumbency of Chinese-educated African parties.

THE "DIGITAL SILK ROAD": DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND TECHNOLOGICAL DIFFUSION

In 2015, a Chinese white paper announced a new subset of the BRI named the "Digital Silk Road" (DSR), a loosely organized set of projects typified by technological transfers from Chinese-owned tech companies to partner with governments to improve data collection, surveillance, telecommunication networks, smart cities, and cloud computing.[114] This serves as a vital pretext for the exportation of China's political illiberalism; DSR projects entrench Africa's authoritarian regimes by providing the technological instruments to crack down on dissidents, interfere in democratic processes, and create a robust surveillance state with unfettered Chinese access to African data.

The PRC retains outsized influence in Africa's technology ecosystem. The Chinese telecommunications company Huawei Co. has emerged as a technological giant on the continent, providing 70 percent of all 4G infrastructure.[115] Huawei, among other Chinese-controlled technological giants, used the facade of benevolent developmental assistance to justify continued market expansion across the continent. While the penetration of Chinese-built 4G infrastructure has provided unprecedented digital connectivity to some of the world's poorest countries, evidence continues to mount as to the perverse and distortive effects of Chinese technology upon African governance and sovereignty.

The Digital Silk Road is chiefly about CCP data collection, testing and training Chinese-produced AI models, and exporting China's digital illiberalism to the governing class in Africa. These projects are often mislabeled as decentralized commercial enterprises detached from the Party-State. This reflects the CCP's attempt to construe this technological proliferation as a decentralized, demand-driven trend that exists in the realm of "private" Chinese enterprise. Indeed, Huawei has gone to great lengths to assert a level of operational independence from the CCP, which does not exist. The very nature of Chinese data-sharing laws compels all Chinese companies in the world to "support, assist, and cooperate with PRC intelligence" in accordance with Article 7 of the PRC's National Intelligence Law of 2017.[116] Just as the State Council has disallowed private involvement within major BRI infrastructure projects, DSR projects are governed by compulsory data sharing, which transforms Huawei, among other Chinese firms, into an intelligence arm of the State Council.

Zimbabwe: Transnational Digital Authoritarianism and Regime Security

"Digital Authoritarianism" is characterized as an authoritarian state's utilization of information technology to surveil, repress, and control foreign and domestic populations.[117] Zimbabwe is a paradigmatic case study on the importance of this technology in capturing African elites and manufacturing consent for continued PRC resource extraction and political penetration.

In 2018, the ruling Zimbabwean party signed an agreement with CloudWalk Technology Co. Ltd., a Chinese facial recognition company.[118] While a nominally public company, CloudWalk has been listed as a "Chinese military company" by the US Department of Defense and was notably sanctioned in 2021 by the US Department of the Treasury for providing the CCP with biometric surveillance and tracking technologies to be used against the minority Uighur population in Xinjiang.[119] Three years prior to the sanctions, the Zimbabwean government signed a contract with CloudWalk to create a national biometric surveillance database. The agreement entailed that Zimbabwe send surveillance data on millions of their citizens back to China and, in exchange, CloudWalk donated data collection terminals, granting the reigning government access to a robust digital surveillance apparatus.[120]

In a statement to China's *Global Times*, CloudWalk CEO, Yao Zhiqiang, stated that CloudWalk's existing surveillance apparatus had been trained only on China's ethnic Han population, which created constraints in surveilling diverse races and ethnicities.[121] The new Zimbabwe agreement, Yao explained, offered valuable data to train CloudWalk models to respond, surveil, and track darker-skinned people.[122] CloudWalk marketing material that emerged in this same timeline described the company's exact mechanism for "Neighborhood Control and Prevention of Sensitive Groups of People." CloudWalk writes:

> If they (CloudWalk cameras) recognize Uighurs, Tibetans, or other sensitive peoples, they will generate a key sensitive persons face-photo database, and in real time pay attention to these sensitive people's entry and exit, records their movements. . . . If the number of sensitive people in the neighborhood increases, for example, if originally one Uighur lives in a neighborhood, and within 20 days six Uighurs appear, it immediately sends alarms (to law enforcement).[123]

Data collected on Zimbabwe's Black population was vital in generating CloudWalk's advanced technology against the typically darker-skinned Uighurs. The proliferation of Chinese technology into Africa has two perceptible strategic net benefits to the CCP. First, it allows Chinese companies the ability to refine their surveillance apparatus to enable more streamlined domestic repression of the Uighurs and general population management. And second, this technological authoritarianism fortifies pro-China African elites, who safeguard the PRC's economic and political interests but who require dissident-suppressing technology for regime security and personal patronage.

Since independence from Britain in 1965, Zimbabwe has been ruled by ZANU-PF, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (also a FLMSA party receiving educational training at the Nyerere School). The Zimbabwean president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, came to power in 2017. In 2018, he entered into an agreement with CloudWalk. Then again in 2020, the president agreed to a five-year Safe Cities project with Huawei, which would expand the existing surveillance infrastructure.[124] A year later, Mnangagwa received a $240 million loan from the China Exim Bank for a nationwide telecommunications data center created and led by Chinese SOEs in partnership with Zimbabwe's largest mobile network.[125] President Mnangagwa bragged that this National Data Center can "track where people walk, who they talk to, even where they sleep."[126]

Concurrent with this technological penetration was China's entrance into Zimbabwe's nascent lithium industry. Since 2021, Chinese SOEs and affiliated private companies have invested $2.8 billion into acquiring the nation's lithium mines and captured more than two-thirds of all available lithium investment/mining licenses.[127] The main Zimbabwean opposition party, CCC, ran in the 2023 election on an anti-Chinese lithium mining platform, reflecting popular civilian discontent toward mass foreign extraction, and by extension, Mnangagwa's presidency. In the 2023 election, CCC alleged extensive Mnangagwa-orchestrated surveillance of dissident and opposition-party members; the election has been widely recognized as illegitimate.[128] And while limited information is available as to the extent of the Chinese surveillance apparatus in Zimbabwe, the scale of CloudWalk's digital repression of the Uighurs suggests a comparable scope in the southern African country.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chinese are the latest in a long line of outsiders who have tried and failed to consolidate an economic chokehold on the African continent. The PRC's BRI projects have cost billions in state funds while only marginally improving African transport infrastructure. The BRI represented a tremendous opportunity to cultivate African human capital by establishing educational and job programming ahead of the impending population boom on the continent. By 2050, the African population is predicted to be 2.5 billion, more than a quarter of the world's population.[129] China, a nation projected to experience a demographic collapse in that same period, did not utilize the BRI to strategically leverage the growing African population of human capital in service of the Chinese economy.[130] The West should not replicate China's error.

Africa represents challenges that can and should be seen as extraordinary opportunities. If current trends persist, we will likely witness low economic opportunity coupled with high African birth rates, a trajectory which would drive a migration crunch in Europe and North America within the next two decades. Europe is already experiencing subreplacement fertility rates that are projected to result in a European Union (EU) workforce decline of 20 percent by 2050.[131] If current demographic trends hold, the likely arrival of Africans in the next two decades can either supplement this declining workforce with skilled labor or exacerbate social tensions in nations receiving low-skilled laborers. The determinant of this outcome lies in the willingness of the EU to embark on strategic human capital initiatives in large African population hubs.

POLICY 1: HUMAN CAPITAL PROGRAMMING

A majority of African nations cannot, in due time, erect the needed social safety nets, job programming, or skills training to accommodate the rapidity of the continent's population boom. Instead, the EU should identify major population hubs in Africa and rapidly establish university exchange programs, vocational training, and technical skill programming. The EU's human capital programming should be crafted with considerable oversight from Europe's private sector, given that the implemented vocational programs need to reflect the skill sets required for European employment.

China failed to strategically leverage the African demographic boom. The EU should understand human capital development in Africa as a diplomatic vessel to improve ties with African nations, to control the shock waves of the inevitable African migration, and to improve the demography and productivity of the European economy through the likely future injection of high-skilled African immigrants.

POLICY 2: ECONOMIC AND INFRASTRUCTURAL PARTNERSHIPS

The EU is uniquely positioned to compete against China for influence in Africa. Aside from human capital, this competition spans two other realms: economics and governance. Rather than enunciate prescriptive policy changes, it is more prudent to briefly characterize the nature of Chinese predation in these veins and expound upon the missing pieces of the West's policy matrix.

The success of Chinese financial entanglement in Africa is largely in the CCP's ability to construe itself as a motivated and legitimate business partner for Africa. As such, African nations often herald their economic agreements with China as a story of partnership rather than charity and dependency. Conversely, Europe's pillaging of the African continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has, unsurprisingly, culminated in an asymmetric power dynamic between the two entities. This manifests in the current model of EU-African engagement, which is typified by large ODA packages from the EU to Africa. These humanitarian assistance packages ultimately do very little to stimulate flailing African economies that are eager to engage in foreign trade. However, the recent and highly visible failures of China's flagship BRI projects in Africa mark an inflection point for the EU to emerge as a dominant economic partner on the African continent.

As part I of the brief demonstrated, the majority of China's financial flows to Africa are through Exim's OOF funds. No nation in the world is deploying OOF funds at pace with Exim; and more important, it is unproductive for the West to replicate this fraught policy choice. Nevertheless, there is a vast amount of Chinese-sourced FDI and quasi-private activity occurring across the continent, and these are contracts for which Europe could compete. A comprehensive EU-Africa trade strategy, in conjunction with considerable private FDI investments, would be a substantive and consequential step toward real FDI competition in Africa. Encouraging this acceleration of European private investment will require a concerted policy effort to minimize stakeholder risk by erecting a number of safety nets and incentives for entrance into potentially risk-laden industries.

In the case of infrastructure, the EU Global Gateway Initiative is a commendable European effort to overcome the African infrastructure bottleneck. The Global Gateway project pledges 150 billion euros' worth of investments to vital African infrastructure between 2021 and 2027. The project is ambitious and promising, but its success requires that the EU take serious note of the CCP's current disastrous failures in the African infrastructure.

China's ineptitude should teach Europe three critical things about building infrastructure on the African continent:

1. Infrastructure construction should utilize the skill sets of African workers, and projects themselves should be shaped intimately by the feedback of the local populations. Chinese exclusions of Africans from construction processes and African discontent toward several mega-infrastructure projects have discontinued several Chinese efforts.
2. The EU should allow for competitive bidding on infrastructure contracts (as opposed to the CCP's process of selecting winning SOEs) and then attempt to rapidly integrate skilled African workers into infrastructure construction. Principally, the projects must be viewed positively by impacted populations and at least result in modest, localized economic growth or stimulation.
3. The EU must prepare for the immense challenges, setbacks, and financial risk associated with building infrastructure in nations with weak state capacity and abysmal rule of law. China's attempt to transpose their building processes onto national contexts that experience power shortages, security challenges, and theft and violence at worksites have only resulted in substantial financial hemorrhaging. This was the case, most visibly, in Ethiopia, where MOFCOM blamed "Ethiopia's planning capabilities" for their crippling loss of $1 billion on the railway project.

POLICY 3: GOVERNANCE AND CIVIC EXCHANGE

Outcompeting China in the governance arena is exceedingly difficult. The covertness of the United Front Work department's operations, coupled with throngs of China-sourced surveillance technology for African autocrats, demonstrates the scale of Chinese entrenchment at play. It is evident that the CCP is attempting to capture some of Africa's governing elite in order to securitize China's economic and political interests abroad. Discernibly, though, China has clearly enunciated which members of the African political elite, notably the FLMSA, are vital to protect China's economic and political interests. As opposed to replicating China's tendency to empower individual African regimes, a much more effective strategy would be to empower democratic processes and structures. Leadership exchanges, expanding civic engagement programming in collaboration with the African Union and regional ad hoc organizations, or initiating EU electoral observation missions as a condition of Global Gateway Project funding could interfere, even if marginally, with China's governance chokehold.

CONCLUSION

The colonial antecedents to China's presence in Africa are incontrovertible. The economy in French West Africa was Colbertist, highly centralized, monopolistic, and driven by the supreme need to serve an authoritarian state. To an astounding degree, the draconian state in Versailles suppressed private enterprise in the colonies to maintain complete state authority over vital resource and extraction hubs in a manner that was completely distinctive from its European peers at the time. The French's Colbertist model required robust and comprehensive state power to synchronously conquer territory; educate indigenous populations; create, manage, and finance new markets; and then rapidly extract. While the French projection of state power was certainly felt, a confluence of topographical barriers, infrastructure failures, and indigenous revolts dramatically hindered the extractive potential of these colonies. These failures and the accompanying weakening of the colonial administration galvanized and accelerated indigenous claims for independence halfway through the twentieth century. France's enduring presence in the region is not attributable to this fraught economic model but rather to the extent of elite capture initially orchestrated through colonial-era educational institutions.

As we have seen, contemporary Chinese behaviors and actions in Africa resemble those of the French during its colonial era. Perhaps the fate of the French Empire on the continent will also prove emblematic for the Chinese. The challenges of topography and widespread infrastructural underdevelopment in Africa have proved timeless, similarly devastating China's economic aspirations as seen by the multibillion-dollar losses on flagship BRI projects. Moreover, China's ardent suppression of most private activity in vital African industries has created an immensely risk-prone environment wherein the success of their state-driven neocolonial enterprise is tied directly to the coffers of the CCP. China's modest strides in elite capture through the Nyerere School and technological diffusion to African autocrats are fruitless if they cannot begin to offset the initial high cost of entry into this arena.

The future of Africa is irrevocably intertwined with Europe. During the first iteration of modern colonialism on the African continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European powers transformed vital mineral and resource hubs into extraction-estates, culminating in brittle economies and weak governance. China now continues this very legacy. The CCP's geostrategic conquest in Africa begs a response from the West, one that does not replicate the current failures of the BRI or of French colonialism a century prior. This intervention must span human capital programming, economic enrichment, infrastructural development, and African governance. Demonstrably, China is unable to meaningfully intervene in these realms, which creates a tremendous opportunity for Europe's reentrance and partnership.

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