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On the Back of U.S Goodwill, China Builds Power in Africa by Propping Up Authoritarian Regimes

By Dr. Isaac K. Gang and Christopher Neiweem

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A few weeks ago, South Sudan briefly entered American headlines because of war, famine, or oil—despite its former status as one of the most resource-rich nations on the continent.

The South Sudanese regime—in a bid to win favor with the Trump administration after a deportation standoff prompted a U.S. visit—agreed to accept several undocumented immigrants. The U.S. Supreme Court later upheld the federal government's authority to deport individuals to a country under repressive rule.

This fleeting moment of focus on the world's youngest country—into America's most contentious political and constitutional fight—conceals a deeper truth about a changing global order and America's place in it.

South Sudan is a case study in how authoritarian regimes have been empowered through the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political tutelage and export of repression—and how years of uncritical U.S. goodwill have subsidized the rise of a hidden one-party state beholden to Beijing.

After the death of founding leader Dr. John Garang in 2005, Salva Kiir, his less stately and seemingly loyal deputy, who had served as an intelligence officer in the Sudanese armed forces—assumed leadership and oversaw independence in 2011, and has yet to hold a national election.

Under Kiir's rule, South Sudan has transformed into a de facto one-party state. Promises of democracy have been replaced by repression and conflict.

Fearing an electoral process that could empower his vice president,

communities persist

Gloria Swindler Boutte

Riek Machar—a more charismatic, U.S.-oriented policy wonk who came from the University of Bradford—Kiir derailed South Sudan's transition roadmap and ignited the 2013 civil war.

Lasting until 2018, the war saw government-aligned forces target communities deemed disloyal—leading to atrocities widely documented by the United Nations and international researchers.

What has allowed such a predatory regime to survive?

Strategic ambiguity with the West—and, more decisively, growing patronage from the CCP. Quietly courted by Kiir in the wake of his death—and behind the back of his vice president—Beijing's influence sustained the regime.

Even as Mr. Kiir publicly sought Western legitimacy and aid, his government steered South Sudan toward Chinese fealty.

By 2013, his ruling clique had siphoned nearly \$1 billion from donor-backed programs—including U.S.-funded demobilization efforts—exploiting American goodwill while deepening ties with Beijing. Some of those resources were later used to wage war against Vice President Machar and the pro-Western voices aligned with him.

Though framed as investments in the people, the CCP's privilege to oil, infrastructure, and strategic assets amounts to tribute from a one-party state—exchanged for political patronage.

The country's telecom infrastructure is now Chinese-dominated. The sector is controlled by two Chinese state-owned giants—CNPC and Sinopec. The Export-Import Bank of China finances most major infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, party-state cadres participate in mentorship exchanges in Beijing—part of the CCP's broader effort to export its authoritarian model across Africa.

No figure better embodies this pivot than former ambassador to China and recently appointed Foreign Minister Monday Semaya Kumba visited Washington, D.C., last week.

A month ago, on his first overseas trip, Mr. Kumba led a delegation to Beijing. There, he met with China's foreign minister, state oil executive and the president of Tsinghua University—Xi Jinping's alma mater—Kumba's as well. His rise reflects Juba's reliance on Chinese patronage and Beijing's stake in South Sudan.

Kumba's Washington trip aimed to parlay symbolic gestures of cooperation into the loosening of U.S. visa restrictions and targeted sanctions—tangible benefits for South Sudan's ruling elite, not the people.

The brazen intentions of Kiir's ostensible emissary in the nation were a textbook example of the double game CCP-aligned regimes perfected with the United States: symbolic gestures on the surface, transactional gain beneath—all while reinforcing loyalty to Beijing.

The message is clear: for CCP client regimes, China is the anchor, the United States is the mark.

The Trump administration—and U.S. policymakers more broadly—

recognize the pattern. For decades, Washington believed economic engagement with China would lead to political liberalization. In Beijing's deception fueled U.S. deindustrialization and empowered a strategic adversary.

We must change course. Failure to do so will not only harm U.S. but rob Africans of their hope for freedom, prosperity, and national renewal.

South Sudan offers a vivid example of what must change. U.S. engagement should be recalibrated—diplomatic legitimacy and be conditional on measurable governance outcomes. That includes release of Vice President Riek Machar, full compliance with the embargo, and a credible 2026 election process that guarantees freedom.

America's goodwill was central to South Sudan's birth. It should be used to finance the ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party.

Christopher Neiweem is an Iraq War Veteran and lobbyist who represents the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO). Further information can be found with the U.S. Department of Justice FARA Unit.

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