

# China's evangelising mission

I recently [argued that Africa's key challenge is that it has outsourced the right to self-define.](#) Although I focused on political and economic management, this is a challenge that is across almost all key areas of society, including in education. In fact, it would be wrong to characterise the extent of the challenge as a struggle rather than a submission. There was a time when such struggle – for the right to self-define – existed.

On the struggle's frontline were people like Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara, and a few others. However, their fate scared the generation of African leaders that came after, hence the total submission. A crop of leaders that is averse to trouble making – fighting over the right to self-definition – emerged thereafter and understood that the power they had did not include this prerogative. Those who quickly understood that they could live in the master's house but they could not rearrange the furniture thrived, accepting the reality that they were to receive orders.

The entry of China into this equation is rearranging the chairs. It is messing with this settlement that is otherwise known as neo-colonialism. China understood that the submission of African leaders was an instinctive reaction to the demise of the Lumumbas. China's entry was to disrupt this settlement.

If the African leaders were robbed of the right to self-define, how could the Chinese dangle this possibility? What if African leaders were told that there was a way they could reclaim the ability to operationalize political and economic governance, that they could rearrange the furniture?

Enter the principle of “non-interference.” Chinese engagement with Africa is premised on the idea that it does not concern itself with the internal affairs of the independent states. In

other words, it is an offer for its partners to substantiate independence, to self-define. This is the allure of the Chinese, from the perspective of African leaders.

Credit to the Chinese foreign policy architects. The set of tools at their disposal are diametrically opposed to those deployed by the Europeans and Americans. Whereas the Europeans and Americans usurped Africa's prerogative to self-define, the Chinese insist that it is none of their business, a sovereign right that must be respected through non-interference.

This is disruptive. The disruption has been far-reaching. The traditional territorial subdivision of Africa along external interests increasingly makes less sense, for instance. Chinese influence cuts across Lusophone, Anglophone, French, British, and even American spheres of influence.

Consequently, these countries are being pressured to fight back to fortify their positions. Gradually, they will be forced to meet the Chinese on their terrain: they will dangle the right to self-definition.

In 2019 President Trump unveiled the "Prosper Africa" strategy that was exactly about this need to pivot and viewed as a response to China's "predatory practices" in Africa. John Bolton, his national security advisor, noted that the strategy is needed for "safeguarding the economic independence of African States and protecting U.S. national security interests." Significantly, trade and infrastructure development has also been given a prominent role in the new strategy, with over \$60bn committed.

It is not only the Americans who have panicked. The British – still believing in soft power – have reinforced the BBC. Over the past couple of years an intensive recruitment drive to attract Africa's brilliant young talent to fill its Nairobi Bureau – the biggest outside the UK – has been underway.

**Historical baggage**

Unlike the Americans and Europeans, China does not carry with it historical baggage – slavery and colonialism. On the contrary, it enjoys historical credit due to its stance in support of decolonisation and its observer status to the Non-Aligned Movement serves as a solidarity reference point.

But while China has made inroads in the hearts of Africa leaders, Europe and America remain in the hearts of Africans. The same way the Chinese are relying on the “non-interference” policy as bait to lure African leaders in pursuit of their own interests, the Europeans had deployed the soft power architecture including religion, education, democracy, human rights, and the media as allure to conceal their real interests.

These instruments of persuasion allowed the Europeans to paint Africa in their image over the past century. Similarly, Africa is expected to be painted in the Chinese imagination in this century. Once China has successfully wrestled Africa from the grips of Europe and America, its true colours are expected to emerge – much the same way the true colours of Europeans emerged after the evangelization of Africans.

It behoves the Africans to see the period of non-interference as a grace period and to fortify themselves during the interregnum before the Chinese true colours emerge. The temporary period of non-interference is only tactical – its bait. Expecting that the Chinese will always have a hands-off approach would be naïve – like the naivety of evangelisation. It is a matter of time before they impose themselves. The invisible hand in the coup that removed Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe is early evidence that Chinese non-interference may end sooner rather than later. So are the “uncoordinated troop movements” in South Sudan via force deployment, to say the least about the scramble for military bases around the Horn of Africa.

Sadly, it appears that when that time comes Africans will not

have developed the tools to resist. It will have wasted the interregnum. Those who have taken loans from banks know how useful the grace period can be. Presently, African leaders are not getting the most of the grace period of non-interference.

African leaders are using the relative autonomy – and breathing space – to access Chinese money to implement the European and American prescriptions of what Africa should be. They are not using the interregnum to reflect deeply around rearranging the proverbial furniture in the house of independence. They are not reflecting about self-definition, about what an autonomously derived political and economic governance would look like, what ethos would undergird those, and what direction and ambitions are possible out of such reflection. In other words, there's little that shows that African leaders have interest in painting Africa in the imagination of Africans.

In whose body will Africans exist this century?