

CHINA IN THE ERA OF 'XI JINPING THOUGHT': FIVE KEY TRENDS FOR AFRICA

COBUS VAN STADEN¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy briefing identifies five trends that could affect Africa, emerging from China's 19th Communist Party Congress, held in Beijing in October 2017. The congress saw the institutionalisation of several of President Xi Jinping's key initiatives, which will determine Chinese policy over the next few years. While widely discussed in the Global North, the direct implications for Africa have received little attention. Xi is the general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and is seen as a more hard-line and hands-on leader than his predecessors. The congress entrenched this power by enshrining 'Xi Jinping Thought' in the CPC constitution. This means he is now seen as a political leader on par with Mao Zedong, a figure fundamentally shaping the core philosophy of the 89 million-member party. His views on China's development trajectory and growing global role will have an impact on both domestic and foreign policy. Drawing on Xi's writings, this policy briefing identifies five key trends for African governments and populations: the strengthening of CPC rule in both China's internal and external behaviour, the full institutionalisation of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's support for UN reform, the expansion of China's military role on the global stage, and stricter Internet governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** African universities and think tanks need to develop greater capacity to keep track of changes in China, building on links with Chinese institutions.
- 2** Governments should draw on these skill sets and integrate this specialist knowledge of China into national and regional development and security policy frameworks.
- 3** African universities and think tanks should remain in close conversation with African governments to advise them of new developments in the Belt and Road Initiative, and their possible impacts on African development.
- 4** African civil society should demand the most suitable Internet regime for their countries, taking into account that certain governments are drawing on China's campaign for Internet control to advance illiberal regimes.

INTRODUCTION: WHY SHOULD AFRICA TAKE NOTE OF THE 19TH PARTY CONGRESS?

When Xi stepped onto the stage of the Great Hall of the People in October 2017, he was not only the focus of the 2 300 black-suited party delegates. The world was waiting for clues about how he would use the power he had consolidated through his first term, and how this would shape China's global role.

These questions particularly concern Africa. The projected Sino-African trade for 2017 is \$180 billion² (down from the 2014 peak of \$210 billion) and China has been Africa's largest trading partner since 2009. China's African investments passed the \$100 billion milestone in 2016, a 50-fold increase since 2010. Yet few analyses of the congress's implications for China–Africa relations have emerged.

This policy briefing uses Xi's statements at the congress and his earlier writings to pinpoint five trends in China's policy towards the Global South and Africa specifically. Here a caveat is important: the language used at the congress is coded and vague. The dearth of specific policy pronouncements forces reading between the lines. Secondly, there is a tendency to read these indicators as Xi's personal directives. However, as Jeffrey A Bader³ has pointed out, many have been a part of CPC thinking for a long time. What changes is their prioritisation and mode of implementation. Xi's vision as a leader emerges less from a set of personally issued diktats and more from how he interprets and curates existing party doctrine.

THE CENTRALITY OF CPC RULE

Xi's writings reveal a long-standing dedication to strengthening the CPC as the overarching governing mechanism for China, from the local to the international level. While the party has of course been central to Chinese governance since the ascendancy of Mao Zedong in 1949, the 19th Party Congress showcased Xi's reassertion of party power at all levels of government.

China's relationship with African countries is dominated by bilateral ties. However, African governments should recognise that there is no clear distinction between the Chinese state and the CPC. Xi Jinping Thought's key themes of 'The Chinese Dream' and 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' are fundamentally rooted in the centrality of the party in all aspects of Chinese decision-making: 'The leadership of the CPC is essential

to socialism with Chinese characteristics. The People's Republic of China is prosperous and strong. It would not exist without the CPC.'⁴

China focuses significant funds on African capacity building, training thousands of African officials, journalists, and students per year. In 2016 China increased the number of training scholarships to junior African politicians to 1 000 per year, from the 200 per year allocated from 2011 to 2015. More anglophone African students are studying in China than in the UK and US combined. The total number of African students in China increased 26-fold, from just under 2 000 in 2003 to 50 000 in 2015.⁵ African governments should take into account that this capacity building is framed by CPC doctrine, especially since the publication of CPC Document No. 9 in 2013, which called for the elimination of a range of so-called Western ideas (for example, constitutional democracy, neoliberalism, civil society promotion) from Chinese institutions.

This does not mean that African students (or their Chinese instructors) are being 'brainwashed'. Rather, all knowledge is ideologically inflected, and African governments pursuing skills training should take into account the complexities of the Chinese academic environment.

BELT AND ROAD

The 19th Party Congress reaffirmed that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) lies at the heart of Xi's foreign policy. The BRI is an integrated infrastructure and development scheme made up of the Silk Road Economic Belt, linking China with Europe overland through central Asia, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a series of sea routes connecting China to Kenya and Egypt, on the way to Europe. Not only did the congress restate Beijing's dedication to the trillion-dollar scheme, but it was also the occasion for the scheme's inclusion into the CPC constitution.⁶ This means that Africa is now explicitly part of a key mechanism of Beijing's development and foreign policy.

The BRI should thus also be a key factor in the continent's thinking about China. While it is officially limited to two African countries, it opens up development and financing opportunities for wider parts of Eastern and Northern Africa, and possibly further afield, owing to Chinese-funded cross-border infrastructure. The political will behind the scheme also means projects face fewer hurdles to financing approval, despite Beijing's attempts to stem capital outflow.⁷

However, the BRI could also increase debt burdens and derail local development agendas. Kenya's recently inaugurated Nairobi–Mombasa railway line (a BRI-related project) was enabled by a loan equivalent to 6% of the country's gross domestic product. The repayment burden could affect the government's future development agenda and result in humiliating trade-offs, as was recently seen when the Sri Lankan government granted a 99-year lease to offset its debts with Beijing.

The October congress provided a clear signal that the BRI would remain central to China's dealings with Africa. While it commits China to openness and global integration in an era when many other global powers are pulling up the drawbridge, its vision is of a Beijing-centric global trade and investment order. African governments interested in partnering with China, whose enthusiasm is tied to Beijing's being an alternative to Western dependency, will have to consider the BRI's implications.

AFRICA-CENTRED UN REFORM

The CPC Congress is not the occasion for specific policy discussion. Most pronouncements are broad, and in coded language. So a reader of Xi's speech will be struck by his sudden shift into specificity regarding the UN: 'China supports the United Nations in playing an active role in international affairs, and supports the efforts of other developing countries to increase their representation and strengthen their voice in international affairs.'⁸

This stance is not new. In a 2005 position paper the Chinese government opposed calls for the UN Security Council's inclusion of countries such as Japan and Germany, and instead called for the body to include more developing countries.⁹ China has acknowledged that its own UN membership was aided by African support, and it has been a vocal advocate of higher-level African representation.¹⁰ The congress suggests that African campaigns for greater representation can probably count on Chinese support.

GLOBAL MILITARY ROLE

While China's official annual military spending (\$144 billion in 2016) still trails that of the US (\$600 billion), the military budget was increased by 8.1% in 2018.¹¹ The congress followed an anti-graft crackdown on military figures and a restructuring of the force, widely seen as consolidating Xi's control. Calling the congress 'a new historical starting point', he committed to further

expanding China's military: '[W]e must ... build a powerful and modernized army, navy, air force, rocket force, and strategic support force, develop strong and efficient joint operations commanding institutions for theater commands, and create a modern combat system with distinctive Chinese characteristics.'¹²

China's ambition to expand its military capability directly affects Africa. Its first overseas military base was operationalised in Djibouti, on the east African coast, in 2017. Chinese troops have also joined multilateral peacekeeping operations in Liberia, Mali and South Sudan, as well as anti-piracy initiatives off the Somali coast. Africa provides strategic positioning on the Indian Ocean rim, and crucial in-theatre training for Chinese military personnel.

In his speech, Xi made the importance of this kind of experience clear: 'A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on.'¹³

While Africa has certainly gained from these initiatives, an expanded military role for China should lead Africa to grapple with the implications of the continued militarisation of the superpower presence on the continent, and how China's stated adherence to non-intervention and African sovereignty should be interpreted.

INTERNET GOVERNANCE

Xi's first term saw greater pressure on the media, academia and the Internet. In 2017 the US-based Freedom House labelled China's Internet as the least free in the world.¹⁴ A new Cyber Security Law compels media companies to store user data and to police content. China is campaigning for even greater control of the Internet by national governments on the grounds of 'Internet sovereignty'. Instead of seeing the Internet as a transnational space, this approach views it as a series of national spaces subject to government control. In his congress speech, Xi called for increased party control over the Internet: 'We will provide more and better online content and put in place a system for integrated Internet management to ensure a clean cyberspace.'¹⁵

Western authorities have accused China of exporting authoritarian rule.¹⁶ However, media scholars such as Iginio Gagliardone have shown that there is little evidence that China puts pressure on African governments to

adopt its regime of Internet censorship and surveillance.¹⁷ Rather, African leaders tend to see its control of the Internet as a prototype that can be implemented locally. Ten African countries (Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, The Gambia, Mali, Uganda and Zimbabwe) closed down Internet services completely, or blocked instant messaging or social media sites, in 2016 alone.¹⁸

It is important for African civil society to interrogate the impact of elite relations between African and Chinese officials on African Internet governance. It is important for African populations to keep an eye on African official decision-making about Internet access, and to track the implications of the Internet sovereignty debate for African Internet access.

CONCLUSION

Africa's relationship with China will be shaped by the dominant discourses in Beijing. It is crucial for Africa to build capacity, both in government and in civil society, to track these developments. Knowledge about the inner workings of the CPC will crucially aid Africa in formulating a comprehensive and unified approach in order to maximise its relationship with this emerging superpower.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cobus van Staden is a Senior Researcher: China–Africa at SAIIA.
- 2 Chinese Embassy in South Africa, 'Sino-African cooperation makes steady progress', 17 November 2017, <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.za/eng/znjl/t1514248.htm>, accessed 12 March 2018.
- 3 Bader JA, 'How Xi Jinping Sees the World ... And Why', Brookings, Asia Working Group Paper, 2, February 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/xi_jinping_worldview_bader-1.pdf, accessed 8 December 2017.
- 4 Xi JP, 'CPC leadership is essential to Chinese socialism', in *The Governance of China II*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017a, p. 18.
- 5 Sun Y, 'Political party training: China's ideological push in Africa?', *Africa in Focus*, Brookings Blog, 7 May 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2016/07/05/political-party-training-chinas-ideological-push-in-africa/>, accessed 9 December 2017.
- 6 *Xinhua*, "'Belt and Road" incorporated into CPC Constitution', 24 October 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702025.htm, accessed 12 March 2018.

- 7 Wu K & S Chatterjee, 'Exclusive: China's Belt and Road acquisitions surge despite outbound capital crackdown', Reuters, 16 August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-m-a-exclusive-chinas-belt-and-road-acquisitions-surge-despite-outbound-capital-crackdown-idUSKCN1AW00K>, accessed 12 March 2018.
- 8 Xi JP, 'Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China October 18, 2017', *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017b, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf, accessed 9 December 2017.
- 9 *Xinhua*, 'Position paper clarifies China's stance on UN Security Council reform', 9 June 2005, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/131439.htm>, accessed 10 December 2017.
- 10 FOCAC (Forum on China–Africa Cooperation), 'China calls for more representation of African countries in UN Security Council', 24 February 2016, <http://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx/dfzc/t1342707.htm>, accessed 10 December 2017.
- 11 Lim YL, 'NPC 2018: China raises military budget by 8.1% in face of "profound changes" to national security environment', *The Straits Times*, 5 March 2018, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-raises-2018-defence-spending-by-81-per-cent>, accessed 12 March 2018.
- 12 Xi JP, 2017b, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 14 Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report 2018*, 'China: Profile', <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/china>, accessed 9 February 2018.
- 15 Xi JP, 2017b, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- 16 See, for example, Congressional Executive Commission on China, 'The Long Arm of China: Exporting Authoritarianism with Chinese Characteristics', 13 December 2017, <https://www.cecc.gov/events/hearings/the-long-arm-of-china-exporting-authoritarianism-with-chinese-characteristics>, accessed 9 February 2018.
- 17 Gagliardone I, 'China and the African Internet: Perspectives from Kenya and Ethiopia', *Index Comunicación*, 3, 2, 2013, pp. 67–82.
- 18 Turianski Y, 'Balancing Cyber Security and Internet Freedom in Africa', SAIIA Occasional Paper, 275, 2018, <http://www.saiia.org.za/occasional-papers/1292-balancing-cyber-security-and-internet-freedom-in-africa/file>, accessed 9 February 2018.

The African Governance and Diplomacy Programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency