



Universiteit Leiden

*Stories from the periphery:
African political perspectives on Africa-China relations*

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Abstract

Burgeoning Africa-China relations have sparked considerable debate over the past two decades. Many Western academics, politicians, and journalists now see growing Africa-China relations as a form of Chinese neo-colonialism in Africa that is challenging Western efforts to help the continent develop. It is in this atmosphere of competition that the perspectives of Africans themselves have often been overlooked. This research paper attempts to shed light on these perspectives by analysing how elite political discourse in South Africa, Zambia and Angola perceives growing Africa-China relations, and how this discourse differs from common themes found in Western discourse. The paper combines a macro critical political discourse analysis of elite political discourse with a qualitative comparative analysis of these three case studies, within the timeframe January 2018 – January 2020. The research paper reveals that African political discourse often differs from, and indeed challenges, common themes found in Western discourse. In doing so, this research also contests the ‘universality’ of Western perceptions of both Africa and Africa-China relations. And finally, this research problematises the portrayal of non-Western actors in mainstream IR and highlights the need to listen to these voices from the periphery.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected every corner of the globe, has also highlighted the unequal nature of the international system. Regions of the global South have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Africa's need for international support has resulted in an escalation in the battle of narratives between the US and China, with each one presenting itself as the ideal partner for Africa. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has argued that *'China will exploit the pandemic as a pretext to continue its opaque lending practices that have led nations to debt and disappointment all throughout Africa'* (Olander, 2020). China has fired back, claiming that the US's argument is *'neither moral nor responsible'* and that *'attempts to use the pandemic to drive a wedge between China and Africa are bound to fail'* (Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe, 2020). This conflict is yet another chapter in the tensions between the two superpowers, tensions which have been greatly fuelled by China's rising involvement in Africa.

This growing involvement spans the areas of trade and investment, humanitarian support, development aid, and military cooperation. In 2018, Africa-China trade was valued at \$185 billion, growing from approximately \$50 billion in 2006. In addition, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa rose from \$75 million in 2003 to \$5.5 billion in 2018, with US FDI to Africa decreasing since 2010 (China-Africa Research Initiative, 2020). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has spread across the continent, with 39 African countries signed on to the initiative. Beijing has established bilateral diplomatic relations with 53 of the continent's 54 countries under its 'One China Policy', with the Kingdom of eSwatini the only country that still recognises Taiwan as a sovereign state. Links between the continent and China has also been strengthened through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which gathers representatives from China and these 53 countries every three years. Although cooperation occurs largely on the bilateral level, China is also increasing its cooperation with African countries in multilateral fora such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU).

Since the early 2000s, many in the West have observed Chinese involvement in Africa with growing concern. Scholars, politicians and journalists have perceived relations as a threat not only to Africa's dreams of development, but also to the very foundations of the Western-led liberal international order, which promotes the values of democracy, human rights, and 'good' governance (Brautigam, 2009). The Economist (2008) published an issue titled 'China: The

New Colonialists’, accompanied by an image of several Chinese travelling across the desert on camels and brandishing the Chinese flag. Such discourse portrays China as a ferocious dragon invading Africa, plundering the continent’s natural resources and practising exploitation reminiscent of colonial times (Benabdallah, 2015). By focusing on China’s rise and its implications for the Western liberal order, this Western discourse ignores one critical aspect of Chinese involvement on the continent: the perceptions of Africans themselves.

The analysis of African perspectives on growing Africa-China relations will be the subject of this research paper. It is vital to study these perspectives for several reasons. Firstly, international relations (IR) scholarship continues to prioritise the perspectives of scholars from the West, specifically from the US and Europe. The West still sees itself as the legitimate centre of knowledge production, and the growth of IR has legitimised the diffusion of Western norms and values (Jones, 2006). Furthermore, mainstream IR privileges the historical and cultural experiences of the Western world, with the rest of the world seen as a barely comprehensible ‘other’. Africa is often portrayed as a conglomeration of failed states brimming with conflict, corruption and poverty, whose only hope of redemption is Western civilisation. The continent is seen as an object of study, rather than as an actor capable of engineering its own development (Smith, 2012). By analysing African perspectives, this research paper is attempting to decentre this IR scholarship, which involves *‘interrogating, disturbing, engaging, reframing, challenging, mocking, or even undoing mainstream, privileged ways of viewing the world’* (Nayak & Selbin, 2010: 8).

Western-centric IR also permeates the study of Africa-China relations, where accounts are often analysed through the lens of authoritarian China’s rapid rise, and how this rise challenges the promotion of Western liberal values in Africa. China is seen as acting upon Africa, with the continent falling victim to a new coloniser. By assuming that Africa is a passive actor, we disregard the perspectives of Africans, and forget to ask why many countries on the continent are choosing to build relations with China. This research paper will refer to relations as ‘Africa-China’ relations, rather than the more common ‘China-Africa’ relations, in an attempt to change this conversation (Gadzala, 2015). In listening to the voices of Africa, Western research also needs to move beyond generalised accounts of the ‘African perspective’ and appreciate the diverse histories and cultures of each country. No two countries are the same, and thus their relations with China will not be the same (Sautman & Hairong, 2009).

The research question of this paper is: *What are the perspectives of African political discourse on Africa-China relations, and how do these perspectives differ from common themes found in Western discourse?* This research paper will begin with a literature review of the common themes found in Western discourse and will then introduce the chosen methodology of macro critical political discourse analysis. This methodology will be used in conjunction with a qualitative comparative analysis of elite political discourse in three case studies from Sub-Saharan Africa; South Africa, Zambia and Angola, within the timeframe of January 2018 to January 2020. The analysis will first involve highlighting the main themes in political discourse and will subsequently examine how these themes relate to common themes found in Western discourse. Academics such as Benabdallah (2015) and Gadzala (2015) have called for more case studies on African perspectives in Africa-China relations. This research will thus be contributing to a small but growing body of work that is seeking to move towards a deeper understanding of how individual African countries are building relations with China.

The results of this research have revealed that perspectives of these case studies differ from, and indeed challenge, many assumptions held in the Western world. African political discourse largely views Chinese involvement on the continent as positive, offering an opportunity to diversify and decrease dependency on Western powers while also allowing African governments to exercise their agency in shaping relationships in their own interests and under their own aegis. And as with any sovereign entity, the desire is to establish multilateral relationships rather than being presented with a binary choice of China or the West.

Literature Review

The 'battle for Africa' narrative

The 'China threat' theory is a growing body of academic literature that critically explores how many scholars, politicians, and media outlets based in the West have perceived China's global rise. The Western-led liberal order, which is seen to promote the norms of democracy, human rights, and 'good' governance, is being threatened by an increasingly powerful China, an authoritarian regime that seems to show little regard for these Western norms. Authors such as Hirono & Suzuki (2014) and Zeleza (2008) have conducted important research into understanding how the West sees itself in the world in relation to China's rise and have exposed misunderstandings and prejudices that many in the West have vis-à-vis the Asian giant. The body of Western literature that the 'China Threat' Theory critically analyses is vast and beyond the scope of this literature review. Therefore, I have chosen to analyse a sub-section of this Western literature that deals specifically with China's involvement in Africa, and how this involvement is perceived by those in the West. This narrative will be referred to as 'The battle for Africa' narrative.

The overarching theme of this narrative is the portrayal of the African continent as a battleground for the zero-sum conflict between the West and China. The narrative is premised upon a series of perceived contrasts between the West and China. The West, China and Africa all play a certain role in this conflict, and these roles will be elaborated upon in this literature review. This narrative permeates a wide range of Western academic, political and media discourse, its widespread nature testament to how important it is (Benabdallah, 2015). While this literature review will focus on the academic strand of discourse in order to narrow the focus, the themes that will be discussed are also echoed in political and media discourse. The following sections will highlight how the core propositions of the 'battle for Africa' narrative have helped shape the discourse on Africa-China relations, and thus how they have influenced how those in the West make normative and moral judgements on China's increasing presence on the continent.

Role of the West

The West is morally good and beneficial to Africans

Although the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative focuses disproportionately on the threatening rise of China in Africa, it is important to understand what role the West indirectly gives itself in this narrative. The lack of critical reflection in the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative is symptomatic of the broader issue of Western exceptionalism, where the West often sees itself as fundamentally good and thus beyond reproach. In the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse, the West sees itself as the status quo presence in Africa that has tirelessly supported African states on their paths to development since the period of decolonisation. The recent histories of colonialism are often not addressed, and instead the West sees itself as the long-time guardian of Africa. There is an overarching sense of superiority and of moral obligation; helping Africa is not seen as a choice, but rather a duty that the West must carry out (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014). It is therefore up to Africa to learn from the West and emulate the Western-promoted development model. The West shouldn’t have to compete with China in Africa since the West is the morally superior actor (Zezeza, 2008). The West uses this moral high ground to look down on China, who is seen as a newcomer to the continent that has ruthlessly exploited Africans to feed its own rapid economic growth and to ultimately overthrow the West’s liberal international order (Piccone, 2018). Discourse thus uses the malevolence of Chinese involvement to emphasise the legitimacy of the Western-led order (Mearsheimer, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018).

The West is the guardian of ‘universal’ liberal values in Africa

Once the West has established itself and its values as the status quo force in the world, everything that is alternative to this is a threat (Taylor, 2009). The Western-backed aid architecture upholds the values of human rights, democracy, and ‘good’ governance as universal and thus universally applicable. Although the notion of ‘good’ governance may have different meanings in different parts of the world, proponents of the ‘battle for Africa’ equate democracy with goodness and expect all countries to replicate the Western framework of democratic governance (Poluha & Rosendahl, 2012). Moreover, the perception of human rights as a hierarchy of rights, where individual civil and political rights are placed above collective social and economic rights, has been enthusiastically promoted in Africa by Western powers (Simpson, 2013; Terrata, 2013). China, in contrast, is seen to be imposing its own authoritarian worldview onto Africa (Chen, 2016). Western-banked entities such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) have criticised China for reversing years of conditionality-based aid and development packages and for recklessly supporting corrupt

regimes on the continent (Piccone, 2018). China's increasing footprint on the continent fits into the broader threat China poses to the West's once unchallenged presence on the continent. Therefore, by portraying itself as the 'universal' voice of reason in Africa, China is cast as a non-status-quo power that poses a huge threat to Africa (Chen, 2019).

Role of China in Africa

China's global rise is threatening the peaceful status quo

China has experienced extraordinary economic growth over the past several decades, with Beijing advertising this ascension as a 'peaceful rise', based on the principles of 'win-win cooperation' and 'equal partnership' (Brautigam, 2009). However, the 'battle for Africa' narrative equates this rise as something the West needs to be incredibly aware and indeed wary of. The common use of phrases such as 'China's global rise', the 'rise of Communist China', or indeed the 'Yellow Peril' further reinforce this sense of 'other' and highlights the perception of Chinese foreign policy as threatening (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014). This sense of threat is further heightened by the portrayal of China as a unified actor with the force of over one billion people behind it. Mearsheimer (2019) has contended that US policy has been foolish in attempting to integrate China into the Western-dominated world economy, but that it was not too late to act and slow the rise of China. Other scholars point to the idea that the more China rises, the less peaceful this rise will become, and that the fate of everyone depends on whether the US and China can prevent large-scale war (Allison, 2017; Art, 2010). Thus, the West, and more specifically the US, needs to protect the West's democratic and capitalist institutions so that the Western-dominated world order is too difficult for China to overturn. For Ikenberry (2008), this strategy should be predicated on the motto '*The road to the East runs through the West*'.

China is undermining 'good' governance and human rights

After the 'battle for Africa' literature has addressed the rise of China, it addresses how Beijing's foreign policy interacts with the global status quo. The manner in which China sees the world is portrayed as directly opposed to that of Western liberal ideals (Ikenberry, 2008). Looking specifically at Chinese involvement in Africa, innumerable criticisms have been levelled at China for their policy of non-intervention, which is seen as a threat of the West's decade-long struggle to instil 'good' governance practices in Africa. They are also criticised for turning a blind eye to human rights abuses committed by countries they are supporting, with their actions in Darfur often used as an example (Piccone, 2018; Chen, 2019). Human rights are thus consistently discussed in relation to Chinese foreign policy and this feeds into the anxiety of

China's global ascendancy (Rogers, 2007). For Piccone, China's engagement with the UN's human rights system is only exploiting *'the vacuum of leadership posed by an increasingly wobbly West'* (2018: 21). Moreover, Chen portrays Chinese involvement as Xi Jinping's pursuit of his *'own illiberal agenda'* (2019: 1179). China is therefore doing all it can to overturn the world order the West worked so hard to build, leading some scholars to use the term 'neo colonial' (Olander, 2018).

China is a neo colonial power in Africa

The contemporary *'scramble for Africa'* reminds many Western scholars of colonial times. Thus, the term 'neo colonial' is increasingly used in reference to China's presence on the continent, with African populations trapped underneath a new wave of colonial oppression (Taylor, 2009). Commonly employed phrases such as 'win-win cooperation' and 'south-south development', as well as references to a shared colonial past, are seen as a thin veil to disguise China's colonial-like interests and its thirst for Africa's natural resources (Chen, 2016). The narrative of 'debt-trap diplomacy' encapsulates this sense of Chinese neo-colonialism. This narrative posits that China is using its generous no-strings-attached loans and financial support to trap developing countries into a cycle of dependency on Beijing. China is also using its growing economy to woo African elites and gain their support in multilateral fora such as the UN and the AU. The unequal balance of power between China and African countries, as well as large trade imbalances that exist in these relationships, are used to further boost this argument (Brautigam, 2019).

Role of Africa

Africans are victims of China's global rise

The 'battle for Africa' narrative portrays the continent as the battlefield for this great power struggle between the West and China, and largely overlooks the role of Africans. This seems surprising at first, but when we look at the Western-centric nature of IR and the positionality of its academics, this omission is less surprising (Smith, 2012). By depriving them of their agency, the 'battle for Africa' narrative portrays African states as pawns in the increasingly tense battle between the West and China. This scholarly discourse has created a binary debate that leaves little room for context or nuance, or indeed for the perspectives of Africans themselves (Olander, 2018; Taylor, 2009). African leaders are seen as puppets of China's rise that are too distracted by generous Chinese loans and brand-new infrastructure projects to really see China's true intentions. China, in turn, is allowing these unscrupulous leaders to develop

lax attitudes to human rights and democratic governance, thus leading the continent down the wrong development path (Olander, 2018) Leaders are thus treated like children who need to be educated by their Western parents so to understand what is actually in their best interests (Gadzala, 2015).

Africa is one underdeveloped system

As the Chinese presence in Africa is growing, Beijing is portrayed as a unified evil actor, taking advantage of vulnerable Africans. Similar to portraying China as a unified actor, the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative depicts Africa as one single underdeveloped continent. This oversimplification of the continent is reminiscent of colonial times, where Africans are still seen as subjects of rule (Benabdallah, 2015). The different socio-political realities of African states, their varying stages of development, as well as their different relationships with China are not taken into consideration, therefore leaving no room for a more nuanced understanding of Africa-China relations. This issue is further exacerbated by the relative lack of case-studies that analyse how different African states engage with China (Gadzala, 2015). Therefore, the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative still asserts that Africa will only reach a state of development if it follows the one-size-fits-all guidance of the West (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014).

Africa has a choice to make between East and West

Within this battle reminiscent of Cold War dynamics, Africa must also pick a side. Discourse on China’s relations with other world powers, especially with the US, is increasingly portrayed in a competitive and combative manner (Mearsheimer, 2019; Allison, 2017). China and the West are competing for resources and allies on the African continent, and thus African leaders will need to select a global power to ally itself with. African countries such as Zimbabwe and Sudan have adopted ‘Look East’ policies, seeing China as a more favourable source of investment and trade outside of the West’s sphere of influence (Brautigam, 2009). In his recent Africa trip, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned African leaders ‘*against authoritarian regimes that offer empty promises*’, a warning that establishes Africa as a backdrop for escalating US- China tensions (Kato, 2020). The ‘battle for Africa’ discourse therefore places African ruling elites in the position of having to choose their preferred hegemon, and to suffer the consequences if this hegemon is not a Western power (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014).

Conclusion

These key propositions encapsulate the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative surrounding China’s growing footprint in Africa. While considerable research has been conducted on this issue, few scholars have analysed what this ‘battle for Africa’ literature actually says about the West, and even fewer have questioned the assumption that Western norms and values are applicable to African realities (Large, 2008). However, there is a small but growing body of literature that analyses Chinese involvement in Africa from African perspectives. Scholars such as Gadzala (2015) and Sautman & Hairong (2009) have collated academic articles and surveys from across the continent that deal with different aspects of Chinese engagement and that prioritise African perspectives. In addition, a growing number of African scholars, such as Matambo (2020), Corkin (2011) and Kiala (2010), are working to better understand the complex nature of China’s relations with African countries. However, no work thus far has employed a macro CPDA approach to analyse the political discourse of African countries in their relations with China, and to analyse how this discourse fits within the broader context of Africa’s position in the Western-centric global system. This research paper is thus an attempt to add an important angle to the growing literature that analyses Africa-China relations from the perspectives of Africans, and to draw attention to the broader need for the inclusion of more non-Western voices in mainstream IR.

Methodology

The importance of discourse in Africa-China relations

This research will adopt Fairclough's definition of discourse '*as ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs.*' (Fairclough, 2003: 176). The discursive process is both constitutive and constituted by our social realities, and therefore shapes our perceptions of how the world is and how it should be. Looking specifically at Africa-China relations, the 'battle for Africa' discourse has solidified the moral superiority of the Western-led liberal order and has framed the rise of China as a threat to this status quo. The power of this discourse is important as it influences the way various parts of Western society make normative and moral judgements about Africa-China relations and how policy makers formulate policy. It is therefore important to critically analyse the 'battle for Africa' discourse and compare it to discourse emanating from Africa, especially if this discourse describes a reality which is not supported by the views of local actors.

Macro Critical-Political Discourse Analysis

My analysis of discourse in Africa-China relations will be conducted through the lens of macro critical political discourse analysis, henceforth referred to as macro CPDA. This approach involves identifying the major topics, or 'macro propositions' in discourse (van Dijk, 1997). Van Dijk (1997: 11) defines CPDA as an analysis of '*the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, including the various forms of resistance [...] against such forms of discursive dominance*'. Although the notion of 'political discourse' could be broadened to include diverse areas of society, I will narrow my definition of political discourse as '*the text and talk of professional politicians or political institutions*' (Van Dijk, 1997: 12). I will use speeches of high government officials, government press releases and policy papers, foreign policy papers, and opposition party discourse that discuss relations with China in order to gain a balanced overview of the main discursive themes. The following tools of CPDA, collated from the work of van Dijk (1997), will allow me to better examine how discourse has shaped both Western and African perspectives on Africa-China relations.

Tools of macro CPDA

Highlight main themes of discourse

CPDA will be employed to identify the main themes found in elite political discourse regarding Africa-China relations. These themes will be compared and contrasted with the main discursive themes of the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative, which will in turn expose how African politicians frame Africa-China relations.

Analysis of discourse within social and historical contexts

Africa-China relations do not occur in a vacuum, and CPDA requires an analysis of the social and historical context of the case study countries and their relations with China. For many African countries, relations with China had begun during the decolonisation movement. Therefore, the main themes of discourse will be analysed within the context of the countries’ relationships both with the West and China. CPDA will also take the domestic context from which politicians are speaking into consideration, as well as the positionality of these actors.

Analysis of how discursive strategies legitimate and resist control

CPDA will be used to highlight how the main themes of the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative are often used by Western politicians to legitimise their intervention in African affairs, and to legitimise the advice they offer to African politicians vis-à-vis their relations with China. This control is also justified by constructing a binary divide, where China becomes the ‘other’ and is portrayed as a threat. African discourse will then be analysed to see how African politicians are using political discourse to resist this sense of control found in the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse.

Analysis of how discourse is (re)producing or challenging the dominant threads of the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse

And finally, CPDA will allow an analysis of how African political discourse is using growing Africa-China relations to identify and challenge the ways in which the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative has painted Africa-China relations, and by extension how Africans are seeking to write the story of their relations with China on their own terms.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Macro CPDA will be combined with a comparative analysis of three case studies from the Southern African region; South Africa, Angola and Zambia. I will analyse discourse produced during the period January 2018 - January 2020. The decision to conduct a comparative analysis came from a desire to move beyond the generalised accounts of Africa-China relations, which often portray Africa as a unitary actor, and towards a more nuanced and context-based account of Africa-China relations. I avoided hand-picking countries based on a dependent variable, for example the production of Sino-optimistic discourse, as this would demonstrate selection bias and would in turn distort any valuable conclusions (Collier & Mahony, 1996).

These countries were selected for three reasons. Firstly, all three have developed close political and economic relations with China, and they are countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where China is deeply engaged (Mapping China's Global Development Footprint, 2020; Carmody & Kragelund, 2016). Secondly, despite all having high levels of Chinese engagement, the nature of their relations with Beijing differ. For example, both Angola and Zambia are major commodity exporter economies, and their relations with China are closely linked to their natural resources. Conversely, China's relations with South Africa are more focused on trade and investment partnerships, with South Africa acting as a gateway for Chinese investment into the continent, as well as being one of China's key strategic partners on the continent. The diverse nature of relations will allow an analysis of whether the nature of Chinese involvement affects the manner in which African political discourse discusses Africa-China relations. And finally, while the nature of their relations with China are different, all three countries have come under fire for their growing political and economic relations with Beijing. Western politicians, especially from the current Trump administration, have been especially vocal on this topic. Such intense criticism makes it important to study the perspectives of these countries, and how they are responding to the 'battle for Africa' narrative's portrayal of their relations with China.

Application of Macro CPDA

The empirical analysis of African political discourse will employ these tools by following a series of steps. Firstly, I will collect political discourse from the case study countries that discusses either bilateral relations with China or Africa-China relations in general. I will then categorise this discourse thematically and identify the main threads of discourse. Background research on the social and historical contexts of the country's relations prior to the beginning

of the period of study, as well as the domestic politics of the case study, will also be conducted. When the discourse has been organised, I will then analyse these themes in relation to the main themes of the 'battle for Africa' narrative and examine the similarities and/or contrasts between the discourses. And finally, the similarities and/or contrasts will be used to highlight the different ways in which African political discourse is challenging the dominance of Western perceptions not only of Africa-China relations, but also Western perceptions of Africa's place in the international system.

Chapter 1: South Africa-China relations

Background on relations

In 2018 South Africa celebrated 20 years of formal diplomatic relations with China (DIRCO, 2018a). In 2009, the country became China's largest trading partner on the continent, which accounted for one-quarter of China's total trade with Africa (Bradley, 2016). Since then relations have gone from strength to strength. The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) had supported the South African Communist Party's (SACP) struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, while many Western powers appeared to be standing back and promoting white minority rule (Alden & Wu, 2016). The SACP is closely affiliated to the now ruling African National Congress Party (ANC), which is left leaning, and the solidarity between the ANC and the CPC has grown since the country's transition into democracy. In addition, South Africa is home to the largest Chinese population in Africa, with approximately 400,000 Chinese citizens living in the country in 2019. And crucially, South Africa, which is the most technologically developed country in the region, acts as a gateway for Chinese trade and investments into the continent. Therefore, as Chinese involvement on the continent increases, South Africa is becoming ever more important to the emerging power (Alden, 2012).

Relations during the post-apartheid era

The 'battle for Africa' discourse portrays these growing relations as China sneakily luring Africa nations to turn their backs on the morally superior West and develop a 'Look East' policy, which will inevitably fuel corruption and authoritarianism. However, the context is a lot more nuanced than this and South African political discourse on China does not adhere to this narrative. Burgeoning Sino-South Africa relations developed in the context of the post-Apartheid era and were intrinsically linked to how South Africa wanted to portray itself domestically, on the continent and to the wider world. (Alden & Wu, 2016). The country's latest white paper on foreign policy, titled '*Building a better world: the diplomacy of Ubuntu*', bases its policies on the '*central tenets of pan-Africanism and South-South solidarity*', which strive to '*negate the legacy of colonialism as well as neo-colonialism*' (South African Government White Paper: 3-7). This idea of *Ubuntu* gave a more collectivist meaning to foreign policy discourse and a sense of solidarity with other countries of the global South.

When looking for paths to development that didn't fall into the '*neo-liberal paradigm*', China served as an extremely impressive model (South African Government White Paper, 2011: 14). Relations also take place within the context of close cooperation in multilateral fora such as the UN, the AU, the G20 and the BRICS community. South Africa has often allied with China to prevent sanctions against countries such as Zimbabwe and Myanmar, while China is seen to be using its weight to represent the interests of South Africa globally. And finally, it is important to highlight that relations between China and Africa are not only state relations, but also party relations. The ANC and CPC have developed strong relations since the 1990s and as the ANC holds onto power, the relations continue to strengthen (Alden & Wu, 2016).

The development of relations from Mandela to Zuma

After the end of apartheid Nelson Mandela initially tried to recognise both China and Taiwan. However, China's 'One China Policy' was non-negotiable and, aware of the advantages of creating links with China, Mandela broke ties with Taiwan in 1996 (Alden & Wu, 2016). Relations during Thabo Mbeki's presidency (1999-2008) focused on closer collaboration on security and development, with many official declarations signed between the countries. Mbeki acted with caution towards China and warned against the development of an unbalanced relationship. Nevertheless, relations remained cordial and were strengthened by the foundation of FOCAC in 2000 (Muekalia, 2004). During Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009-2018) deeper bilateral relations were cemented, and in 2010 the two countries entered into a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', solidifying South Africa's position as China's key ally on the continent. The financial crisis of 2008 and its catastrophic effects on Western powers meant that diversifying relations became more important than ever. Zuma still echoed Mbeki and asserted that relations as they stood were '*unsustainable*' (Zuma, 2012), and that while both countries were becoming more politically and economically intertwined, there was need for an alternation in the dynamics if relations were to be truly successful.

The following sections will use the tools of CPDA to critically analyse discourse produced during the presidency of Cyril Ramaphosa, who took office at the beginning of 2018. A member of the ANC, Ramaphosa had been deputy President (2014-2018) under Zuma's administration, and has ramped up efforts to broaden and strengthen relations with Beijing since assuming the presidency. Macro CPDA will be used to conduct an analysis of the main themes of political discourse, and how these themes interact with the core propositions put forward in the 'battle for Africa' discourse.

Analysis

A relationship of friendship and solidarity

One of the major themes present in political discourse is the presentation of China as *'an old friend of Africa'* with *'a long history of engagement, friendship and support'* (Ramaphosa, 2018). South African politicians largely reject the idea of China as a threat or sinister presence in Africa, an idea so prominent in the 'battle for Africa' discourse. This friendship is instead rooted in historical ties between the two countries, which were solidified thanks to *'the support and solidarity [South Africa] received during [its] struggle for liberation'* (DIRCO, 2018d). Furthermore, the shared experience of colonial rule at the hands of Western powers further reinforces this South-South solidarity, with Deputy President David Mabuza asserting that the country's *'fraternal friend'* remains *'a fundamental pillar of South Africa's foreign policy'* during the 7th China Bi-national Commission in 2019 (Mabuza, 2019). Therefore, rather than aligning with the views in 'battle for Africa' rhetoric, which present China as a threat to Africa's welfare, political discourse presents China as a friend that will help Africa *'surmount the [...] challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality'* still rife on the continent (MY ANC, 2018).

China as a model for development

For Africa to surmount these challenges, it requires a development model. Western democracies have long seen the implementation of democracy, 'good' governance and human rights norms as prerequisites for development in Africa, and Western leaders have endlessly lectured African politicians on this point (Poluha & Rosendahl, 2002). The conditionality attached to Western aid and investment further reinforces this model. Thus, the 'battle for Africa' narrative asserts that Africa must follow the Western path if it wishes to rid itself of the shackles of poverty and underdevelopment that it is still bound by. Implicit in this discourse is the notion that Africa absolutely needs the West's support to develop (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014). However, China's rapid transformation into an emerging power has offered African leaders an alternative path towards development. Unlike the Western model, the Chinese approach prioritises economic development, applying the mantra *'to get rich, build a road'* (Brautigam, 2009). Minister for Trade and Industry Ebrahim Patel has expressed how this example has helped the country to learn *'from how China [...] developed [its] industrial capacity'* (Department of Trade and Industry, 2019b). Increased Chinese involvement in South Africa will thus help facilitate *'the many valuable lessons that Africa can learn from China's*

impressive growth model' (Ramaphosa, 2018). Such discourse exposes the fact that while proponents of the 'battle for Africa' narrative may not have realised it yet, the West no longer holds a monopoly over what development path African countries decide to take (Large, 2008).

South Africa-China relations as part of changing world order

CPDA also requires us to analyse what the 'battle for Africa' discourse overlooks. By portraying the global South as a victim of China's ruthless rise, this discourse pays little attention to the perspectives of African politicians. This discourse vacuum is then filled by Western politicians who tell African leaders, often from a moral high ground, what is in their best interests when it comes to dealing with China. During an official trip to Africa in 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned African countries against '*authoritarian countries with empty promises*' that will jeopardise '*the progress that Africa so needs and desperately wants*' (Al Jazeera, 2020). While South Africa recognises that its relations with China take place '*in the context of an increasingly uncertain global environment*' (Ramaphosa, 2018), it doesn't view China's rise as a threat to the status quo, but rather as an opportunity to reshape it in line with its foreign policy of Ubuntu.

Ramaphosa has not shied away from criticising the continued dominance of Western powers in international fora, and has taken to the stage of the UN General Assembly to demand a reshaping of global institutions so they can be '*more responsive to the needs of [...] the developing world*' and can '*better serve the interests of the poor and marginalised around the world*' (United Nations, 2018). Discontent is further heightened by the fact that South Africa, along with its African neighbours, has long been demanding '*comprehensive reform of the Security Council*', and yet their efforts to obtain a permanent representation have thus far proved fruitless (South African Government News, 2018). CPDA therefore demonstrates that Ramaphosa has used fora such as the UN, whose agendas have traditionally been dominated by Western powers, to question their legitimacy and their position of control in an increasingly multipolar world.

The benefits of allying with China are further reinforced by the perception that, unlike many Western powers, China treats Africa as an equal partner, willing to invest in Africa while also respecting sovereignty and adhering to the principle of non-intervention (Alden, 2012). Moreover, China is seen to represent the continent's interests in global fora, supporting Africa's call for permanent representation on the Security Council. Ramaphosa has expressed gratitude

towards China for working *'to ensure that Africa's development is prominent on the international agenda'* and for building *'a global architecture that promotes the interests of the developing world'* (Ramaphosa, 2018). Such relations have, according to former minister of International Relations Lindiwe Sisulu, allowed South Africa to better assert its own agency and take *'tangible steps to determine its own destiny'* (DIRCO, 2018c). Overall, there is a sense that *'Africa has awakened to [its] great potential'*, and that China has played a big part in this (Ramaphosa, 2018).

South Africa-China relations need a stronger economic foundation

While most of the political discourse is positive towards China, there are certain fears that increasing ties have brought forth. The biggest fear is the unbalanced nature of relations, specifically trade imbalances. China's economic prowess is enormous compared to that of its African counterpart, which is exacerbated by the fact that most of Africa's exports to China are raw materials and primary products, whereas the imports coming from China are mainly manufactured goods (Alden & Wu, 2016). Minister Patel drew parliament's attention to this when he affirmed that *'Africa does not produce what it consumes; and Africa does not consume what it produces'* (Department of Trade and Industry, 2019b). For Ramaphosa, *'trade between Africa and China should be balanced so that we have a win-win outcome'* (Ramaphosa, 2018). The 'battle for Africa' discourse has pointed to these remarks, and the cautionary words of Ramaphosa's predecessors, as evidence of a re-emergence of colonialism in Africa. The increasingly popular discourse of 'debt-trap diplomacy' also fuels this neo-colonial discourse (Brautigam, 2019).

Ramaphosa has refuted these common threads in the 'battle for Africa' discourse, claiming that this discourse is *'propagated by people who are envious and jealous of this relationship'* and that the relationship *'has its roots deep in history'* (africanews, 2018). While he acknowledges the increasingly uncertain global environment, Ramaphosa has reassured those on the continent that relations with China are *'focused on the tangible improvement of the quality of lives of all the people of Africa'* and that relations, unlike those with Africa's *'colonial rulers'*, are based on *'the fundamental and inalienable right of the African people to determine their own future'* (Ramaphosa, 2018). This CPDA highlights that, rather than seeing the unbalanced nature of relations as a new form of colonialism on the continent, South Africa wishes to deepen relations. It also acknowledges the need for a more solid economic foundation, which involves using important fora such as FOCAC and increasing *'the abilities of African countries to*

extract full value for their [...] natural resources and to create work for its people'. It is only then that relations can *'have a win-win outcome that benefits both China and the countries of Africa'* (Ramaphosa, 2018).

South Africa-China relations and agency

In addressing these trade imbalances, South Africa sees relations as an opportunity to act in its own interests. Such notions of agency are largely absent in the 'battle for Africa' discourse, with Africa portrayed as a victim caught between a clash of superpowers. However, CPDA requires us to analyse how South African political discourse is challenging this common assumption. Former president Thabo Mbeki highlighted that these trade imbalances were a *'dereliction of duty on [Africa's] part'* (SABC, 2019). When faced with opposition party discourse, this is also apparent. The main opposition party, Democratic Alliance (DA), has used parliamentary debates to voice concern over loans from China. Former party leader Mmusi Maimane, quoting a New York Times article, described *'loans from China [...] as a debt trap for vulnerable countries [that] fuel corruption and autocratic behaviour in struggling democracies'* (eNCA, 2018a). Furthermore, Mkhuleko Hlengwa, a National Assembly member for the Inthaka Freedom Party (IFP), asked Ramaphosa what he was doing *'to insulate and protect South Africa from the global expansion of China'* (eNCA, 2018b). In response, Ramaphosa has asserted that *'We've got the experiences of our imperialists, [...] we can see exactly when an imperialist comes'* and that these agreements are *'agreements that are meant to advance the interests of our people'* (eNCA, 2018b). CPDA therefore shows us that, although the 'battle for Africa' discourse overlooks the existence of African agency in Africa-China relations, South Africa does recognise its ability and indeed its responsibility in shaping relations with China to its best interests.

Conclusion

South Africa does not reproduce the binary notion of the 'battle for Africa' discourse, which posits the West as inherently good and China as inherently bad. Rather, it has welcomed what China has to offer and, as a country with relatively little political clout on the international stage, allying with China seems to offer more opportunities. Much of South Africa's political discourse challenges the main propositions found in the 'battle for Africa' narrative by seeing China as a friend, as a more realistic model for development and as a key ally in a changing global environment. Macro CPDA has also revealed that South Africa is questioning the common assumptions of the 'battle for Africa' narrative and is by extension challenging the

West's self-appointed role as legitimate guardian of Africa. While South Africa has acknowledged the limitations and potential imbalances of its relationship with China, it also acknowledges its advantages and recognises its own agency in choosing partners that will further its own interests.

Chapter 2: Zambia-China relations

Background on relations

'If they helped us at a time when no one else would, what reasons have I got to doubt them now?' (Fitzgerald, 2008). These were the words of Kenneth Kaunda, the first president of independent Zambia, when discussing the beginning of Zambia-China relations. Zambia and China established diplomatic relations in October 1964, just five days after Zambia achieved independence from Britain. President Kaunda, who had instituted a series of socialist reforms in Zambia, developed close relations with Chairman Mao Zedong, and it was in conversation with Kaunda that Chairman Mao elaborated on his 'Three Worlds theory'. Mao asserted that China and Africa belonged to the third world and were at the mercy of the First World *'exploiters and imperialists'* (Wilson Center, 1974). Both countries thus shared a common identity, with Kaunda referring to China as an *'all weather friend'*, a phrase still enthusiastically employed in Africa-China discourse today (Kopiński & Polus, 2011). Kaunda, now ninety-six years old, is still extremely Sino-optimistic. When asked about the symbolic Tanzania-Zambia (TAZARA) railway, Kaunda asserted that *'in Europe they dismissed it as a waste of money, but China 'helped Zambia at a time when no one else would'* (Fitzgerald, 2008).

Trade with China has been vital to Zambia's economic revitalization

Zambia is known for its copper, with the combined export of raw and refined copper accounting for 74.5% of total exports in 2017 (OEC, 2020). The mining industry was developed under colonial rule and was the country's lifeline as it gained independence. The national soccer team has the nickname *Chipolopolo*, or 'the copper bullets', and copper colour features on the national flag (Matambo, 2020). Copper is therefore closely linked to Zambian identity. Steady international demand for copper in the 1960s and 1970s transformed Zambia into a middle-income country, and because copper mines were state-owned employees enjoyed state-subsidised health and housing. However, when international demand for copper began to drop in the 1980s, production costs skyrocketed, and Zambia was plunged into a state of extreme poverty. In the 1990s Zambia was swept up in the wave of Western-backed neo-liberal reform that moved across Africa and was put under serious international pressure to privatise the copper industry. International demand for copper began to rise again and China's growing appetite for the mineral in part helped Zambia's copper industry get back on its feet (Negi,

2008). Since the 1990s Chinese involvement in Zambia's economy has grown and is now the country's second largest import market, after Switzerland (OEC, 2020).

The use of anti-Chinese rhetoric in Zambia

As these relations have grown, so has the use of anti-China rhetoric. This rhetoric originally emerged during the 2006 general elections when Michael Sata, nicknamed 'King Cobra' for his sharp tongue and caustic rhetoric, ran the Patriotic Front's (PF) campaign on an anti-China ticket. Sata portrayed the ruling Movement for Multi-Party Democracy's (MMD) relations with China as a threat to Zambian sovereignty. Sata argued that '*We want the Chinese to leave and the old colonial rulers to return [...] at least Western capitalism has a human face; the Chinese are only out to exploit us*' (The Economist, 2011). Although the PF did not win the 2006 election, the Chinese presence became a central issue and turned many Zambians against Chinese involvement in the country. Interestingly, when Sata was eventually elected President in 2011, his first official meeting was with the Chinese ambassador Zhou Yuxiao. Once in office, Sata dramatically changed his approach to Chinese involvement and China became an important ally for his government. At a dinner for Zambian expatriates in London in 2012, Sata talked of the similarities between Chinese and Zambian peoples and applauded the ability of Chinese immigrants to adapt to the Zambian way of life. This shocking twist in Sata's rhetoric occurred when he realised that China was an incredibly important partner to Zambia and that his government needed Chinese funding to develop the country. The importance of China meant that Sata had to drastically change his tune, and that he could no longer use Chinese involvement as a scapegoat for issues that were now his responsibility to solve (Matambo, 2020).

With general elections around the corner in 2021, anti-Chinese rhetoric has once again gained traction. The leader of the main opposition party United Party for National Development (UPND), Hakainde Hichilema, has been suspected of stoking anti-Chinese sentiment during political rallies. The irony of accusations made by opposition parties today against the ruling PF is that the same accusations were made by the PF against the MMD government when the latter was in power. A closer look at Zambian domestic politics thus reveals that anti-Chinese rhetoric, while it holds genuine concerns, is more often an expression of frustration by ordinary Zambians, who have not reaped any rewards from Zambia's economic growth (Matambo, 2020). This is exemplified by Zambia's 2010 GINI coefficient, which stood very high at 55.6, the fourth highest in all of Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2020). Similar to trends seen in

South African discourse, the domestic situation plays a crucial role in how the Chinese presence is perceived. The following sections will use macro CPDA to address the main themes in Zambian political discourse and will analyse these themes alongside those of the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse.

Analysis

When the West turned its back on Zambia, China was there

The ‘battle for Africa’ narrative constantly cautions Zambia on its growing economic ties with China. In 2011, Former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton visited Lusaka and warned leaders against powers that ‘*undermine good governance in Africa*’, stressing that ‘*we don’t want to see a new colonialism in Africa*’ (U.S. Department of State, 2011). However, CPDA requires us to look beyond contemporary narratives and towards the broader context and historical background of power relations. The ‘battle for Africa’ discourse fails to remember that when Western powers refused to help newly independent Zambia build the TAZARA railway, it was China that came to the country’s aid. As a landlocked country, Zambia wanted to bypass the neighbouring colonial powers of South Africa and Zimbabwe in order to gain access to seaports in independent Tanzania. After Kaunda and the Tanzanian president Nyerere unsuccessfully petitioned Western powers, it was China that provided the \$400 million to fund the 1,860km railway line. Zambian political discourse constantly draws on this symbol of Africa-China solidarity as the beginning of a friendship in the face of Western indifference. Foreign Minister Joseph Malanji reminded Parliament of this and stated that ‘*China is an all-weather friend and it is the Zambian Government’s desire to continue strengthening and deepening cooperation*’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Former President Kaunda, speaking at the Africa-China Think Tanks Forum in 2019, highlighted the importance of financial assistance in helping to ‘*increase collaborative support for a shared development agenda*’ and ‘*to keep the Pan African dream alive*’ (Africa-China Think Tanks Forum, 2019). This early Chinese involvement also highlights the fact that Zambia, along with many other African countries, have exercised agency and have chosen to have relations with China since decolonisation. This reality contradicts the rather simplistic ‘battle for Africa’ narrative which portrays Chinese involvement in Africa as a nefarious phenomenon that mainly began in the 2000s, and that ruthlessly disrupted the positive relations the West had until then maintained with African countries.

What China is being blamed for doing, the West has already done

With rising debt levels in Zambia, China may be partly to blame. However, Western involvement in Zambia during the 1990s is not discussed in the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse and CPDA requires us to elucidate on what this discourse largely omits. While Western powers turned their backs on Zambia in the 1960s and 1970s, a struggling copper industry saw the intervention of Western-backed International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in Zambia’s economy during the 1990s. The IMF encouraged the development of neo-liberal economic policies and pressured Zambia to privatise the state-owned Zambian Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM), allowing Western companies to invest in the copper industry. Privatisation led to a huge drop in employment and deprived Zambians of housing and health subsidies that had been offered when ZCCM was state-run. Changes also meant that the government had less control over its key resource and unsustainable loans from the IMF further weakened government (Hairong & Sautman, 2013).

The mining sector suffered greatly, and it was only when China began to invest in Zambian copper mines in the 1990s and 2000s that the sector began to bounce back (Negi, 2008). Foreign Minister Joseph Malanji has lauded the ‘*long history of friendship*’ and has thanked China for its ‘*selfless assistance [to] Zambia’s socio-economic development*’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018b). While the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative apports blame to China for Zambia’s weak economy, Zambia’s permanent representative to the AU, Emmanuel Mwamba, asserts that China is ‘*not predatory like we’ve seen for example from Western states or Western entities*’ and is not ‘*imposing anything on Africa, on Zambia*’ (SABC, 2018). Therefore, while the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative overlooks the legacy of Western involvement in Zambia’s contemporary reality, the experiences of the 1990s are very much present in Zambian political discourse.

The narrative of ‘debt trap diplomacy’ overlooks Zambia’s agency

The ‘battle for Africa’ discourse on Zambia usually focuses on Chinese exploitation of the country’s natural resources and Beijing’s irresponsible lending, with these seen as the root cause of Zambia’s rising debt levels (Brautigam, 2020). The narrative of ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ often presents Zambia as a prime example of how no-strings-attached Chinese loans are being used to ensnare poorer countries across the continent and serves as a cautionary tale for other African nations tempted by what China is offering. In 2018 Former US National Security Advisor John Bolton accused China of using ‘*bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use*

of debt to hold states in Africa captive’ and singled out Zambia as an example of where China was *‘poised to take over [its] national power and utility company’* for failing to fulfil debt obligations (National Security Council, 2018). Although it was later revealed that this accusation was unfounded, China’s actions are still seen as neo-colonial in nature, and Zambia is now running the risk of being completely ‘owned’ by Beijing (Matambo, 2020). A key aspect of CPDA is analysing how language is used to legitimate control and assume moral superiority. The words of Bolton, and those of ‘debt trap diplomacy’ more generally, indirectly position the West as the morally superior power who knows best for Africa, thereby portraying Africans as childlike and in need of protection. It also hints at Western fears that it is losing out to China in Africa. This narrative is being increasingly challenged in Zambian political discourse.

President Lungu has spoken out in parliament against the *‘false, malicious and distorted reports [...] which seek to malign Zambia’s mutually beneficial relationship with China’* and frequently asserts that relations *‘are not that of a horse and the rider’* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Emmanuel Mwamba, during an interview on South Africa’s news broadcaster SABC News, spoke out against Western media narrative of Chinese loans to Zambia. He contended this *‘narrative that is taking foothold that China is out to get [Zambia’s] copper mines’* and questioned why *‘every time Africa moves out from that yoke of [Western] influence, all of a sudden these narratives emerge’* (SABC, 2018). He considers that the ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ narrative is *‘using Africa’s debt to China as a weapon to fight China’* (Lusaka Times, 2019). There is an important caveat to point out. China is Zambia’s biggest single creditor and the lack of transparency in Chinese lending to Zambia is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Mwamba has admitted that *‘the concerns about China, I’m not dismissing them, they’re genuine’* (SABC News, 2018). However, he has also stressed that the Zambian government has been active in its dealings with China and has put into place measures that oblige foreign investors such as China to support local suppliers and business when they conduct projects, so that *‘there will be skills transfer, [...] beneficiation to the local economy, there will be local benefits [...] where the community feels that this investor has left something’* (SABC News, 2018).

Brautigam (2019) has highlighted how this narrative is ultimately rooted in the West’s fear of China’s global rise and is part of a larger kickback against China’s increasing economic involvement in Africa. Such fear has led proponents of the ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ narrative to highlight all the negative examples of Chinese involvement in Zambia and overlook the

positive impact that Chinese investment has had on the country's economic development. As Ofstad & Tjønneland (2019) recommended, the narrative needs to be redirected and acknowledge the agency and responsibility of African governments in their dealings with China. Therefore, if Lungu wants to demonstrate that Zambia is '*a fully conscious nation*' whose relations with China '*will always be informed by [a] noble focus*', his government needs to take greater steps to increase transparency in its relations with Beijing (Lusaka Times, 2018c).

Zambia doesn't want to choose between East and West

'We need China. We need the IMF [...]. We need everyone. We are a global world. It's not one against the other. The issue to pit one against the other [...] that narrative I think is based on false foundations' (SABC, 2018). Mwamba's words echo wider frustrations among African politicians regarding the notion that African countries need to make a choice between the West and China. That, according to the 'battle for Africa' narrative, cooperating with China is part of a zero-sum game that Africa plays at its own risk. Mwamba's words also highlight that presenting African leaders with an ultimatum reinforces the already unequal global power relations. Zambia doesn't want to make this choice and Lungu has emphasised that Zambia's '*right to choose our friendship with one nation is not dependent on making enemies with others*' (Lusaka Times, 2018c). Similar to South African political discourse, Zambian politicians largely reject the portrayal of Africa as a victim of China's aggressive rise, and Lungu recognises that it is Zambia's responsibility to '*entrench this relationship for the common good of our people*' (Lusaka Times, 2018c). For Mwamba, it is within this environment of diverse relations that '*each state in Africa has to ask itself what it wants, what it wishes to achieve*' (SABC, 2018). It remains the responsibility of the Zambian government to leverage its copper industry, its strategic location, and its long friendship with China to achieve its own interests.

Conclusion

The 'battle for Africa' narrative frequently uses Zambia as an example of everything that can go wrong when an African country develops close ties with China. However, the macro CPDA of Zambian political discourse has demonstrated that the propositions of the 'battle for Africa' discourse often overlook other aspects of Zambia-China relations. While proponents of the 'battle for Africa' narrative portray the West as a friend and guardian of African countries, Zambia remembers the reluctance of the West to help them in their hour of need. Furthermore, while China is blamed for causing Zambia's debt problems, the West conveniently overlooks

its own role in Zambia's recent past. This historical amnesia highlights the 'battle for Africa' narrative's inability to reflect on its own actions and admit its wrongdoings. CPDA has also exposed the fact that the 'debt-trap diplomacy' narrative exaggerates the role of China in Zambia's accumulation of debt, ultimately depriving the Zambian government of its own agency and responsibility in managing its economy more effectively. And finally, Zambia refuses to adhere to the 'battle for Africa' narrative's notion of Africa as a pawn in the clash between East and West, and instead wishes to be respected and recognised as an actor by both sides.

Chapter 3: Angola-China Relations

Background on relations

Standing at the podium of the UN General Assembly in 2019, Angolan President João Lourenço declared that ‘*Angola is now open to the world*’ (UN, 2019). For a country that was ruled by the same president, Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, for 38 years, the arrival of current president Lourenço in 2017 signalled a new era in Angolan politics. Whether Lourenço’s presidency, which is attempting to root out corruption in domestic politics and to diversify relations on the global stage, will in fact bring about deep reform in Angola is yet to be seen. However, the political discourse of his government highlights several crucial aspects of Angola-China relations that challenge and often contradict the conventional wisdom in the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse, which more often than not portrays Angola as another prime example of China’s exploitation of the continent (Brautigam, 2009). Politicians are growing increasingly weary of this outdated narrative and are determined to alter the world’s perception of their country.

The beginning of Angola-China relations

Despite achieving independence from Portugal in 1974, disagreement over what party should rule the country plunged Angola into a 27-year long civil war. The conflict was a proxy war that became a battleground for Cold War tensions. The Soviet Union and Cuba supported the Socialist Party in power, the *People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola* (MPLA), and the US and apartheid South Africa supported the rival parties. The beginning of China’s involvement in Angola dates back to the period of decolonisation, where they supported all three parties involved in the struggle to end Portuguese rule. The MPLA declared themselves as the ruling party in 1975 but China refused to recognise the MPLA government and continued to support the rival party, the *National Union for the Total Independence of Angola* (UNITA). It was only in 1983 that the MPLA established relations with China, and relations mostly involved military cooperation and the sale of Chinese weapons (Corkin, 2011). When Angola finally emerged from the war in 2002, relations with China shifted from mainly defence to economic cooperation. The MPLA was already burdened with huge debt but it desperately needed finance to rebuild the war-torn country. After refusing several IMF structural adjustment packages, China came knocking on Angola’s door. Beijing’s offer of oil-backed loans included fewer conditionalities than those put forward by the IMF and were seen by the

government as a better way to protect their new fragile sovereignty. China thus began to provide Angola with loans in return for the country's most precious resource: oil (Kiala, 2010).

The importance of oil for Angola

Oil is at the heart of the Angolan economy, with the major oil-producing region Cabinda often referred to as the '*Kuwait of Africa*'. Oil makes up more than 90% of Angola's exports and 30% of its GDP (World Bank, 2019). Despite this incredible mineral wealth, Angola remains one of the poorest and most unequal societies in the world, with a GINI index of 51.3 in 2018 (World Bank, 2020). Similar to Zambia, the 'battle for Africa' discourse often holds up Chinese involvement in Angola's oil industry as another example of Beijing exploiting poorer countries. However, the picture is not so straightforward, and Angola exercised its agency towards China and secure its own interests under the rule of Dos Santos. Dos Santos served as president of Angola from 1979 – 2017 and he was able to manipulate China's need for sustainable oil sources to secure loans with favourable conditions and secure funding for vital infrastructure projects (Corkin, 2011).

A new Angola?

João Lourenço entered office in 2017 with the determination to transform Angola and began an extensive anti-corruption campaign. While some see this campaign as a rhetorical tool to win popular support, Lourenço has surprised observers by immediately firing many of Dos Santos' closest allies in government and in Angola's state-owned enterprises. Those affected included Dos Santos' daughter Isabel Dos Santos, who had been running Angola's state-owned oil company Sonangol and had been accused of laundering funds. Whether Lourenço's efforts will have a long-lasting impact on Angolan politics is yet to be seen. However, the rhetoric of 'a new Angola' extends to aspects of Angola-China relations and is directly challenging conventional assumptions of China's role in Angola, and in Africa more broadly.

The role of China and the West in Angola's post-war reconstruction

A lot of the 'battle for Africa' discourse on Angola-China relations revolves around the country's emergence from civil war in 2002 and the financial support it received from China. This narrative constantly uses China's no-strings-attached oil-backed loans as an example of why Africans should not liaise with Beijing, mainly because they do not promote transparency and 'good' governance and are seen to foment corruption and authoritarianism in developing countries. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stood in front of Angolan political elite and

advised them that *'You can see it in ways that are important to liberate the people of this region, to liberate Angola, [...] you can see that our investments are transparent, they're clean'* (U.S. Department of State, 2020). For Pompeo, it is only the US that can liberate Angola, not China, or not even the Angolans themselves. Such paternalistic rhetoric treats the Angolan political elite as children that need to be warned about the perils of liaising with China. The rhetoric also exposes common themes in macro CPDA, where the use of 'us' versus 'them' serves to legitimate the power and ideology of Western political elites (Fairclough, 2003).

Therefore, when looking back at Angola's emergence from its long and gruelling civil war, the 'battle for Africa' discourse largely focuses on the exhaustive efforts of the IMF to increase transparency in the oil sector and to gain access to the government's accounts. This narrative compares the genuine efforts of Western entities with the malevolent presence of China, who arrived and destroyed the noble efforts of the IMF by not encouraging transparent business practices (Gadzala, 2015). However, CPDA reveals that this narrative overlooks the role of Western countries and entities in Angola's post-war reconstruction. Shortly after China extended its \$2 billion line of credit to Angola in 2004, which was destined solely for infrastructure projects, a consortium of Western banks, including Royal Bank of Scotland and Barclays, organised an even larger oil-backed line of credit of \$2.35 billion with the Angolan government, without any requirements regarding transparency or how the funds were used. Several more loans followed from diverse Western banks and eclipsed the \$2 billion received from China in 2004. And this is not even considering the estimated 48 oil-backed loans Angola had taken out from Western banks by the end of the war in 2002. Therefore, while the 'battle for Africa' narrative criticises China's no-strings-attached loans for their lack of transparency and for fomenting corruption, Western banks provided a lot more financing to the Angolan government than China did, and their loans showed absolutely no concern for conditions of transparency (Brautigam, 2009). We shall now turn to the common themes of Angolan political discourse, which will help us provide a more nuanced understanding of Angola-China relations.

Analysis

When negotiations with the IMF were going nowhere, China offered to help

When asked about China's involvement in Angola in the early 2000s, and whether this involvement was good for Angola, former Foreign Minister Domingos Augusto laughed and paused for a moment, before answering '*How did China come to Angola, Africa and almost the rest of the world? Because somebody was not there!*' (Atlantic Council, 2019). One of the main threads of political discourse is that when help was desperately needed to rebuild the country's infrastructure, it was China who stepped in and provided the loans for these projects. Negotiations with the IMF didn't seem to be going anywhere and, according to Domingos Augusto, '*Western partners said Angola is a rich country, you have oil to find your own way. Angola had to find its own way, we had to do something*'. The line of credit from China was destined exclusively to infrastructure projects and made the challenge of national reconstruction a lot more realisable (Brautigam, 2009). Domingos Augusto has stressed this, stating that '*After the war in 2002 [...] Angola had everything destroyed*', and that the country's '*rehabilitation was made by China!*' (Atlantic Council, 2019).

This sentiment of being abandoned has also been expressed by President Lourenço, a situation only resolved when '*China reached out to [Angola] and the results of which are visible across the continent*' (Gomes, 2018). Macro CPDA requires us to highlight what is often overlooked in the 'battle for Africa' discourse, namely that Chinese involvement in Africa is a lot more visible and tangible than Western involvement. Rather than spending money mainly in sectors such as health and education, China builds roads, bridges, stadiums, railways, and even opera houses. This is indicative of how China engages in Africa in general, with an emphasis placed on economic development, which is seen and appreciated by Africans (Brautigam, 2009). Furthermore, when discussing these historical ties during the latest FOCAC summit in 2018, Lourenço stressed that Chinese involvement grew '*on the basis of Africa's actual needs*' and that relations developed without '*attaching any political conditions or interference in African countries' affairs*' (FOCAC, 2018). This thread of political discourse shows appreciation towards China for providing Angola with the infrastructure it desperately needed to get back on its feet.

Angola appreciates China but relations need to be more ‘win-win’

Political discourse is imbued with a deep sense of gratitude towards China and the help they provided during the country’s reconstruction. President Lourenço has applauded the ‘*mutual efforts [...] to promote the development of the African continent*’ (Lourenço, 2019) and hopes that ‘*cooperation between Angola and China will become a model for Africa-China cooperation*’ (FOCAC, 2018). This gratitude however does not prevent Lourenço from recognising that the practice of using oil as collateral for Chinese credit lines was ultimately ‘*disadvantageous for the country*’ and that ‘*from now on [Angola’s] relationship with China will be different*’ (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). It is the new government’s mission to ‘*make it clear to investors in general and to the Chinese in particular, that the bases are laid with regard to transparency, free competition and legal protection of their investments to carry out safe investments in Angola*’ (Lourenço, 2019).

The need for change in Angola-China relations was echoed by the Minister of Commerce Joffre Van-Dunem Junior, who lauded trade and economic cooperation but also highlighted that ‘*a sincere, transparent and respectful relationship must be the basis for mutually beneficial cooperation that will allow [...] Africa to break the poverty and inequality indexes*’ (Agencia Angola Press, 2019). Similar to discourse found in the other case studies, the Angolan government accepts its responsibility in shaping relations. This does not mean turning its back on China, but rather fostering more equal relations and protecting its own interests. Manuel Calado, president of the China-Angola Chamber of Commerce, has rejected criticism of Chinese investors in Angola, asserting that ‘*it is really important not to turn away from the people that are ready to help Angola*’ and that ultimately ‘*the rest depends on [Angola]*’ (AnGo News VC, 2019). This notion of responsibility on the part of African governments is largely absent from the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse, which instead portrays Africa as largely powerless to Chinese unilateral action (Brautigam, 2019).

Angola wants to diversify its relations

Angola differs from the other case studies of Zambia and South Africa in the sense that there has been no overt trend of anti-Western sentiment in political discourse. This is out of necessity, namely to keep the economy healthy and welcoming to international investors. It is also out of a desire to prevent China from becoming the only source of funding and to ensure international competition that will benefit the Angolan economy. Despite this lack of anti-Western sentiment, there is nevertheless a pervading sense of fatigue regarding the constant stream of

questions about China's role in Angola, questions largely posed by Western reporters. The government reiterates that it is determined to diversify its relations and to market Angola as an attractive business destination for all international investors. This does not mean severing ties with China, but rather looking towards both the East and the West (Corkin, 2015).

Angolan political rhetoric has recognised that for this to happen, Western countries need to adopt a newer image of Angola. When asked what he wished people would better understand about his country, Domingos Augusto lamented that *'people still think of Angola as a country of war, but also as a country of oil. What we want to say is that Angola has no more war, it still has oil, but it also has more than that'* (Atlantic Council, 2019). In addition, president Lourenço has warned that relations cannot develop further until the *'lack of knowledge on the US side about the program that the [Angolan] government has been undertaking'* has been addressed (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). In terms of Macro CPDA, this political discourse exposes how politicians are challenging the dominant portrayal of Africa as a voiceless continent. It places the onus on Western powers to alter their perception of Angola as a war-torn country and to start seeing the country as a place that is ready and willing to do business.

Conclusion

While standing at the UN General Assembly podium in 2019, Lourenço joined the chorus of African leaders demanding reform of the UN Security Council and the allocation of permanent representation to Africa. For Lourenço, the *'victors of the Second World War no longer reflect the need for a fairer global geostrategic balance'* (UN News, 2019). He also demanded an *'end to the trade war that currently pits two economic powers, the United States of America and China, against each other, the negative consequences of which are being felt in the global economy'* (UN News, 2019). In a trade war between the US and China, it is ultimately Angola, and Africa, that will lose out.

The footprint of China in Angola is often sensationalized and exaggerated in the 'battle for Africa' discourse (Campos & Vines, 2007). Moreover, conventional discourse often misrepresents the role of China in Angola, and completely overlooks the role of the Angolan government in shaping Angola-China relations. Macro CPDA has exposed the inconsistencies in this discourse, and how these inconsistencies are being increasingly challenged by Angolan politicians. By portraying China as an evil force that ruthlessly exploited Angola at its time of

need, the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative leaves little room for a more complex portrayal of Angola’s post-war reality. When China arrived to Angola in the early 2000s, it was joining an already very crowded room. This discourse only serves to construct a narrative that legitimizes the West’s self-appointed role of guardian of Africa and paints China as the evil ‘other’. Nevertheless, Angola political discourse makes it clear that it wants to move on from Western narratives of Chinese involvement in the early 2000s and that it does not want to dwell on the past. In Domingos Augusto’s words, ‘*we looked East, but the rest is history*’ (Atlantic Council, 2019).

Conclusion

The analysis of political discourse in South Africa, Zambia and Angola has revealed that Western discourses often misunderstand, and subsequently misrepresent, various aspects of Africa-China relations. This research paper is by no means an exhaustive study of African political discourse, nor does it claim to tell the ‘truth’ of Africa-China relations. It does however provide several important answers to the research question: *What are the perspectives of African political discourse on Africa-China relations, and how do these perspectives differ from common themes found in Western discourse?* Firstly, unlike the alarmist nature that runs through the ‘battle for Africa’ discourse, which presents Chinese involvement as a recent phenomenon, these governments point to their historical links with China and to China’s willingness to provide assistance when many Western countries seemed reluctant. In addition, cooperation with Beijing is seen as an opportunity to diversify relations away from dependence on the West and to renegotiate the terms of their engagement with Western powers. These African governments do not want to choose between East and West, but want to work with everyone, with the ultimate goal of advancing their own interests. African governments do not accept the portrayal of the continent as a battleground, with Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta famously admonishing world powers for ‘*weaponizing divisions, pursuing proxy actions and behaving like Africa is for the taking*’, and adding that ‘*I want to tell you that it’s not*’ (KTN News Kenya, 2020).

These research findings challenge the main propositions of the ‘battle for Africa’ narrative, and they also problematise the portrayal of non-Western actors in mainstream IR. Although the scope of this research paper did not allow for it, there is a need to rethink Western perceptions of China’s role in the global system. Many in the West criticise Beijing for not complying with Western views of how Africa should develop, rather than understanding how China’s own historical and cultural experiences inform its contemporary foreign policies (Large, 2008). For example, China is often criticised for supporting African governments with questionable human rights records. Although these accusations need to be taken seriously, Western-centric IR also needs to move beyond the perception of human rights as first and foremost civil and political rights, and appreciate how Chinese involvement has helped many Africans enjoy rights such as the right to economic security and the right to development (Olander, 2018). Rethinking China’s place in IR does not mean analysing its actions with an uncritical eye, but rather appreciating that the Western view is neither universal nor definitive (Tickner, 2003).

The results of this research paper also go beyond the scope of Africa-China relations and challenge us to think differently about how we study IR in general, and how we conduct our lives. IR often operates under the false assumption that the current international order is postcolonial in nature. If the linkages between IR and colonialism are studied, they are usually relegated to the realm of postcolonial theories. In addition, while Western IR traces its origins back to the Enlightenment and to the advancement of European civilisation, for the majority of the world their experience of IR is strongly linked to oppression under colonial rule. This research paper has exposed the persistence of a Western saviour-like paternalism that is reminiscent of colonial times. Therefore, it is not enough to study non-Western voices. IR needs to go further and question the very foundations upon which the discipline is built. It is only then that perhaps we could move beyond the division between stories from mainstream IR and those from the periphery and reach a point where all storytellers are valued (Jones, 2006).

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has highlighted the '*danger of a single story*' (Adichie, 2009). While living in the US, Ngozi Adichie realised that many people possessed a single story of Africa as a poor, conflict-ridden continent that was fundamentally different to the West. This research paper has highlighted that by telling a single story of Africa-China relations, many in the West have ignored the complexity of African international relations. While China is an important player in Africa, it is only one part of Africa's story (Gadzala, 2015). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided salutary lessons regarding the study of IR. The ability of the Western world, and specifically the US, to coordinate an international response to the pandemic now seems improbable. However, this moment also provides us with an opportunity to look beyond the Western-centric world order and towards non-Western ideas that may offer an alternative approach to global issues. Scholars and policymakers alike should look to non-Western philosophies such as Ubuntu and Confucianism, which both emphasise what we have in common rather than what makes us different. The political discourse of the three case studies has highlighted the ways in which the Western-centric IR, and the Western world in general, needs to stop marginalising non-Western voices. For all of this to happen, the West needs to relinquish its self-appointed role as legitimate storyteller of world affairs and acknowledge that there are other stories that deserve to be told, and that deserve to be heard.

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