

From Cobalt to Cars: How China Exploits Child and Forced Labor in the Congo

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A year ago, I was invited to talk to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on Chinese on a similar topic. My presentation then characterized our relationship with China and Russia in Africa as adversarial, tantamount to war.

Moreover, I argued it was a war we were losing. Had in fact been losing for many years.

US policy toward Africa, through administrations of both parties, has been characterized above all by neglect.

We have taken interest in Africa episodically, usually prompted by a crisis of some sort, and that interest usually wanes quickly and moves on.

The result is that we left Africa for others, especially China and Russia.

They have expanded their economic and political influence on the continent for decades at our expense.

Moreover, it would have been a struggle regardless. They had advantages that we lacked.

China and Africa were on the right side of Africa's liberation struggles and though that was two generations ago it still matters to Africans. It will always matter.

Also, their governments subsidize and support their commercial ventures in a way that we do not.

And they don't play fair: they abet corruption, and they ignore violations of civil and political and human rights.

As many others have argued, the world is at an infection point, riven by rivalry and by violence.

China and Russia pose a systemic threat. They are allied against us and they mean to change the world order that we helped build.

Africa is one of the key battlegrounds in this conflict.

To win in Africa there are several things that we should and must do. To start with we need to acknowledge that it is a conflict.

It is no longer acceptable to say that Chinese investment is simply filling in where the West was too timid or too biased to venture.

The old adage of one man one vote one time also applies to China in Africa: one investment, one country, for all time.

The Chinese mean to freeze us out African resources as best they can and they have spent hundreds of billions of dollars in this effort.

And Africa's resources are essential to next generation economic growth, especially copper, rare earths, and cobalt.

The Belt and Road Initiative, at least in Africa, is a transparent effort to gain the upper hand and assert dominion in Africa.

There are few African countries that have not taken money and that are not in China's orbit.

Russia's role is smaller but no less malign. Whether or not Wagner still exists is beside the point. Russian mercenaries, and Russian arms merchants are ubiquitous in Africa.

Nor should it be acceptable to be on our opponent's payrolls. Neither China nor Russia has real private companies. Working for a Chinese or a Russian company means working for their governments.

We are not immune in the U.S. from the "Schroederization" of our elites.

Many American businessmen, consultants, retired government officials and the like have taken Chinese and Russian money and have aided their efforts.

We also need to change the way our government and businesses work together abroad, especially in Africa.

We are a private sector economy and are stronger for it. But in many places in Africa the investment risk is high enough that government support needs to be overt to convince American companies to invest.

The argument that we can't pick winners among American companies should no longer be an excuse for inaction. Supporting American companies should be one of, if not the principal, task of American foreign policy.

The Development Finance Corporation is a good start to making that support more tangible, but it needs to be more active, to have fewer constraints on what it can support, and above all it needs to have more money.

Its job should be to expand the reach and the influence of the American Government by expanding the reach and influence of American commerce. It should not make the perfect the enemy of the good.

The U.S. Government itself should be cautious about imposing its views on Africans. Supporting democracy and human rights have to be at the center of U.S. foreign policy but not at the expense of friendships.

Because friendship is the key to winning in Africa and everywhere else. Less finger wagging and more listening. More recognition of the way the world is and less dreaming of the way we want it to be.

The U.S. is and always has been a better friend and a better ally than our rivals.

At the end of the day, this is how we win.

When an Indian company, for instance, has its mine expropriated in Africa our response should not be to ignore the situation or to blame the victim. It should be to help the company of a friendly country.

And when African countries find themselves in trouble, deep in debt, often as not the result of the corruption of previous regimes, we need to be more active in helping.

Chinese debt is still rising in Africa, even if investment itself is tailing off. The problem now and for decades to come is the vast sums owed and the interest rates that cause those sums to compound and continue rising with no real prospect that the debts can ever be repaid.

And China doesn't forgive.

The IMF is a useful institution but using it to help countries meet their debt payments to China seems counterproductive.

Wouldn't it be better to help African countries organize to negotiate as a group to press China for better terms, including especially the forgiveness of some loans, at least of those that can demonstrably be shown to be odious and the consequence of corruption?

The Global South, including especially Africa, is rising in importance, its clout growing in a polarized world.

A New York Times headline the other day said it all – by 2050 one in four people will be Africans.

And their economies are also among the fastest growing.

Africa's friendship matters.

PEPFAR was a great initiative twenty years ago; it saved millions of African lives.

However, Africans tend to take it for granted now and are more impressed by China's infrastructure projects, how ever poorly built and misconceived.

We can do better.

My favorite proverb, Chinese ironically but taught to me by Africans, says that the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago; the second-best time is today.

Today is a good time to start fighting for Africa.