

Africa Is Choosing China over the U.S.: The Case of Cape Verde

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In February the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, made it a priority to phone Rui Figueiredo, the Foreign Affairs and Defense Minister of Cape Verde. They spoke about commerce and “security.” ^[1]

Why is the tiny African nation of Cape Verde (population 550,000) a U.S. priority? It is because the U.S. is behind China in the latest “scramble for Africa.”



Source: operationworld.org

To rectify its position, vis-à-vis China, in Africa, U.S. President Joe Biden [pledged](#) to put values at the heart of his administration’s China policy. Since entering office, he has [called on](#) the world’s democracies to “gird for a new era of strategic competition with China.”^[2]

To cut through U.S. rhetoric and reveal the covert value system of the U.S. in Africa, the word “security” is instructive.

Antony Blinken’s concern for the “security” of Cape Verde automatically activates a destructive infrastructure that’s summed up in the Americanisms: “war on drugs,” “war on terror” and the “United States African Command” (AFRICOM). War and its latest accoutrements actually define U.S. values in Africa.

A Pentagon map, for example, shows a [network of 29 bases stretching from one side of Africa to the other](#).



Map of U.S. bases in Africa. [Source: [bing.com](#)]

The U.S. at the same time has provided [billions of dollars in security assistance](#) to local partners, conducted persistent counterterrorism operations that include commando raids, [combat by U.S. Special Operations forces in at least 13 African countries between 2013 and 2017](#), and a [record number of U.S. airstrikes in Somalia](#) (just over one attack per week in 2019).

The Chinese by contrast have focused on the development of large infrastructural projects across the continent, which have been financed in part as a form of payback for Chinese exploitation of Africa’s mineral wealth.

Cape Verde has few mineral resources, and China’s investments there are mainly designed to spread goodwill and convey a positive image on the African continent.^[3]

The centerpiece of China’s efforts in Cape Verde is the opening of a university in Praia—the capital city of the archipelago.

China's government has just funded the building of a campus that includes 34 laboratories, five auditoriums, a convention center with capacity for 654 people, and dormitories with 382 beds, in addition to classrooms, computers and reading rooms, a library, cafeterias and sport facilities. It was built by China's LongXin Construction Group.^[4]

In Cape Verde, China has also funded the expansion of the presidential and government palaces and a national stadium, which has been hailed by then-ambassador Su Jian as [“the greatest construction after independence.”](#)

The juxtaposition between China's spectacular contributions to Cape Verdean society and U.S. militarism captures two contemporary approaches to Africa. In simple terms, one involves the barrel of a gun and the other involves a wheelbarrow.

One is marked by violence and racism and the other by a solidarity with roots in the Third World movement. One is imperialist and the other, to a certain degree, liberationist.

Kickstarting the Slave Trade

The tragic humiliation of Africa began in Cape Verde. In 1462, Portugal began the European colonization of tropical Africa on the island of Santiago—in a settlement then called Ribeira Grande.^[5]

In the process, the Portuguese kick-started the Atlantic slave trade that eventually spawned the USA. Or, as Walter Rodney put it in his seminal volume entitled [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa](#), Africa developed Europe at the same rate as Europe underdeveloped Africa.



Painting of the Portuguese slave trade in Cape Verde. [Source: cratediggs.blogspot.com]

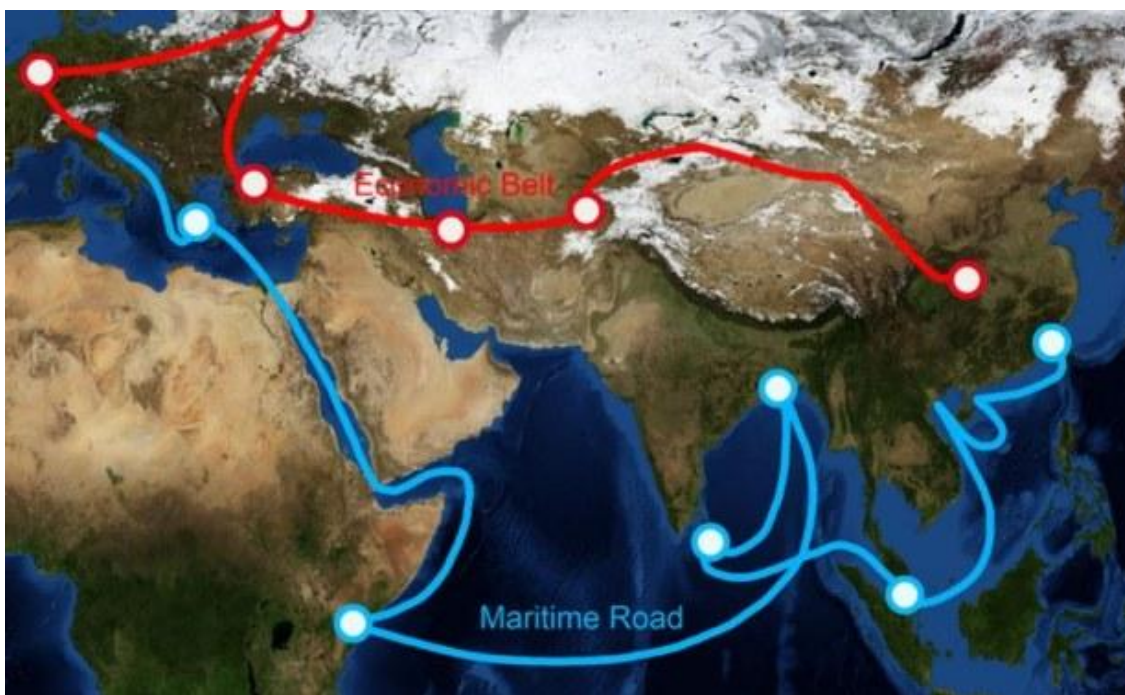
Although not entirely analogous, China's century of humiliation echoed what happened in

Africa. The British colonization of a tropical island (Hong Kong) triggered fragmentation and the obnoxious opium trade—the trade which gave rise to powerful U.S. dynasties and U.S. institutions (Forbes, the Astors, the Delanos, U.S. Steel, Ford, General Motors, and the universities of Harvard, Yale and Princeton).^[6]

The humiliation of Africa and China at the hands of Europe and the U.S. cannot be brushed aside. When considering China's current investment in Africa and Africa's openness to this investment, it is imperative to include the long African and Chinese struggles against Western imperialism.

The founders of modern China and modern Cape Verde—Mao Zedong and Amilcar Cabral—were two of the greatest anti-imperialists of the 20th century. And both nations still tap into the Third-World perspective to develop their people.

For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative—of which Cape Verde is a strategic part—is boldly uniting the economies of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is the materialization of the South-South alternative which first emerged in the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia.



Map of China's one-belt-one-road initiative. [Source: allafrica.com]

The 20th century struggle against Western imperialism was even more global than imperialism itself. To bring down the Portuguese empire, for instance, required not just pan-Africanism but universalism (the equality of all races and all nations). Amilcar Cabral identified this in his speeches and writing:

“One should not forget that the African revolution is in the service of the peace and progress of humanity as a whole. If the African peoples succeed in taking into their hands, exploit and develop rationally all the material and human resources of their countries, it will be a decisive contribution to world peace, to the total disappearance of imperialism ...”

“One should not forget that whatever the particularities of the African case and

the possible originality of African societies, the laws of their development are the same as those of all the other human societies.”^[7]

These were not abstract thoughts. Cabral, in the 1960s, explicitly connected the struggle for freedom in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau with universalistic societies throughout the world.

Cabral and other leaders of PAIGC [African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde] became regular guests at the Chinese embassy in Conakry [Guinea]. In 1960, the PAIGC received an invitation from the Chinese Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity to visit China. A delegation from the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was invited as well. During this visit, China agreed to use their military academies to train combatants from both the PAIGC and the MPLA.

As a result of Cabral’s leadership and diplomacy, China would emerge as one of Guinea-Bissau’s [and Cape Verde’s] first supporters in the early stage of its struggle for independence. China provided the PAIGC with a great diversity of support, from weaponry to assistance broadcasting radio messages denouncing the regular, horrific crimes of the Portuguese military in Guinea-Bissau. With support from China on one hand, and Portuguese brutality on the other, the anti-colonial struggle intensified between 1963 and 1974.^[8]

After the collapse of Portuguese imperialism in 1974, and the independence of Cape Verde in 1975, the relationships Cape Verde made during its struggle against Western racism continued. None was more important or more lasting than that with China.

Since its own birth in 1949, the People’s Republic of China has been supporting the construction of an Africa free from imperialism. This revolutionary narrative—in one way or the other—forms the backbone of China’s modern engagement with the continent.

Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People’s Republic of China, was a key signatory to the ten Bandung principles in 1955—which outlined Afro-Asian solidarity. These guiding points were based on the Charter of the United Nations and its idea of peaceful cooperation. But explicit, in the principles, was the belief “in the equality of all races and ... the equality of all nations large and small.”^[9]



Zhou Enlai signs autograph for an admirer at the 1955 Bandung Conference. [Source: chinadaily.com]

The U.S. response to this egalitarian initiative within the Third World was an act of covert war: The CIA planted a bomb on the airplane it believed was transporting Zhou Enlai to Bandung. On April 11, 1955, 16 people died in the mid-air explosion between Hong Kong and Indonesia. The Chinese Premier, however, was on a different aircraft.^[10]

In the decades following the Bandung Conference, China outlined its position regarding Africa more clearly. Speaking in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1964, Zhou Enlai said:

“Although the Chinese people and the African peoples speak different languages and are thousands of miles apart, we have similarly experienced aggression and oppression by imperialism and colonialism, and we face the common fighting tasks of opposing imperialism and building up our respective countries. We understand each other best and we share each other’s feelings.”

^[11]

And, significantly, this message of solidarity and common struggle against Western racism continued after the death of Mao in 1976.

In 1996 the Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, speaking to the Organization of African Unity (OAU), stated that the Chinese and African people “never have ... had any conflicts between them.” Instead, “both [have] suffered enormously under colonialists and foreign aggression.” And as a result, they are “joining hands in building the solid foundation of Sino-African friendship and cooperation ...” The developmental goal was to eliminate “the unjust and inequitable economic order left over from the past.”^[12]

This decades-long anti-imperialist approach to Africa was then institutionalized in 2000 in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). And it was clarified in the words of China’s leaders when they addressed the first Forum in Beijing. Premier Zhu Rongji spoke of the

“road towards friendship and cooperation [that] is covered with the footprints

of Chinese and African leaders of several generations....”

Image on the right: Zhu Rongji [Source: britannica.com]



He spoke of this “joint struggle waged by the Chinese and African peoples shoulder by shoulder ... [to create] a fair and rational new international political and economic order.”^[13]

And President Jiang Zemin could not have been more explicit:

“[H]aving smashed the shackles of the colonial rule that lasted for several centuries, the African people won their national liberation and independence ... and the Chinese people did away with imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism ...

“We have come to the conclusion after a review of the history of the past one hundred years that the Chinese people and the African people both treasure independence ... and ... are both important forces for world peace and common development.”^[14]

This anti-colonial value system underlies China’s investment in Africa today. And it helps to explain not only the new Chinese-built university in Cape Verde but also the Chinese-built Poilão dam in Cape Verde—as well as the Chinese-built national stadium in Cape Verde. It explains why China is building a special economic zone in Cape Verde—on the island of São Vicente. And it explains why the U.S. government is today so anxious about Africa.^[15]

However, the fact is that China’s deep anti-imperialist narrative regarding Africa is only credible if there is an opposing deep imperialist narrative. It is only believable if Chinese construction in Africa is countered by imperialist destruction. It only holds water if the imperialist leopard—in Africa—has not changed its spots.

The evidence suggests that it has not. Portugal may have pulled back from Cape Verde and its other colonies, but the U.S. has rushed in to fill its imperialist boots.

In 1949, the U.S. aligned itself with Europe’s empires—U.S. President Joe Biden now calls these “the world’s democracies”—the British, French, Dutch, Belgian and Portuguese. At the time, Africa was still in the grip of these European racists. And one of the objectives of this new alignment—NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)—was to tighten that grip on Africa.

Cape Verde’s hero—Amilcar Cabral—was completely aware of the post-World War II

restructuring of imperialism. In 1968, he noted:

“[T]he Portuguese government is able to count more than ever on the effective aid of the NATO allies ...

“It is our duty to stress the international character of the Portuguese colonial war against Africa and the important and even decisive role played by the USA ... If the Portuguese government is still holding out on the three fronts of the war which it is fighting in Africa, it is because it can count on the overt or covert support of the USA, freely use NATO weapons [and] buy B26 aircraft for the genocide of our people ...” ^[16]

Since the assassination of Cabral in 1973, the U.S. and its NATO proxies may have lost their formal grip on Africa; but they continue to strangle Africa militarily. The most blatant example of this is NATO’s destruction of Libya in 2011.

Before the U.S. and its “democratic” partners bombed Libya, that country “had the highest Human Development Index, the lowest infant mortality and the highest life expectancy in all of Africa.”^[17] There was also—at the time of the bombardment—75 Chinese companies (36,000 employees) working inside Libya—constructing housing, railways, telecommunications and hydroelectric facilities. ^[18]

The end result of NATO’s unprovoked act of war against Libya (and Africa) was a catastrophic socio-economic reversal in the region, summarized in headlines such as “Slavery in Libya: Life inside a container”^[19] and “Slavery and Human Trafficking in Libya.”^[20]

When asked about the murder of the man (Muammar Gaddafi) who led Libya to the top of the African human development index, the then U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, succinctly expressed the barbaric values underpinning the U.S. approach to Africa: “We came, we saw, he died.” And then she laughed. ^[21]

War is the language of imperialism and, in Africa today, the U.S. speaks it fluently. Under the cover of “counterterrorism” and “counterinsurgency,” the U.S. and its NATO allies are inserting their forces throughout the continent.

On the one hand, there is the ongoing French Operation Barkhane (2014) that has spread thousands of NATO soldiers across West Africa.

And on the other hand, there is the United States African Command (AFRICOM—founded in 2007). The mission statement of AFRICOM is clear: It exists to “to advance U.S. national interests ... and ... support U.S. Government foreign policy ... through military-to-military activities.” ^[22]

In 2019, just 12 years after its creation, AFRICOM had a “network” of 29 military bases spread across 15 African countries. ^[23]

Indeed, for U.S. leaders Africa is now “a petri dish and a proving ground for the development of a limited power-projection [paradigm](#) of drones, Special Operations forces, military advisers, local proxies, and clandestine intelligence missions.” ^[24]

This is alarming for Africa because it recalls the covert role of the U.S. military in post-World War Two Latin America. U.S. “military-to-military activities” in that part of the Third World resulted in neo-fascist dictatorships and “lost decades of development.”

Only a few decades after losing Africa, Western imperialism is back in Africa with a bang. And “Great Power Competition” is its excuse.

NATO’s purpose is to defend the economic order into which it was born. In 1949 the global economy revolved around the North Atlantic and its Bretton Woods system. To guarantee the flow of global wealth toward Western Europe and North America, NATO teamed up with institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

However, it is this precise order—an order which props up the West at the expense of the Third World—which was challenged by the 1949 Chinese revolution and the decolonization of Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.

The exponential growth of the People’s Republic of China and the current export of that growth to Africa amount now to being a supercharged extension of that challenge.

The struggles for political freedom in Africa, therefore, have transformed into struggles for economic freedom—indeed for economic survival.

After NATO’s wars against African liberation there followed “NATO’s neoliberal attack” on Africa. NATO’s neocolonial debt traps and structural adjustment policies have plagued Africa since the 1980s. In fact, U.S. free-market fundamentalism sabotaged the freedom which Africa fought for.

The values underpinning this U.S. faith in the market—a *propos* Africa—were revealed in the infamous Summers memo of 1991. At the time Lawrence Summers was Chief Economist and Vice President at the World Bank. In his opinion,

the “under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low [sic] compared to Los Angeles.” ^[25]

In other words, this top U.S. economic strategist was advocating “the dumping of toxic waste in Africa.” ^[26]

For many observers, though, it is even worse than that: The dictates of the U.S.-based World Bank and IMF created an “apocalyptic situation” in post-colonial Africa.

“The most basic index of well-being is life itself—how many years a human can expect to live. Yet while other regions’ life expectancy is steadily improving ... Africa’s is now going backwards:

“Life expectancy declined in no fewer than 31 African countries between 1995 and 1998.”

The imperialist logic of neoliberalism in Africa is clear: “[It] is actually planned and reminiscent of the paleo-liberal strategy of the British state in the famines in Ireland and India and the Clearances of the Scottish Highlands in the 19th century.”

The objective conclusion can only be that U.S.-trained economists—the disciples of Milton Friedman inside the IMF and World Bank—since the liberation of Africa, “[have] knowingly ... incorporated the death of millions as an element in their strategy ... Theirs is clearly a strategy of ‘terror from above.’”^[27]

As the 21st century began, China entered into this “apocalyptic” U.S.-made situation. And as it did in the 1960s, it changed the orientation of Africa for the better. In contrast to Western “terror from above” (dictates and drones), China has been building up from below.

Since 2011, [China has been the biggest player](#) in Africa’s infrastructure boom, claiming a 40% share that continues to rise. Meanwhile, the shares of other players are falling precipitously: Europe declined from 44% to 34%, while the presence of U.S. contractors fell from 24% to just 6.7%. ^[28]

Today’s partnership between Cape Verde and China is the cutting edge of this “construction boom.” In the 1960s these two nations combined to defeat the politics of imperialism. Now they are combining to battle the economics of imperialism: “the unjust and inequitable economic order left over from the past.”

If there is “great power competition” in Africa today, the U.S. has already lost the moral high ground since it remains committed to the infrastructure of imperialism—a system which creates nothing but destabilization. For the U.S., therefore, Africa is first and foremost a “security issue”—a “heart of darkness.”

Africa, however, is not an ahistorical enigma or a prize to be won in a competition. It is a proud continent which broke free from imperialism around the same time as China broke free from imperialism. And at the 1955 Bandung Conference both Africa and China invested in freedom from empire and peaceful cooperation. No evidence to date suggests that China has disavowed the spirit of Bandung.

In stark contrast, the U.S.—around 1950—chose to partner with Western Europe (NATO) rather than with the world. It chose empire. It chose to violently oppose “Bandung.” It chose war, racism and the neoliberal apocalypse. If Africa must now choose between China and the U.S., the choice is obvious.

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Notes

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Featured image: Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) meets with Cape Verde's Prime Minister Ulisses Correia e Silva at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, capital of China, Sept. 6, 2018. [Source: xinhuanet.com]

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