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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

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SL: More than a Cold War Playground

The Takeaway:

- There's an ongoing debate in Washington over whether the United States and China are engaged in a new Cold War. But whatever one chooses to call it, this dangerous posturing is already playing out — in Subsaharan Africa.
- From rebuffing communism, to opening Africa to neocolonial economic exploitation, and now to “competing” with China, the United States has largely used its foreign policy towards Subsaharan Africa to profit and to serve its perceived geopolitical interests elsewhere in the world. Rarely has it centered the needs of everyday people.
- U.S. foreign policy will be most effective not through asserting dominance — military, economic, or otherwise — but through building up the power of everyday people and prioritizing strategic cooperation, not an arms race, with a growing power like China.

A Renewed Sphere of Influence: Subsaharan Africa

Last weekend, reports revealed that the Chinese government had tested a new [hypersonic missile](#), sparking the latest wave of panic among China hawks and some U.S. policymakers. They warned that the United States is being [outpaced](#) in its military capabilities; that it will be [defenseless against an attack](#); and that we [must act now!](#)

While the proliferation of extremely deadly weapons — by anyone, anywhere — is concerning, what is equally concerning is the war lobby inflating the threat of this missile test in order to justify more weapons buildup.

This missile launch was the most recent move in a broader [arms race](#) between the United States and China that's been carrying on for years. And with the current mood in Washington, it's about to ramp up even more.

So is [a new Cold War](#) upon us?

Regardless of whether you think the analogy is apt, it's clear that the United States is framing its policy towards other countries as a means to gain power vis-a-vis China, with little regard for who will be impacted the most.

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A New Cold War?

Throughout the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, both countries battled for global dominance, often engaging in hostile behavior or outright violent conflict to pursue their respective military and economic interests. And both countries sought to strengthen their power by building “spheres of influence,” or alliances and arrangements where they imposed their will on smaller “weak” states and organizations in order to shape a global world order to their liking. From Cuba to Vietnam to Afghanistan, the United States and the U.S.S.R. fought proxy wars, forged trade agreements, built out weapons systems, and more, in a constant pursuit of power. The result? Both countries viewed the other as a threat and doubled down on militaristic engagement that protected the interests of the elite over [everyday people's needs](#) or the [health of the planet](#).

Since the United States and China are some of each other's largest trading partners, some argue that their economic interconnectedness would not allow for the new Cold War to turn hot, resulting in a full-blown U.S.-China war. But it is clear that some of the under-examined aspects of the Cold War of old have already materialized between the United States and China. In fact, one look around the globe shows that the United States is focused on solidifying its [“spheres of influence”](#) as China's economy and international influence grow.

A Hidden Frontier: Sub-Saharan Africa

It's no secret that China has spent [considerable resources](#) in the last few decades on formulating trade agreements, infrastructure projects, and more across the African continent as a way to expand its military and economic power — power which the Biden administration has argued is a threat to people in the United States and the rest of the [“rules-based order.”](#) Several U.S. [pundits](#) and policymakers, including Trump, have framed U.S. foreign policy towards countries in Sub-Saharan Africa as a [means](#) to push back against China's spreading influence.

But what's not being said is how the pursuit of maintaining a “sphere of influence” in Sub-Saharan Africa means continuing disastrous policies that have caused immense harm. While it's impossible to sum up an entire region of the world, U.S. activities across the continent have often involved training and equipping corrupt security forces, backing authoritarian governments, and pursuing economic exploitation to serve the United States' larger (often misguided) geopolitical goals, without regard for the needs or lives of people in Africa. Continuing military-first engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa as a means to “compete” with China will only submerge the U.S. into lasting, Cold War-esque conflicts with drastic, [damaging effects](#) on the lives of people in Africa and beyond.

“Strategic Competition”...or Dangerous Militarism?

With [29 military bases](#) across the continent, the U.S. military presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is alive and well, and it heavily shapes U.S. engagement with African countries. U.S. policy towards the region is largely dominated by carrying out [“counterterrorism”](#) operations and

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delivering “security assistance” to foreign governments and opposition groups in the form of [training and equipping](#) their security forces.

But many of these operations have backfired, [failing](#) to curb the activities and power of armed groups that perpetrate terrorism. Instead, these operations have enabled corruption, [coups d'état](#), and [human rights abuses](#) — without any real accountability from the United States. For example, U.S.-trained military officers have organized coups in multiple countries, including [Guinea](#) and [Mali](#).

Further, United States Africa Command, or AFRICOM, which is responsible for U.S. military operations on the continent, has carried out numerous covert operations, without legal authorization, and [drone strikes](#) in Somalia, [Niger](#), and [beyond](#) that have caused civilian casualties that often go under- or unreported.

There is [ample evidence](#) that this [military-first approach](#) has utterly failed to improve the security of people in the United States or across Sub-Saharan Africa. So no, we don't think “[strategic competition](#)” with China is a good reason to continue or ramp up this militaristic engagement that has caused far more harm than good.

Propping up Crooks and Dictators

While the president and the Blob are working overtime to frame ramping up tensions with China as a righteous struggle between autocracy and democracy, they are equally eager to forget the United States' long and ongoing role in backing undemocratic governments everywhere. In the Cold War era, the United States justified its support for corrupt and authoritarian leaders in Africa as necessary to fend off communism.

From backing [Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship](#) for 30 years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (and subsequently backing his overthrow), to U.S. political leaders fawning over [Rwanda's president Paul Kagame](#) despite decades of credible human rights violations, to propping up Uganda's dictator [Yoweri Museveni](#) despite repeated human rights offenses and abuses of power — the United States has truly done it all. And the United States has continued to support undemocratic governments supposedly to encourage political stability that will bring about economic gain. This has included a push to get these governments to deregulate, [privatize](#), and introduce [austerity](#) programs. And often, militarism and economic exploitation go hand in hand, such as how Camp Lemonnier, a U.S. military base in Djibouti, is also used to guard commercial [shipping routes](#).

But who has the “stability” that comes from backing dictators really served? While many countries in Africa have experienced economic growth in the past two decades, this has [largely benefitted elites](#), while the vast majority of people live in poverty. It's no coincidence that seven of the world's ten [most unequal countries](#) are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. So while these

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policies have often done little to significantly improve the lives and livelihoods of Africans, they have certainly provided the United States, other wealthy countries, and multinational corporations with more opportunity for [economic exploitation](#) of the continent.

We need to recognize the harm we cause to people caught in the crosshairs of our Cold Wars, and that where people call home is more than just a playground for acquiring power and profit. It's time for a progressive foreign policy that prioritizes positive engagement with people living in Sub-Saharan Africa — and centers their agency and their dignity rather than treating them as pawns in our misguided pursuit of global military dominance.

BURIED LEDES

This week, **Win Without War joined 120 organizations in signing [a letter](#) urging Biden to provide transparency and action on Afghan resettlement policy.** No humanitarian parole applications have been approved since the end of August. What's going on, Mr. President?

Netflix employees staged [a walk-out](#) earlier this week, protesting for trans and nonbinary rights after Netflix released Dave Chappelle's comedy special spreading hateful comments about the trans community. Yet another addition to [Striketober](#) — more power to the people!

President Bolsonaro has been [accused of crimes against humanity](#) by a Brazilian congressional panel for his management of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that his policies caused the death of 300,000 Brazilians. It turns out, you can hold political leaders accountable for their choice to put their own personal politics ahead of the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Biden's Build Back Better agenda looks a lot less "expensive" when you [compare it to our Pentagon budget](#). So, maybe it's time to invest in our communities and realize that *human security is national security*.

Reporting found that **the Trump administration considered sending over half of the active U.S. army — [250,000 troops — to the US-Mexico border](#)**; another plan suggested sending forces *into* Mexico to hunt drug cartels. Yes, the military [can be manipulated](#) by a few men in suits, and it could happen again.

For the first time in 10 years, [a Guantanamo detainee's habeas case was decided in favor of the detainee](#): Asadullah Haroon Gul's detention was unlawful. Will this be the push our political leaders need to finally shut down GITMO for good?

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If you want more than our distilled take today, take a moment for [a longer read](#) on the history of China's position in our current international system and how we can push for a future of international cooperation rather than unnecessary escalation.

And finally, remember to check the weather today! Is it [a bones or no bones day](#)? The answer may shock you.