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CHINA'S AUTHORITARIAN EXPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

No country has embraced the authoritarian potential of digital surveillance tools with greater alacrity than the People's Republic of China. Its use of those tools for political and ethnic repression has drawn condemnation from human-rights campaigners and some Western governments. In recent years, however, its surveillance technology, packaged with generous state-backed financing, has also found commercial success with governments abroad.

Less well appreciated is that China has also been exporting a set of authoritarian techniques and governance practices. Chinese officials have spoken about sharing "the experience of building a 'Safe China'" with police and security counterparts from other countries, and have offered to train thousands of police officers under Xi Jinping's newly announced Global Security Initiative. China has paired this with efforts to globally legitimize and normalize its own approach to authoritarian control.

The U.S. response to these trends has been halting, hampered by several shortcomings. First, few appreciate how China's intense focus on regime stability informs its foreign policy. Second, experts and policymakers do not yet have an analytically rich understanding of the non-technological elements of China's export of authoritarian practices and tools. Finally, while the U.S. government has sanctioned some Chinese tech companies, it has been slower to respond to China's export to weakly institutionalized states of the institutions that surround and support the use of surveillance technology. The lack of a concerted response to China's authoritarian influence is a problem whether one casts the U.S.-China rivalry

as a clash of values or as an interest-based competition between great powers.

This report examines these phenomena and offers recommendations for the U.S. government to respond. Part I considers China's exports of surveillance technology in the context of Xi Jinping's broader theory of how to achieve security for China's socialist system and the Chinese Communist Party. Part II examines China's underappreciated but expansive efforts to train governments and political parties overseas in its methods of authoritarian social and political control. Part III considers how these trends affect concrete U.S. national interests, and how the U.S. government should respond, considering the decisive shift toward interest-based dealmaking in U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance.

I. CHINA'S SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY EXPORTS

China's development of a high-tech surveillance state and its export of these technologies around the globe have garnered significant media and policy attention.[1] The development and provision of surveillance and police technology are a core aspect of how Beijing provides the tools of authoritarian rule worldwide. At a hearing in May 2019 held by the U.S. House of Representative Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence on "China's Digital Authoritarianism," for example, Chairman Adam Schiff (D-CA) noted, "Th[e] coupling of innovation and authoritarianism is deeply troubling and has spread beyond China itself… Export of this technology gives countries the technological tools they need to emulate Beijing's model of social and political control." Ranking Member Devin Nunes (R-CA) seconded Schiff's concern, warning about "Chinese adoption and exportation of invasive surveillance measures designed to optimize political control."[2]

It is probably most accurate to say that China is exporting the tools of authoritarianism, as it is not imposing a single model on countries in the style of Soviet tanks rolling into eastern Europe. Rather, it is providing security assistance, technology, training, and tools in places that are key to China's overseas development and security interests – which the Party sees as inextricably entwined – and doing so in ways that augment China's presence and situational awareness of the local security environment; its partnerships with key actors in these locations; and its overall influence.[3] Sometimes China provides surveillance and security equipment bundled with high-level security diplomacy (bilateral or multilateral) and police training; at other times, it provides these components on a disaggregated basis, in a flexible manner based on local conditions and receptivity. (For example, when the Foreign Ministry's push to create a regional security pact with Pacific Island Countries failed, the PRC continued to pursue an annual, multilateral police and law enforcement dialogue with countries in the region, paired with police assistance on a bilateral basis to select countries that were open to and interested in it.[4])

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There are several reasons for the United States and its allies and partners to be concerned about the spread of China's surveillance technology. The first is the difficulty such technology poses for intelligence competition between the United States and China; CIA Director John Ratcliffe has identified China's development into a ubiquitous technical surveillance (UTS) environment as a major challenge for the United States' intelligence community (IC).[5] Second, to the extent that the United States continues to make human rights and democracy promotion a priority in its foreign policy, the spread of Chinese surveillance technology presents clear challenges to these values, especially when coupled with practices that facilitate authoritarian governance. Third, as Section III of this report discusses in more depth, China uses the export of surveillance and public security technology, and its security assistance more generally, to enhance its presence, its partnerships, and ultimately its global influence – and does so in an increasing number of places that also maintain defense cooperation with the United States, as well as other places where the type of presence China is creating poses concrete risks to American interests.[6] The U.S. will have to think carefully about where and how to engage in the emerging asymmetric technological and security competition that characterizes the contemporary global environment.

China's Concept of Security: Where the Surveillance State Fits

China's surveillance industry emerged from the country's reform and opening period. As Kellee Tsai and Jingyang Huang document, China's initial liberalization provided the conditions under which domestic firms could import and then adapt foreign technology -- particularly in Guangdong, where access to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), global technology, and international production networks combined with an early concentration of security equipment producers.[7] Initially, the drive for social stability led China's public security apparatus to rely on imported foreign technology, a phenomenon that lasted through the 1990s.[8] Local firms, however,

observed the requirements of these customers and began to adapt accordingly, re-engineering desired products for production at a lower cost. Latecomers to the market, especially those based in Zhejiang, around Hangzhou, developed a parallel business strategy as subcontractors for publicly funded digital surveillance projects, which began to emerge in the 2000s and which comprise as much as 60% of the revenue for Chinese surveillance equipment firms.[9] As a result, as of the late 2000s:

> *China had developed a vibrant and segmented security industry: homegrown surveillance giants with the most advanced technology dominated public procurement contracts and export markets, while smaller and medium-size enterprises were creating intrusive monitoring applications.*[10]

China's domestic surveillance system continued to develop throughout this period and in the subsequent two decades. The Ministry of Public Security began building an internet security system and population database in the 2000s; a program called Skynet employed facial-recognition-enabled video surveillance systems to monitor Chinese citizens in urban areas; and the Sharp Eyes program extended that effort to rural areas.[11] State media compared these surveillance systems to thousands of "sleepless police officers," who can remember the faces of passers-by and license plate details.[12] The outbreak of COVID-19 and the enforcement of China's long-lasting Zero-COVID policy then expanded and supercharged this system, forcing data integration and giving the state new justifications for collecting biometric data via "health code apps," data that could be integrated with local grid management, government services, and public security bureaus tasked with enforcing draconian lockdowns.[13] In 2017, BBC reporter John Sudworth tested an early version of system by having his photo taken at a local Public Security Bureau and seeing how long it took the authorities to use the facial recognition and video surveillance systems linked through their photo database and command center to find him and take him into custody. The answer was seven minutes.[14] Perhaps unsurprisingly, but not reassuringly, one of Huawei's marketing campaigns advertised that it left alleged criminals "nowhere to hide."[15]

The rise of China's contemporary surveillance state is deeply tied to Xi Jinping's theory of how to achieve security for China's socialist system and the Chinese Communist Party. This can be found in what China calls the "comprehensive national security concept," a phrase that could also be reasonably translated as "overall state security concept" (using the same terminology that appears in the name of the Ministry of State Security, which handles much of China's non-military intelligence, counterintelligence, and political policing work).[16] Under Xi's concept, originally promulgated in 2014, the foundation of national security work is "political security": protecting China's socialist system, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leadership, and Xi personally.[17] The comprehensive national security concept is exactly that – comprehensive – having expanded from around a dozen components of "national" security in 2014 to nearly twice that today.

Internal regime security achieved through the use of surveillance, law enforcement, and state security police has been a hallmark of Xi Jinping's governance throughout his time in power,[18] and this emphasis continues to the present day. At a Politburo study session on 28 February 2025, for example, Xi Jinping urged cadres to "unswervingly implement the comprehensive national security concept and push construction of a 'Safe China' towards an even higher level."[19] A White Paper on National Security released in May 2025 referred to Xi's comprehensive national security concept as "the first major strategic thought established as the guiding ideology of national security work since the founding of New China."[20] This discourse inextricably links China's approach to security to its successful trajectory of economic growth, calling rapid economic development and long-term social stability the "two great miracles" (*liang da qiji*, 两大奇迹). Xi's emphasis on preventing the emergence of threats to social stability and party control appeared in a 2025 directive to "transform [China's] public security governance model toward one of pre-emptive/advance prevention" (*shiqian yufang*, 事前预防) and strengthen "prevention and control" of societal security.[21]

Technological surveillance plays a key role in this highly preventive concept of social control and regime security.[22] In 2015, the State Council and CCP Central Committee issued a directive ordering the construction of a "multi-dimensional information-based prevention and control system for public-social security," with the purpose of "comprehensively promoting the construction of a peaceful China."[23] Concretely, it called for expansion of networked video surveillance and community grid management, enhancement of predictive and early warning capabilities in public security, and reorganization of

local party and government work to limit "information islands" and more smoothly coordinate information and public security intelligence. Following this directive, provincial and local governments across China invested heavily in both surveillance collection hardware and the back-end platforms necessary to integrate data and conduct predictive analytics.[24]

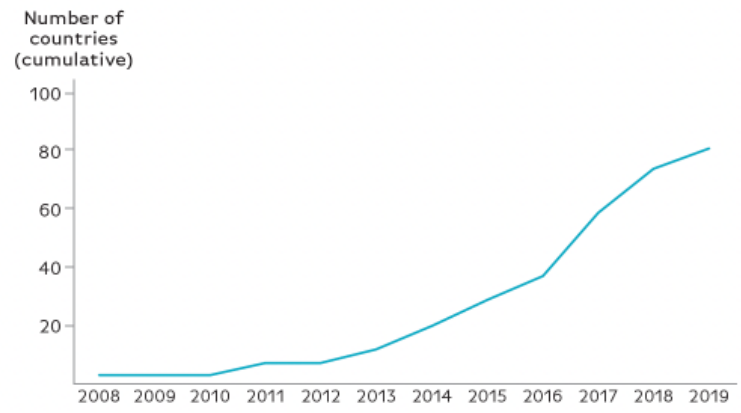
The kind of repression and human rights abuse enabled by this high-tech surveillance state has been most widely covered in Xinjiang, where its use in a campaign of coerced re-education, indoctrination, and preventive repression against China's Uyghur Muslim minority population has been called genocide by both the (first) Trump and the Biden administrations.[25] But similar tools are in use in cities across China,[26] and local authorities are particularly likely to invest in surveillance technology if they have experienced higher rates of collective action (e.g., protest), particularly if that protest is violent.[27] Although survey data from China should be treated with caution, some studies suggest less public resistance to the use of technological surveillance than might be expected: one study found that a clear majority of Chinese citizens support state surveillance, and that support levels correlate with an individual's preference for social stability and their trust in government.[28]

Exporting Surveillance Technology

China began exporting surveillance and policing technology platforms around 2008.[29] In addition to countries like Iran and North Korea, who were some of the earliest adopters of Chinese surveillance technology,[30] the late 2000s saw the beginning of the adoption of Chinese surveillance technology in Latin America. In 2008, a visiting delegation from Ecuador saw how Beijing was using surveillance cameras for security purposes, and began to explore the feasibility of importing a similar system. Eventually, China helped finance a ~$200 million video surveillance and emergency response public safety platform now known as ECU-911, which deployed first in then-President Raphael Correa's hometown of Guayaquil and was provided primarily by China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) and Huawei.[31]

China's export of these platforms steadily increased over the course of the 2010s, with surveillance giants such as Huawei, CEIEC, Dahua, ZTE, and Hikvision as major players. (A number of these companies have been sanctioned by the United States government for various reasons, ranging from nonproliferation to complicity in human rights violations.) Huawei, in particular, became known for its "Safe City Solutions," which center on a data integration platform that collects, integrates, and analyzes data from a wide range of sources, from existing government re-cords to facial-recognition-enabled or license-plate-recognition-enabled cameras. Figure 1, below, shows the growth in adoption of Chinese police surveillance platforms over time:

Figure 1: Number of Countries Adopting Chinese Police Surveillance Platforms[32]



Huawei alone became a major global provider of surveillance and data integration platforms used specifically for policing and domestic security purposes. The company's 2018 annual report, for example, noted that its "safe city solutions now serve over 700 cities across more than 100 countries and regions, including Brazil, Mexico, Serbia, Singapore, Spain, South Africa, and Turkey," around three times the number of countries that it had reported in its 2015 report.[33] Chinese surveillance technology, provided by Huawei and other major Chinese tech companies, was adopted in regions ranging from Venezuela and Ecuador to Zimbabwe and Uganda.[34]

In some recipient countries, the use of Chinese surveillance technology for repression is clear.[35] For example, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2018 about Huawei's involvement in Uganda, where the company is the top supplier of digital technology and helped build eleven monitoring centers for the Ugandan police. It also built a new, six-story, $30 million hub that connects to more than 5,000 cameras equipped with facial-recognition technology. Huawei first supplied surveillance technology to Uganda in 2014, when it gave the government 20 surveillance cameras valued at $750,000. It began to expand its assistance on digital surveillance following

a 2017 order by President Museveni, bringing Ugandan police to China for discussions with the Ministry of Public Security and with Huawei; in May of the next year (2018), Uganda signed a $126 million dollar deal with Huawei, which began with the digital surveillance unit in Kampala but envisioned connecting 83 police stations in the capital and eventually, another 271 police stations across the country. In December 2018, at the request of the Ugandan government, the company's technicians helped the government's cyber-surveillance unit conduct digital surveillance of opposition leader Bobi Wine, obtaining information that was used to disrupt political rallies and ultimately to arrest Wine. In Zambia, Huawei technicians stationed in the country helped security officials who worked in the "Cybercrime Crack Squad" of the Zambia Information & Communications Technology Authority (Zicta), the telecommunications regulator, gain access to the phones and social media accounts of opposition activists and bloggers. Early assessments of the global impact of China's surveillance exports on democracy and human rights suggest that these technologies have negative effects in terms of both digital and offline repression in recipient countries, effects that are particularly concentrated in other autocracies.[36]

How China Promotes Surveillance and Security Abroad

Today, China actively promotes its model of "Safe China" (*Ping'an Zhongguo*, 平安中国), an approach that employs high-tech surveillance and public safety tools for the purposes of law enforcement and social control – not only as an objective to be pursued by the Chinese party-state, but as an example the rest of the world can learn from, including through Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and "community of common destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体, also translated as "community with a shared future for mankind").[37] A White Paper on National Security released by the PRC State Council in May 2025 stated that the White Paper was released, in part, to "share China's experiences and practices."[38] It argued that China injects "certainty and stability into a turbulent world," and asserts that "China is one of the safest countries in the world."

The 2025 White Paper argues that the Global Security Initiative, which Xi Jinping announced in April 2022, "contributes Chinese wisdom" to the world, and is the "global chapter" of the comprehensive national security concept.[39] (The press release announcing release of the White Paper referred to GSI as bringing "a global outlook to the holistic approach to national security."[40]) Although GSI has roots in historic principles of Chinese foreign policy,[41] it is also frequently described by Chinese scholars as the "external presentation" of Xi Jinping's comprehensive national security concept (总体国家安全观, *zongti guojia anquanguan*)[42] – further evidence of the intellectual fusing of the comprehensive national security concept, GSI, and "Safe China" in China's domestic and foreign security concept.

In July 2021, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized diplomatic envoys stationed in China to meet with the Ministry of Public Security to learn about the Chinese party-state's efforts to build a "Peaceful China"; they stated that the event was attended by "153 representatives from 108 embassies and 8 international organizations," including 25 ambassadors.[43] The event "introduced the achievements, experience and directions" of building a Safe China, and presented it as "a vital contribution to global security and stability." It included examples of how the Chinese police had maintained "social order" during the COVID-19 pandemic, a visit to the Chinese Peacekeeping Police Training Center (which trains UN peacekeeping police), and two sub-bureaus of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau. In October 2024, the Ministry of Public Security invited police liaison officers from eight countries to visit Guizhou to "personally experience[e] the achievements of building "Peaceful China" and "Rule of Law in China."[44]

The Ministry of Public Security actively promotes the export of China's police and surveillance technology abroad. One of the forums in which it has done that is the China International Exhibition on Police Equipment (CIEPE), which held its 12th meeting in May 2025 and markets itself as "the only police equipment exhibition hosted by the Ministry of Public Security… the most influential and most authoritative police equipment

exhibition in China and around the Asia-Pacific region," explicitly noting the exhibition's role in "promoting international police exchanges and cooperation."[45] The 2025 exhibition, held over the course of four days in Beijing, boasted the presence of 835 companies from 11 countries; an MPS official stated that the exhibition featured "30 international exhibitors from 11 countries, including the US, Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Finland and Spain."[46] The event showcased "intelligent unmanned equipment" for law enforcement, including police robot-dogs equipped with "intelligent analysis" including facial recognition technology, and "autonomous decision-making capabilities."[47] Other firms advertised "products based on indigenous large-scale AI models to enhance police capabilities" aimed at providing "effective prevention for time-sensitive cases."

The exhibition also marked the debut of the "Police Hongmeng Operating System (PHOS, 警鸿操作系统)," a specialized version of Huawei's HarmonyOS platform intended for use by law enforcement for "public security prevention and control."[48] A police officer with the MPS First Research Institute commented that one of the advantages of the Police-Harmony OS was not just its ability to do real-time data integration across a range of traditional and intelligent police equipment, but that the equipment involved used domestically-produced chips, improving data security and "ensuring the reliability and confidentiality of public security operations."[49]

The other place where China presents its vision of how to coordinate domestic and global dimensions of security is at the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum (Lianyungang), which began in 2015 but re-emerged in a rebranded, upgraded, and expanded form.[50] In China's official GSI concept paper, the key platforms for security outreach and Chinese leadership in global security governance include the Xiangshan Forum (hosted by the Ministry of National Defense); the China-Africa Peace Security Forum, and the GPSCFL, with the GPSCFL now the largest of these gatherings.[51] The Ministry of Public Security claims that GPSCFL's 2024 meeting attracted over two thousand participants, including officials, experts, and scholars from "122 countries, regions, and international organizations."[52]

GPSCFL presents an opportunity for China to market its law enforcement and surveillance technologies to foreign customers. During the 2024 forum, the Ministry of Public Security hosted what it referred to as the inaugural "Public Security Tech Expo," which invited 45 Chinese surveillance, forensics, and law enforcement technology companies to show their wares.[53] (The Lianyungang Forum included tech expos from 2015 to 2018, but these stopped, and then restarted when GPSCFL assumed its rebranded form in 2024.) GPSCFL, like CIEPE, provides an opportunity to encourage law enforcement officials and agencies in other countries to adopt China's security and surveillance technology.

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These events seek to normalize China's development and use of advanced surveillance and security technology in policing, and to build international consensus around China's preferred norms by proposing standards for their development and use. They reflect the underlying alignment between China's concept of regime security, the extension of that concept into China's foreign security policy and PRC efforts to reshape global security governance, and the export of specific tools like surveillance and police technology as a key pillar and tool in that effort.

II. UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S AUTHORITARIAN PROJECTION: OVERSEAS TRAINING AND NORMATIVE PROPAGANDA

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese government have become emboldened in promoting authoritarian governance principles and practices globally.[54] The party-state engages in a concerted effort to disseminate authoritarian ideals via exchanges, trainings, study tours, seminars, educational programs and other related activities that are targeted at the governing elite in other countries.[55] Although the hallmarks of this effort began more than two decades ago, under Xi's leadership Beijing has expanded the number of activities as well as the number of countries targeted, now encompassing much of the Global South.[56] The CCP-government's primary motivation is ensuring regime survival. As scholars Michael Beckley and Hal Brands put it, the CCP possesses "a strong desire to refashion the world order so that the PRC's particular form of government is not just protected but privileged."[57]

Despite growing concern about the PRC's authoritarian projection, the mechanisms of this phenomenon remain under-documented.[58] In order to improve policy and scholarly understanding, therefore, this section details the scope, content, and targeted countries that are part of the PRC's efforts to export authoritarian practices. It focuses, in particular, on a set of activities implemented by the Chinese party-state that target governing elites, including government officials and party leaders from other countries, especially the Global South. Its findings are drawn from primary empirical research as well as observations gathered during a convening of scholars in May 2024 that unpacked various aspects of the CCP government's efforts to spread authoritarian practices around the world.

Several key findings are worth highlighting. First, these activities encompass a range of actors across the Chinese party-state, even local governments, such as the Luban workshop implemented by the municipality of Tianjin.[59] Second, educational institutions play a key role, particularly graduate degree programs at Chinese universities with all-expenses-paid scholarships. Third, pro-authoritarian messaging is embedded in science and technology activities as well as in more standard political rhetoric.

Because the original research for this report relies largely on PRC self-reporting, including news articles and government announcements, there are naturally gaps in the data. (For example, Chinese sources on training do not emphasize the work of the United Front Work Department, which has received attention from policymakers for its alleged attempts to influence politics in other countries, but often uses other methods than the formal programs described here.) Among other issues, the PRC has increasingly sought to conceal related activities, including warning training participants not to share material.[60]

Illustration accompanying a 2013 column in *China Daily* describing connections between Mandela and the African National Congress and the PRC.

Bob Wekesa, *Mandela and the China Connection*, Aug. 2, 2013.

Growth Trajectory and Contemporary Reach

The PRC's activities reach every region of the world and, according to official sources, influence tens of thousands of local elites each year. The PRC initially concentrated on Africa, but has expanded its efforts to other regions of the Global South, particularly Latin America. Beginning in the 2000s, governance became a more prominent theme in the trainings, seminars, and related convenings the PRC offered to Global South countries.[61] The PRC's robust economic growth, confidence resulting from the success of the 2008 Olympics, and Xi Jinping's assertive global posture further fueled this mission.[62] Xi's speech

at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 catalyzed these efforts, with Xi stating that:

> *the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.*[64]

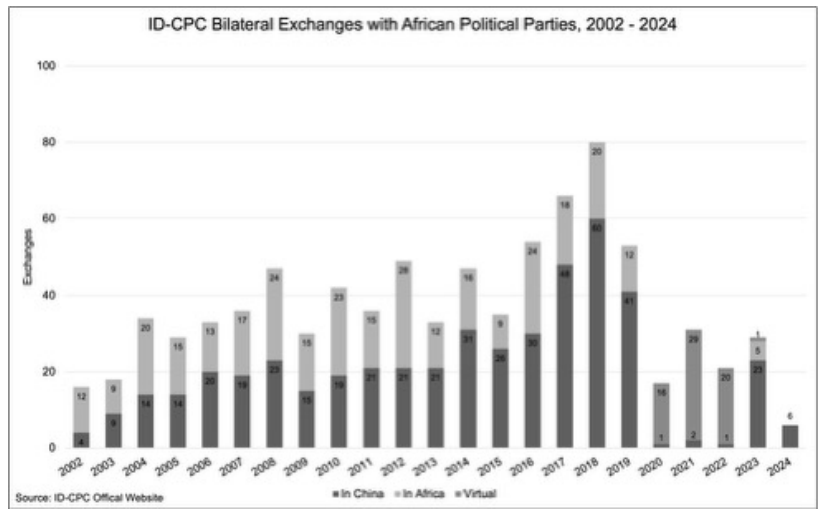
Under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) alone, the PRC claims to have trained "160,000 personnel" from Africa.[63] Table 1, below, captures the growth in both scope and volume of the PRC external training programs:

Table 1: Frequency of and Participation in PRC training programs delivered to the Global South[65]

Period	Annual average number of trainees	Annual average number of programs
1981-2009	4,285	142
2010-2012	24,574	975
2013-2018	40,000	1,400

Joshua Eisenman finds a similar uptick in the CCP International Liaison Department's engagements with foreign counterparts, shown in Figure 2 below.[66] The PRC organized 500 sessions of "special training on governance," and Xi Jinping's book on governance has been widely disseminated as part of this effort to spread PRC governance practices.[67] China openly acknowledges that its foreign aid, including training programs for foreign officials, are "a way to tell China's stories."[68]

Figure 2: ID-CPC Bilateral Exchanges with African Political Parties (2002-2024)[69]



Through the Global Development Initiative (GDI), which is funded at over $10 billion, the PRC has offered 100,000 training opportunities, framing this work in the development adage that "give people fish and you feed them for a day; teach people to fish and you feed them for a lifetime."[70] Some elements of the GDI focus on legitimate and pragmatic development issues, such as agriculture or food safety, while others more explicitly promote lessons from China's governance experience.

Organizations and Missions

A variety of entities within the Chinese party-state undertake relevant activities to propagate authoritarian governing practices, including convening political capacity-building activities that advance authoritarian norms, and providing trainings that transmit the CCP-government's political techniques.[71] The PRC often frames these events and gatherings as "sharing Chinese experience in governing," even though many of the activities contain content intended to enable and convince other countries to mimic China's authoritarian practices.[72]

Because these exchanges and trainings for foreign officials fall within the foreign aid responsibilities of the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), this agency is among the active players.[73] Within MOFCOM, the Academy of International Business Officials (AIBO) coordinates, manages and implements many relevant activities as part of its international cooperation programs in human resources development.[74]

Additionally, the CCP's International Liaison Department (ILD) also plays a key role in convening

exchanges that share authoritarian practices, convening an average of fifty exchanges with political parties around the world annually.[75] The ILD seeks to engage all types of political parties and elites, not just those that are ideologically aligned with China's brand of socialism, as it seeks to win over more supporters for China's vision of governance. Song Tao, former head of the CCP's International Liaison Department, wrote that the party's external work should "promote Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era [and] continuously enhance foreign political parties' understanding and recognition of the CCP's leadership" in order to "gain more supporters and peers for the Party and the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics."[76] Xi Jinping Thought advocates a brand of socialism that underscores the Party's exclusive and paramount political authority.[77] Because of this focus, the contents of some of the CCP ILD's activities are explicitly focused on political control, including the CCP's use of a "grid management system," which is reminiscent of Mao-era surveillance and political control, but fused with sophisticated surveillance and data analytics platforms.[78]

The actors that promote CCP-style governance have proliferated, and the Chinese party-state has several vehicles to use in authoritarian projection. These include government and party entities; educational institutes; and Chinese companies. Not only has China's leadership created new organizations, but other parts of the party-state have initiated relevant work. This effort spans the entire Chinese party-state; most Chinese ministries have an office for "international cooperation and exchange" that is responsible for subcontracting and delivering international exchange and training programs.[79]

For example, China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS), China's national law enforcement agency, conducts trainings and other capacity-building efforts to share its policing tactics with other countries.[80] In this vein, Xi announced that the MPS would train "20,000 law enforcement officers" in developing countries,[81] one of a number of promises made by senior Chinese officials in major international forums. In some cases, the assistance goes beyond training: a draft version of a bilateral agreement between the PRC and the Solomon Islands included Chinese assistance with "maintaining social order" – a PRC euphemism for cracking down on dissent – and the potential for deploying Chinese military or police forces in the Solomons if the government requested it.[82] The MPS has also provided police training in Argentina and Tunisia on "maintaining and securing stability;" in Fiji and Liberia on riot-control tactics; and in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on the use of facial recognition technology to "maintain order."[83] While some of MPS' trainings include legitimate criminal policing functions that would likely occur in a democratic context, others are used to restrict freedom of expression, the right to peaceful protest, and privacy rights. In countries like Fiji, police cooperation agreements with China have sparked domestic political debate, and the implementation of these agreements has varied with specific leaders' perceptions of the relative benefits and risks of Chinese involvement.[84]

Growing Use of Multilateral Convenings

MPS has shifted toward multilateral convenings, such as the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum (Lianyungang), which – as discussed in the previous section – provides an opportunity for Chinese public security officials to propose global norms and standards around international police cooperation and global security governance, as well as to market surveillance technology and other police equipment for export.[85] This global forum occurs in parallel with a robust array of other regional and bilateral police diplomacy that seeks to build patterns of security cooperation based on China's conception of regime and international security.[86]

In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) foreign policy blueprint for the Middle East includes exporting Chinese governance preferences and practices. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the Shanghai Municipal Government, and Shanghai International Studies University, the MFA created the China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development (CARC).[87] CARC sponsors trips that bring Arab officials to the Shanghai region.[88] In southwestern China, the Baise Institute offers courses for political elite from Southeast Asia on party-grassroots building, guiding public opinion, and the CCP's revolutionary legacy.[89] This strategy of convening multilateral events has also been employed by the Cyber Administration of China by hosting a "World Internet Conference" since 2014.[90] The PRC has also hosted the South-South Human Rights Forum to articulate its ideas, such as allowing the state to restrict human rights in certain instances, including for public order,[91] similar to the ideas that now

appear in Xi's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).

Enlisting Educational Institutions

PRC universities, think tanks and other educational institutes also engage in similar activities, in alignment with the CCP's wishes and often with MOFCOM funding. MOFCOM funds a scholarship scheme that targets the political elite from the Global South; some recruiting notices specify "mid-to-senior level government official," even for courses of study that have little to do with governance such as "Software Engineering," "Professional Accounting," and "Nursing."[92] Of the more than 40 scholarship degree programs offered by MOFCOM, nearly half focus on more politically oriented subjects, including governance, policy or law—providing key opportunities to highlight the PRC political system. For example, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) is engaged in a multi-year exchange with South Africa's National School of Governance, and the Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development at Beijing University includes an explicit focus on governance.[93] Similarly, MOFCOM sponsors scholarships for master's degrees in public administration in Chinese governance for developing countries at Sun Yat-sen University and a master's degree program in information and communications engineering at Huazhong University.[94] The benefits and monetary stipend offered to students are generous, with all-expenses paid.

The Chinese Communist Party has also funded schools in other countries and throughout China. In Africa, CCP funding supported the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania, which opened in 2022; the Herbert Chitepo School of Ideology in Harare, Zimbabwe, which opened in 2023; and South Africa's African National Congress and Uganda's National Resistance Movement.[95] In the case of the Nyerere School, the PRC provides instructors to teach alongside the local faculty, offering courses on CCP organizational structure, methods, interaction with state institutions, propaganda systems and other related topics.[96] In 2023, the Institute of China and Contemporary Asia at the Russian Academy of Sciences established the Modern Ideology of China Research Laboratory.[97]

Content and Messaging

The CCP's overseas training programs emphasize several overarching themes. Foremost among them are the central role of the CCP-led governance system in China's economic development; the superiority of the CCP's political and economic model, such as the strengths of single-party rule; the critical importance of the CCP's absolute leadership over all sectors; and the idea that development and prosperity are possible without Western-style democracy.[98] Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, which affirms absolute party leadership and adherence to socialist core values, is a central component of many of these convenings.[99]

Many party-implemented trainings focus on party building and organization, strict party discipline, party cadre training and limiting dissent.[100] For example, a training for party officials from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front included media management, propaganda systems and ideological work.[101] A *China Daily* article entitled "Communist Party of China shares tips with Kenya's Jubilee Party," noted that a provincial party official from Guangxi had emphasized controlling dissent within the ruling party, particularly noting that "lower-level Party organizations submit to higher-level organizations, the minority submits to the majority…"[102]

While some recipient countries may have legitimate governance needs for which the PRC provides assistance, much of this governance training entails explicitly authoritarian content, such as guiding public opinion, internet censorship, managing criticism of the party, and opposition monitoring.

While some recipient countries may have legitimate governance needs for which the PRC provides assistance, much of this governance training entails explicitly authoritarian content, such as guiding public opinion, internet censorship, managing criticism of the party, and opposition monitoring.[103] Even when the main topic of the seminar or training is on development, these activities nearly always include content on "China's leaders' philosophy of governance" and its development and poverty reduction policies, the majority of which discount individual rights.[104]

China emphasizes its ability to achieve security and stability, including sharing aspects of its digital authoritarianism system, such as use of big data and

artificial intelligence to enable mass surveillance and more efficiently implement state control without regard for individual privacy. Several exchanges paired governance and CCP ideology seminars and lectures with visits to PRC technology companies, which further provided opportunities for tech companies to demonstrate and pitch their digital authoritarian tools to officials from other countries.[105] For example, Venezuelan delegations to the PRC learned how Beijing employs software to track Chinese citizens, and PRC company ZTE assisted Venezuela with an ID card system that monitors citizen behavior and stores personal information such as political party membership, voting history, and income.[106] Similarly, as noted in the previous section, Huawei has sold technology that could be used for political monitoring and repression to Zambia and Uganda, and its technicians subsequently assisted government agencies in actions that targeted political opponents.[107] Some legitimate governance challenges, such as the Westgate Mall Massacre in Kenya, provide China with opportunities to present its system and technology as an aid to public safety and civilian security.[108] Early studies of the effects of these technologies, however, as noted above, suggest that they suppress civil society activity and pro-democracy mobilization, while contributing to increased digital repression.[109]

Embedded Authoritarian Content

In addition to activities with an explicit governance focus, pro-authoritarian content is also often embedded in the numerous tours for foreigners and technically oriented exchanges that aim to shape global opinion about China. Even if the trip or activity does not specifically pertain to governance, content on the PRC's political system and the one-party state is often still included. Thus, even in technical trainings that might appear to be politically neutral, such as those covering science, manufacturing, or agriculture, authoritarian content can still be embedded, for example if the PRC's mastery of skills and technology is attributed to CCP leadership. The Luban Workshop, a PRC-funded vocational skills training program that includes such topics as manufacturing, technology, and artificial intelligence, may offer another forum in which to showcase the putative merits of CCP-style one-party rule.[110]

Modalities and Geographic Reach

The countries China engages as part of this effort are diverse, ranging from closed autocracies with records of severe human rights abuse, such as Cuba, Nicaragua and Syria, to fragile democracies with a tradition of single-party rule such as Ethiopia.[111] For example, the PRC National Academy of the Interior on China and the Cuban Higher School of State and Government Cadres of Cuba held an online November 2022 session on "Xi Jinping thought on socialism with Chinese particularities for a new era."[112] Democracies are also not immune to China's propaganda; for example, South Africa and Namibia have received CCP overtures,[113] and Chinese surveillance technology is exported to democracies and autocracies alike.[114]

The Chinese government directs these projects by setting regional quotas. For example, Niva Yau reports that government officials from Latin America were allotted 1,000 spaces between 2014-2019, and 2,000 spaces were designated for "foreign government officials" at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from 2015-2017.[115] Similarly, through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China claims to have trained an estimated 50,000 emerging elites in civilian and military affairs.[116] In order to identify participants, the Chinese embassy in the target country receives instructions several months prior with recruitment information and selection criteria for participants, with a focus on those in a position to influence their country's governance practices.[117] In general, participants are "strategically selected" with a focus on those that might "play relevant roles in the future."[118] In some instances, it can be difficult to meet the PRC government quotas. For example, in the case of South Africa, there have been a number of repeat participants because of the difficulty of attracting new ones.[119]

Convenings Hosted in China

The Chinese party-state has pursued this agenda both by having its personnel travel to other countries and by hosting events that bring participants to China. Recently, Beijing has increasingly favored convenings in China, where participants are able to hear lectures and talks from a variety of PRC interlocutors at think tanks, universities, government entities and party institutions, as well as make site visits.[120]

State-hosted trips to China appear to be more effective than the previous approach of sending trainers to other countries. Visits to China give the PRC an opportunity to show off its modern skylines and attribute its economic development to the party's leadership and ideology. For example, the CARC program brings delegations of Arab officials to the Shanghai region, with a focus on highlighting "China's path to modernization… as well as policies on China's ethnic and religious practices." Despite the PRC's campaign of repression against ethnic Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China's west, delegates from a 2023 trip came away from a visit to the Xiaotaoyuan Mosque in Shanghai saying, "It was inspiring to witness the peaceful coexistence of different religions in the city and learn about China's policies on nationalities and religions."[121] Another participant on a different trip stated, "It was impressive by comparison to our countries. [The PRC] sold us their development model implicitly through the wonderful things they showed us…"[122] Similarly, a South Sudanese politician who witnessed China's impressive skylines during a 2016 delegation stated, "It was magnificent… I've never seen anything like it."[123] In these instances, even if governance is not offered as a stand-alone focus of a convening, it can be woven into training visits through these kinds of "cultural" experiences or the way that instructors frame the value of even the more technically oriented trainings.

Hosting these visits appears to bear some fruit – for example, in using these visits and activities to promote and legitimate the PRC's conceptions of and policies on terrorism. One participant in a study tour to Xinjiang came away saying, "the checkpoints are packed with soldiers everywhere around Ürümqi, but I understand the Chinese, they had to do it because of terrorist threats... I think the Uyghurs got what they deserved."[124] The PRC's 2015 Counterterrorism Law refers to terrorism as "propositions and actions that create social panic, endanger public safety, violate person and property, or coerce national organs or international organizations, through methods such as violence, destruction, intimidation, so as to achieve their political, ideological, or other objectives."[125] This broad language can be applied to label peaceful political dissent as acts of terrorism.[126] Indeed, much of China's counterterrorism cooperation in the Middle East is focused not on achieving regional stability, as American counterterrorism cooperation in the region does, but on gaining Middle Eastern governments' cooperation in transnational repression aimed at China's Uyghur population and their potential foreign connections, to ensure that these individuals do not become a threat to China's regime security.[127]

Impact, Uptake, and Reception

In some countries, especially those with similar political legacies to China's, pro-authoritarian messaging from the CCP likely falls on fertile soil. For example, in Zambia, Angola, and Mozambique, these ideas appear to resonate with political elites.[128] While some scholars argue there is little evidence that the PRC has succeeded in changing governance practices or winning new converts to authoritarian rule, there are multiple reasons why the PRC's authoritarian propaganda should not be discounted. Firstly, China is adept at refining its initiatives and tailoring content, making the PRC increasingly effective at delivering and communicating pro-authoritarian messages.[129] Secondly, limited preexisting understanding of China and lack of alternative news sources create a knowledge vacuum, allowing Chinese messages about the CCP's success to be received favorably. For example, in Latin America and Africa there are no news outlets with correspondents based in China.[130]

Thus, some participants find the CCP's model attractive. Andrzej Szejna, Vice President of Poland's New Left Party, fawned:

> *"I'm very deeply under the impression and impressed by your achievements, by your social policies, by your economic development… The policies, especially social policies in China, the social policies of the Communist Party are a kind of proposal for Europe or Poland, and you are very efficient. We see that what we could bring Poland is your experience in the economy, in fighting against poverty… And that is why I think the philosophy that you are declaring and presenting is a great philosophy and you have a great role to play."*[131]

In a similar vein, the first lady of Nigeria expressed a similar desire to emulate PRC practices, stating that "if China can control over 1.3 billion people on social media, I see no reason why Nigeria cannot attempt controlling only 180 million people."[133] In August 2017, following a roundtable with the Cyberspace Administration of China, Tanzanian deputy minister for transport and communications endorsed China's web censorship, noting that "Our Chinese friends have managed to block [social] media in their country and replaced them with their homegrown sites… We aren't there yet…"[134]

China's authoritarian projection through the activities described above are a crucial part of its approach to ideological security, geopolitical competition, and power projection. PRC leaders have declared their intent in "laying a foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position." One of Beijing's means to achieve this is by propagating norms and values consistent with China's governing system as it seeks to normalize and support authoritarian rule.[132] As the PRC promotes its authoritarian governance practices and uptake of related technologies, it has demonstrated creativity and refinement, deploying a variety of vehicles to promote features of autocratic governance to other countries.

III. CHINA'S AUTHORITARIAN PROMOTION IN AN ERA OF INTEREST-BASED FOREIGN POLICY

Thus far, this report has described China's export of the "tools of authoritarianism"[135]: technologies and governance practices that enable social and political control and the protection of a particular regime's hold on power. While these tools tend to facilitate the spread of authoritarian, one-party governance, China's motives may reside more in realpolitik than revolutionary zeal. Unlike the Soviet Union, China does not seek to impose "a single model on countries in the style of Soviet tanks rolling into eastern Europe."[136] And alongside ideological gains, China's provision of security assistance and surveillance tools carries various concrete benefits as well. These range from influence and partnerships with local elites, to profits and preferential access for Chinese companies, to presence and situational awareness in strategic locations around the world.

Which raises the question: should the United States regard China's authoritarian exports as one side of a global, ideological competition between "authoritarianism" and "democracy," or as shrewd realpolitik aimed at advancing the PRC's geopolitical and material interests? Like a hologram, the answer likely depends on the angle from which one sees the problem. For some, moves that tend to spread authoritarian models of governance cannot but be aimed at doing so, and must be answered in the same vein: by actively encouraging other countries to adopt democratic governance, the rule of law, and pluralism.

The trend in U.S. foreign policy, however, is otherwise, both in its avowed aims and the tools available to influence events abroad. In Riyadh in May, President Trump decisively broke with the Wilsonian tendency in post-Cold-War foreign policy, denouncing "Western interventionists" and "people in beautiful planes giving you lectures on how to live and how to govern your own affairs."[137] He specifically praised the Gulf monarchies for effecting "unbelievably remarkable" economic transformations of their societies. Most pronounced was the President's praise for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his cultural, economic, and technological transformation of Saudi society. President Trump's praise for the Crown Prince contrasted starkly with President Biden's short-lived vow to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" that would "pay a price" for human-rights issues, which elevated objections to Saudi Arabia's internal governance over that country's geostrategic importance to the United States.

President Trump also castigated the approaches that previous post-Cold War administrations have deployed to exert influence within foreign societies to mold them in a more liberal-democratic vein. His critique took aim at "liberal nonprofits" and "nation-builders" who "wrecked far more nations than they built." And while he vowed to use the U.S. military to "defend the United States or help defend our allies," he criticized his predecessors for being "afflicted with the notion that it's our job to look into the souls of foreign leaders and use US policy to dispense justice for their sins."

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The Trump Administration has implemented the President's views by ending or downsizing much of the U.S. government's institutional infrastructure for influencing foreign governance and the internal character of foreign societies. Agencies affected include the Department of State (particularly the functional bureaus), the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Voice of America and other international broadcasting organizations, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the government-funded International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute.

Instead, the Trump Administration has promised an approach to foreign assistance based principally on mutually beneficial investments, rather than grants pegged to governance reforms. A recent internal memorandum published by *Politico* noted that "supporting American companies to trade and invest in high-growth markets" benefits the U.S. economy and can "serve as a strategic counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative."[138] In this vision, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), rather than USAID or the National

Endowment for Democracy, will lead U.S. engagement with emerging economies.

China's Authoritarian Exports and U.S. National Interests

China's authoritarian exports have typically been discussed in terms of their effects on human rights in the affected countries. Those effects can certainly be stark. As described above, Chinese technologies do not merely facilitate surveillance, censorship, or one-party rule. Instead, these exports are often accompanied by training that encourages ruling parties and government officials to prioritize those goals, thereby eroding institutional and regulatory safeguards that can curtail abuses of surveillance technology.[139]

Yet framing Chinese tech exports and overseas training principally in terms of human rights or "democratic backsliding" underplays those activities' significant harms to concrete U.S. interests. PRC technology exports and institutional training offer the PRC access, influence, and scale that advantage China in its global competition with the United States.

Most concretely, embedding PRC technology in countries' governmental and private ICT (information and communications technology) systems creates the possibility of backdoor access by PRC intelligence services. This is far from hypothetical: intelligence services have long sought to arrange and exploit such dependencies. In one celebrated operation, the CIA and Germany's *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND) clandestinely operated Crypto AG, a Swiss provider of equipment used by many governments to encrypt diplomatic communications.[140] The CIA and BND thus gained backdoor access to those governments' diplomatic communications for decades.

China is certainly well-schooled in such operations. For instance, China funded and built a new headquarters building for the African Union in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. In 2018, however, French newspaper *Le Monde* revealed that China's "gift to its African friends" was in fact a Trojan Horse: each night, between midnight and 2 a.m., the AU's data was being mysteriously copied to servers in Shanghai.[141] Security officers also found microphones embedded in walls and under desks.

In effect, as China becomes a major software, cloud-computing, and hardware provider, it could gain backdoor access not merely to the African Union, but to governments across the globe. Insights and potentially compromising secrets from that backdoor collection can then be leveraged to persuade, pressure, or blackmail local officials to support PRC priorities. These could include preferential access to minerals, basing rights, support in international institutions, or relations with Taiwan. At a minimum, backdoor collection can provide valuable insights for Chinese intelligence services and diplomats. And more subtly, even the knowledge that China *might* have such access can shape local officials' behavior in ways that are potentially deferential to Beijing.

China's assistance with maintaining political and social control also accrues influence with regimes bent on retaining power. In weakly institutionalized systems, the police and security agencies with whom China is building relationships through training and diplomatic engagement are often key actors in the coalitions needed by rulers to stay in power – and staying in power is what guarantees continued access to wealth, patronage, and even the physical safety of one's family and followers. China's efforts are therefore likely to generate influence among leaders who depend for political and even physical survival on systems provided and maintained by the PRC (e.g., systems for surveilling communications and public spaces, monitoring and censoring social media, or responding to public protest).

In a global competition for influence, PRC gains resulting from backdoor access to data or influence as a guarantor of regime stability are likely to come at the expense of the United States. PRC gains in the so-called "Global South" erode concrete U.S. interests in various ways. One is strategic geography, as recent disputes over PRC commercial inroads in the Panama Canal illustrate. The Trump Administration's successful campaign to exclude Chinese operators from administering the canal has closed that chapter, but the canal is far from the only region where Chinese encroachments threaten U.S. defense and economic interests. For example, China is known to be seeking a naval base in West Africa, "allowing it to access the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean for the first time."[142] Influence or leverage over personalist authoritarian regimes in the region could be the key to gaining this long-sought base, which would be a significant expansion of China's global power projection and deeply unsettling to the United States.[143]

China and the United States are also in direct competition for mineral resources, particularly metals that are critical for next-generation energy technologies. Many of those mineral deposits are found in weakly

institutionalized countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Years of U.S. neglect enabled Chinese companies to dominate supply chains for important minerals, even buying strategically important mineral rights from American companies in "arguably the most significant commercial misstep the United States has made in Africa."[144] Today, the competition is fully joined, and Chinese sanctions on U.S. access to key parts of the rare-earth supply chain leave no doubt that it is zero-sum.[145] Technology, training, and the influence and backdoor collection opportunities these tools provide offer the PRC additional levers that Beijing can exploit to compete with the United States for access to mineral rights and other commercial opportunities in the Global South.

Finally, Chinese technology exports convey a benefit that may be even more consequential in the longer term: global scale for PRC tech companies. The history of the internet thus far has been the story of U.S. firms achieving global scale, with the United States gaining the influence and economic rents that accrue to a dominant position in key technologies. That may be changing. Huawei's networking equipment and the TikTok video-sharing app have proven that Chinese technologies can achieve global scale. And the next generation of technologies may prove even more consequential.

Huawei's cloud offerings, for instance, are highly competitive with U.S. hyperscalers[146] in the Global South. Serving as the preferred cloud provider for African governments and businesses not only provides opportunities for backdoor collection, it also naturally inclines those users toward Chinese providers at other layers of the technology stack: most significantly, AI. That provides China with another vector for influence, via the outputs of CCP-approved AI models.[147] It also gives Chinese model developers access to linguistically and geographically diverse datasets they can use to improve their models. Gaining a leading position as AI provider to the Global South will, in turn, bolster China's efforts to promulgate standards favorable to its model of governance and technology development.[148]

The upshot is that China's export of the tools of authoritarianism affects U.S. interests beyond human rights and other abstract values. The uniquely sensitive access that such influence entails can be leveraged into economic and political inroads in strategically relevant countries across the Global South. In the context of a great power competition, many of those gains will harm concrete national interests of the United States.

Responses in an Era of Interest-Based Foreign Policy

These problems are not entirely new. American policymakers have acted to address some of the harms from the spread of Chinese technology, at least among U.S. allies and partners in the industrialized world. For example, the first Trump Administration successfully persuaded other members of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom – to exclude Huawei equipment from their 5G networks, amid fears that the gear would provide China with a backdoor into those networks for intelligence collection and offensive cyber operations.[149]

The United States has been slower to respond to China's export of the institutional practices and techniques that operate alongside surveillance technology exports. The question, in an era of interest-based dealmaking and reduced focus on the internal character of foreign governments, is how the United States should respond to China's efforts to spread its approach to the use of surveillance technology for political and social control.

This project began with the hypothesis that the United States could offer its own model of conducting law-enforcement and intelligence surveillance under law as a counterpoint to China's approach. Since the late 1960s, the United States has developed a detailed, mature legal and institutional architecture for electronic surveillance. Statutes and court-issued rules regulate real-time interception, access to data stored by telecom and internet companies, and even hacking operations targeting criminal suspects.[150] A separate legal regime, and even a separate court system, governs surveillance collect intelligence on foreign spies and terrorists.[151] Overseas surveillance is governed by executive orders that impose various protections for privacy and civil liberties.[152] Detailed procedures govern how data, once

collected, can be used, stored, and shared.[153]

The U.S. government's use of these powers is overseen within the Executive Branch by inspectors general, agency compliance offices, and the independent Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board.[154] In Congress, the Intelligence and Judiciary Committees provide a powerful external constraint. Sunset provisions require Congress to regularly reconsider whether certain powers should continue.[155] The United States also provides considerable transparency about intelligence programs. Each year, the Intelligence Community publishes a detailed "statistical transparency report."[156] Public laws, regulations, executive orders, agency documents, and declassified court opinions offer visibility into the rules that govern intelligence collection.

To be sure, the American experience with surveillance and civil liberties is far from unblemished. At times, agencies have misused these powers for inappropriate ends, and the separation of intelligence powers from politics remains a live and volatile political issue. Yet the United States' openness about the challenges of exercising and constraining security powers arguably makes the American experience more intriguing and informative.

The question is whether, in an era of interest-based dealmaking, there remains room for the United States to propagate an alternative to the Chinese approach of technologically supported authoritarianism.

For many current and potential U.S. partners, the answer will simply be no. The President has made clear that U.S. foreign policy will pursue deals that yield concrete benefits to the United States, and will no longer "lecture" countries on how to govern their people. Countries such as the Gulf monarchies, with which the Trump Administration has already concluded deals around technology and investment, likely have little interest in being instructed in U.S. legal or institutional models. The Administration's landmark deal with the United Arab Emirates, discussed further below, suggests that inducements such as access to export-controlled U.S.-designed chips, which are needed for AI model training and inference, may prove a sufficient incentive for many countries to forgo the Chinese tech stack and any institutional influence that accompanies it.

In other circumstances, however, there may be a need for some discussion of institutional and legal safeguards, even under an investment-first approach. Countering the appeal of the broader CCP technology stack will require providing a viable, U.S.-backed alternative. Building out datacenter capacity and cloud offerings, for example, will mean enlisting U.S. hyperscalers and enterprise software companies. Given those companies' public commitments to transparency, privacy, and civil liberties,[157] they may be reluctant to provide powerful capabilities to foreign governments absent some credible legal and institutional constraints on those governments' use of the data.

Governments also have a legitimate need for public-safety technologies. If the United States seeks to divert other countries from Chinese offerings, there will have to be viable U.S.-aligned alternatives. Congress and the companies themselves, however, will likely be uncomfortable with such exports absent reasonable assurances that the technology will not be misused for repression.[158]

In these circumstances, adoption of (1) some high-level rule-of-law commitments, coupled with (2) modest U.S. engagement on developing legal and institutional mechanisms for lawful access to private data, could provide a mutually palatable solution.

For the first, the OECD's December 2022 "Declaration on Government Access to Personal Data Held by Private Sector Entities" supplies a ready-made, ecumenical formula for basic rule-of-law commitments regarding governmental access to private data. The Declaration identifies seven principles for "government access to personal data" embodied in members' existing laws and practices. The principles are: a legal basis for government collection of personal data; legitimate aims; prior, documented approval by an impartial authority; rules and internal controls for how data is handled after being collected; transparency; effective and impartial oversight; and effective redress for violations of the rules.

For the second, legal and institutional guidance could be offered in a spirit of technical capacity-building, rather than framed principally as a human-rights constraint or crusade. U.S. intelligence is, by many accounts, the world's most formidable, particularly in technical domains like signals intelligence. The U.S. legal architecture offers well-structured, proven processes for agencies to deploy electronic surveillance against crime and national-security threats. With the demise of many of the State Department's functional bureaus, this engagement could be coordinated directly by U.S. missions abroad, which are most attuned to local

conditions. They could draw on expertise from visiting judges,[159] prosecutors, and technical specialists from the FBI and other agencies.

Plainly, specific elements of the U.S. institutional approach will not translate into every overseas context. The OECD Declaration anticipates this, however, recognizing that countries' institutions need not be "identical to one another," even if founded on similar principles.

Nor should we assume that constraints on intelligence and security agencies will always be resisted by governments that do not already have them. External oversight, judicial review, internal compliance, technical safeguards, and transparency help keep secret power centers within their appropriate ambit. That proposition could appeal not only to human-rights advocates, but also to other centers of power within weakly institutionalized states—including leaders themselves, who often fear the capabilities and knowledge of their own secret services. Some foreign leaders and political parties may be happy to be "forced" to impose accountability measures and legal constraints on their own coercive apparatus.

Finally, even in countries with weak institutions, journalists, opposition parties, the legal community, religious organizations, and other civil society groups can still exert meaningful influence over the government's choices. Even where a leader may find it advantageous to bolster regime security by adopting Chinese technologies and models of institutional control, the United States can generate headwinds for that choice by highlighting the downsides of the Chinese model and the advantages of a rule-of-law approach.

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The PRC Institutional Model and the Chinese Tech Stack

In an era of investment-led foreign assistance and interest-based foreign policy, the most plausible way to persuade countries to decline China's authoritarian exports is for U.S.-aligned technology offerings to be more attractive than China's. Countries who opt to participate in the U.S. and allied tech stack will have ample incentive to decline incompatible offerings from China.

Persuading countries in the Global South to do so is a formidable challenge, as other studies have noted,[160] and is largely beyond the scope of this report. For present purposes, it suffices to note that China's Digital Silk Road is predicated on combining attractive technological offerings with subsidized financing.[161] In certain areas—most notably, networking equipment,[162] but also policing gadgets like networked surveillance cameras—Chinese offerings offer a combination of low cost, attractive financing, and functionality that is extremely attractive to low- and middle-income countries.[163]

At other layers of the tech stack, however, the field is still open. And recent evidence shows that the United States and its broader network of allies and partners can prevail when they bring the right capabilities and incentives to the table. Most importantly, the United States and its partners have significant advantages in AI chips and infrastructure. The Trump Administration's deal with the United Arab Emirates, for example, would more closely bind the UAE to the U.S.-aligned tech stack, with commitments that preclude equally deep technological engagement with China. In exchange for expanded access to Nvidia chips, which will power a massive AI campus in Abu Dhabi, the UAE will "recalibrate[e] tech strategy to align with U.S. standards and protocols where it matters most: compute, cloud, and chip supply chains."[164]

In parts of the Global South that lack the UAE's capital and native AI champions, however, preempting China will be more difficult. Africa has been relatively slow to adopt cloud computing, with many countries reluctant to store their citizens' data in overseas datacenters. Local hosting, meanwhile, can be uneconomical or insecure in small economies with unreliable electric generation.

China has stepped into the breach. In recent years, Huawei has built datacenters in Egypt and South Africa to serve African customers. Huawei's cloud buildout provides several benefits for China's diplomacy and tech ecosystem. Data stored in the Huawei cloud could be accessed by China's intelligence and security apparatus under the PRC's 2017 National Intelligence Law.[165] Chinese companies or government actors may also be able to use the data for training AI models, enabling more accurate predictions across economic, linguistic, and cultural contexts very different from China's own.

Finally, a cloud hosting provider is the gatekeeper for *which* AI models the user can apply to the hosted data. Amazon Web Services, for example, enables its customers to work with their data using numerous foundation models, ranging from Meta's LLaMA to China's DeepSeek.[166] Huawei Cloud similarly claims to "support … all major open-source foundation models."[167] It is plausible, however, that the Huawei Cloud would favor DeepSeek and other Chinese models, enabling Chinese models to gain market share over American and other competitors.

An investment-first approach to foreign assistance aligns well with this challenge, which is essentially a race to build subsidized datacenters and other supporting infrastructure (e.g., fiber-optic capacity) in the Global South. There are already encouraging signs. In December, for instance, the Development Finance Corporation invested $90 million in Cassava Technologies, an African provider of datacenters and other digital infrastructure.[168] The DFC's messaging around the Cassava investment makes clear that it is a direct response to China's "investment in Africa's digital landscape," which the DFC notes "often embed[] opaque financing terms and technology that raise cybersecurity and data sovereignty concerns."[169]

The Trump Administration's UAE deal, which binds the Emirates more closely to the U.S. tech ecosystem, offers another promising angle for inroads in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. Led by national champions like AI firm G42 and datacenter firm Khazna,[170] the UAE has both the capital and the corporate know-how to expand datacenters in strategic locations in the Global South. In 2024, G42 and Microsoft announced that they would collaborate to build a massive 100 MW datacenter in Kenya, to be powered entirely by geothermal energy.[171] The new datacenter will be part of Microsoft's forthcoming "East Africa cloud region."

Bringing American hyperscalers and their unmatched expertise and capacity to this effort will be critical. To encourage private investment in U.S.-aligned datacenter capacity in the Global South, the DFC could consider subsidizing credits for low-income countries to use on U.S. cloud providers. Private entities, such as the Gates Foundation, might do the same to encourage countries to use U.S. cloud services for health programs or other digital public infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

China's Surveillance Technology Exports (Part I)

1. Regularly and systematically collect data on China's law enforcement training and technology exports worldwide, and develop standards to assess whether, to what extent, and how Chinese security presence and provision of surveillance/security technology poses risks to American military forces (if applicable) or other strategic interests.

2. Assess whether countries are receptive to Chinese surveillance technology for the purposes of hardening autocratic rule, or whether there is a genuine and legitimate governance/public safety interest that the United States (or an ally/partner) could act as a substitute supplier for.

3. Provide transparent evidence on the non-effectiveness of China's surveillance technologies for crime control and its downsides for civil society, and provide attractive American or U.S.-aligned alternatives where possible (see Part III below).

4. For countries that might be receptive to American or US-aligned alternatives, identify whether American allies/partners may be better placed to lead on police and civilian security cooperation and assistance programs (for example, Australia in the Pacific Islands, or Japan in Southeast Asia), and formulate plans for an effective division of labor.

5. Develop an interagency process for strategic assessment of American security cooperation that integrates the above assessment process with security cooperation efforts carried out by various actors across the U.S. government (including in particular the security cooperation activities carried out by the Department of Defense and Department of State under Title 10 and Title 22 authorities).

Understanding China's Authoritarian Projection: Training and Normative Propaganda with Other States (Part II)

1. Develop in-country China expertise in the Global South. Universities in the United States could create fellowships for China scholars to teach at universities in the Global South, and could sponsor journalists and students from the Global South to study China at American universities.

2. Highlight cases where PRC surveillance technology fails to deliver promised public-safety benefits. For example, despite Kenya's purchase of Chinese "safe cities" technology, crime has not decreased in targeted areas.[172]

3. Highlight the risks and downsides of PRC surveillance technologies and China's institutional training among receptive audiences within Global South states. Making civil society, opposition parties, religious groups, and journalists in the Global South aware of China's efforts to spread its model and its technology can galvanize civil society oversight and local resistance.[173]

China's Authoritarian Promotion in an Era of Interest-Based Foreign Policy (Part III)

1. Leverage U.S. development finance to enlist U.S. hyperscalers and partners like the UAE in building out datacenter capacity and enabling uptake of U.S.-aligned AI models in regions of the Global South that implicate important defense or geoeconomic interests of the United States.

2. Consider providing governments in the Global South with subsidized credits and other incentives to develop digital public infrastructure using American or U.S.-aligned cloud providers.

3. Where appropriate, encourage countries working with U.S. hyperscalers and AI companies to subscribe to the OECD Declaration on Government Access to Personal Data Held by Private Sector Entities.

4. Working through U.S. embassies, provide willing partners with capacity-building assistance on developing accountable, functional processes for government access to data for law enforcement and security purposes.

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and its use in China, see Chen, Huirong and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Information Capacity and Social Order: The Local Politics of Information Integration in China," *Governance* 35/2(2022):497–523; Beibei Tang, "Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-class Neighbourhoods," *The China Quarterly* 241 (2020): 43–61.

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100 Nantulya, “Are China’s Norm Diffusion Efforts in Africa Winning Converts, and If so Why?”

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102 Edith Mutethya, “Communist Party of China shares tips with Kenya’s Jubilee Party,” *China Daily*, July 15, 2018.

103 Dearing Scott, “Does China’s Involvement in African Elections and Politics Hurt Democracy?,” Democracy in Africa, September 27, 2021, https://democracyinafrica.org/does-chinas-involvement-in-african-elections-and-politics-hurt-democracy/, accessed July 24, 2024.

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123 Ang, “The Real China Model.”

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133 Asterius Banzi, "Tanzania Seeks Chinese Help in Social Media," The East African, July 28, 2020, https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/tanzania-seeks-chinese-help-in-social-media--1370738. Following the conclusion of a 3-year program to train Algerian civil servants and officials in which the PRC underscored "the perfect connection" between the Chinese government and the CCP, the Algerian Interior Minister Noureddine Bedoui hailed the program, stating that "The training provided to our civil servants and officials has been excellent, as we have learnt a lot from the Chinese experience and know-how in this field. Xinhua, "Algeria, China Hail Fruitful Cooperation in Governance Capacity Building," Xinhua Wang, December 5, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2018-12/05/c_137651070.htm.

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national-security/ (prohibiting the U.S. government from acquiring intrusion software that has been used for human-rights abuses abroad, subject to narrow exceptions).

159 *Cf.* Fed. Judicial Ctr., *International Activities at the FJC*, https://www.fjc.gov/content/international-activities-fjc.

160 *E.g.,* Vivek Chilukuri and Ruby Scanlon, *Countering the Digital Silk Road: Indonesia*, Center for a New American Security (Mar. 2025), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-the-digital-silk-road-indonesia.

161 *See, e.g., id.* at 5-6 ("To seal the contract for [one major] project, the China Development Bank (CDB) offered a nearly $4 billion, low-interest loan over a 40-year term with no sovereign debt guarantee. The CDB also devised a special financing vehicle to evade Indonesia's public debt ceiling….").

162 *See Iain Morris, Huawei defies US to grow market share as RAN decline ends*, Light Reading, Feb. 18, 2025, https://www.lightreading.com/5g/huawei-defies-us-to-grow-market-share-as-ran-decline-ends-omdia ("Huawei remained the world's biggest vendor of radio access network (RAN) products," with 31.3% market-share); Erin Baggott Carter & Brett Carter, *Exporting the Tools of Dictatorship: The Politics of China's Technology Transfers, Perspectives on Politics* (Jan. 2025), at 5 ("Huawei's telecommunications equipment, in particular, is generally high quality and as much as 30% cheaper than competitors, due in part to financial subsidies from the Chinese government and preferential loan terms from the Exim Bank." (citations omitted)).

163 *Id.* at 7 (noting that Huawei has 70% market share for telecoms equipment in Africa); Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dealing with Global Demand for China's Surveillance Exports* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2020), www.brookings.edu/articles/dealing-with-demand-for-chinas-global-surveillance-exports/.

164 Federico Maccioni, Manya Saini & Yousef Saba, *UAE to build biggest AI campus outside US in Trump deal, bypassing past China worries*, Reuters (May 15, 2025), https://www.reuters.com/world/china/uae-set-deepen-ai-links-with-united-states-after-past-curbs-over-china-2025-05-15/ (quoting Mohamed Soliman, Senior Fellow, Middle East Institute).

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166 *See* Amazon Web Services, Amazon Bedrock, https://aws.amazon.com/bedrock/.

167 Huawei Cloud, *AI Cloud Service*, https://www.huaweicloud.com/intl/en-us/product/modelarts/ascendaicloud.html.

168 *Cassava Technologies Secures $90 Million Equity Investment,* CIO Africa (Jan. 7, 2025), https://cioafrica.co/cassava-technologies-secures-90-million-equity-investment/.

169 U.S. Int'l Development Finance Corp., *Strengthening strategic competition through investments in Africa's digital economy* (2025), https://www.dfc.gov/investment-story/strengthening-strategic-competition-through-investments-africas-digital-economy.

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172 Jili, "China in Africa." On the (non)effects of Huawei's Safe City projects on crime in Kenya, and cross-nationally; *see also* Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "The Global Impact of Chinese Surveillance Technology: Issues for U.S. Policy," Wilson Center (April 2020), pp. 135-37; Goldring and Greitens, "Exporting the Tools of Authoritarian Social Control."

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