

U.S. ADVISORY COMMISSION ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Minutes and transcript from the September 23, 2022 quarterly public meeting to examine **Public Diplomacy Approaches to Countering Disinformation Effects in Sub-Saharan Africa.**

U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy Quarterly Meeting

Friday, September 23, 2022, 12:00 PM - 1:15 PM ET

International Student House of Washington, DC at 1825 R St. NW, Washington, DC
with on-line (Zoom) access

COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT:

TH Sim Farar, Chair

TH William Hybl, Vice-Chair (via Zoom)

TH Anne Terman Wedner

COMMISSION STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Dr. Vivian S. Walker, Executive Director

Ms. Deneysel Kirkpatrick, Senior Advisor

Ms. Kristy Zamary, Program Assistant

MINUTES:

The U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy met in an open virtual session from 12:00 p.m. to 1:15 p.m. on Friday, September 23, 2022, to discuss public diplomacy efforts to counter disinformation effects in sub-Saharan Africa.

An expert panel of policy and academic experts discussed public diplomacy efforts to counter disinformation effects in Sub-Saharan Africa. Panelists included **Nadège Rolland**, Senior Fellow, Political and Security Affairs, The National Bureau of Asian Research; **Anita Plummer**, Assistant Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of African Studies, Howard University; and **Mark Duerksen**, Research Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies which is at the National Defense University.

ACPD Executive Director Vivian Walker opened the session, and Chairman Sim Farar provided introductory remarks. Vivian Walker moderated the Q&A and Commissioner Anne Wedner provided a discussion wrap-up and closed the meeting. The speakers took questions from the Commissioners and the audience, as detailed in the transcript below.

AUDIENCE:

Approximately 200 participants registered and 60 attended this in-person public meeting. Forty-five logged on to the Zoom platform to view the event virtually including:

- PD practitioners and PD leadership from the Department of State, USAGM, and other agencies;
- Members of the foreign affairs and PD think tank communities;
- Academics in communications, foreign affairs, and other fields;

- Congressional staff members;
- Retired USIA and State PD officers;
- Members of the international diplomatic corps; and
- Members of the public.

Note: The following transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Vivian Walker: Hello everyone. I'm Vivian Walker, the Executive Director and Designated Federal Officer for the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy.

Today, along with our Chairman, Sim Farar, Commissioner Anne Wedner, and Commissioner Bill Hybl, I am pleased to welcome you to this quarterly public meeting held in partial fulfillment of the ACPD's mandate to keep the American people informed about USG public diplomacy activities.

Understanding and addressing disinformation impacts in the sub-Saharan Africa has never been more important. While Chinese influence efforts continue to dominate thanks to large scale infrastructure projects, direct involvement in local politics, and huge investments in education and training opportunities, Russia's influence has also been growing rapidly, if less systematically. China depicts itself as an economic and cultural champion of the Global South and amplifies an anti-Western narrative based on a shared history of imperialism and colonialism. Russia, while also emphasizing its lack of colonial baggage and criticizing the U.S.'s so-called hegemonic intentions, isolates and exploits local grievance and social divisions.

The how and why of these information manipulation challenges are relatively clear. How to address them---much less so. How should the U.S. respond? As experts have pointed out, the U.S. democratic values-based approach to soft power may have met its match in Chinese pragmatism. And Russia's deliberate efforts to sow doubt and discord among vulnerable audiences undermines U.S. soft power projection.

Today we are pleased to present a panel of policy and academic experts who will, we believe, help us to understand how best to address these information manipulation challenges, examining context and motivations, reviewing the role of history and culture, and mapping the disinformation landscape in the region.

Today's distinguished panelists include Nadège Rolland, Senior Fellow, Political and Security Affairs, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Anita Plummer, Assistant Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of African Studies, Howard University, and Mark Duerksen, Research Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, which is at the National Defense University.

Just a quick note on process. Today's speakers will present consecutively, followed by a general question and answer session. We ask those of you on-line to please submit your questions via the chat function.

Please note too that a full transcript of this event will be available on our website: <https://www.state.gov/reports-u-s-advisory-commission-on-public-diplomacy/>.

Now, it is my pleasure to turn to Chairman Farar to open this quarterly meeting.

Sim Farar: Thank you, Vivian, and all of you who have joined us today.

With my distinguished colleagues from the Commission, Vice Chairman Bill Hybl, from Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Anne Wedner from Miami, Florida, I am pleased to welcome you to this quarterly meeting.

This is the first in person public meeting we have hosted in more than two years, so we are especially happy to see you here today. As always, we sincerely appreciate your continued interest in and commitment to the practice of public diplomacy.

Our bipartisan Commission was created by Congress in 1948 to appraise U.S government activities intended to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics and to increase the understanding of, and support for, these same activities.

For nearly three quarters of a century, the Commission has represented the public interest through regular reviews of the U.S. government's global information, media, cultural, and educational exchange programs.

The Commission also assesses the effectiveness of these public diplomacy activities, recommends changes when needed, and reports its findings and recommendations to the President of the United States, Congress, the Secretary of State, and of course, the American people.

Today's topic underscores the role that public diplomacy programs can play in addressing global security and economic challenges in a critical region. As Secretary Blinken said recently, "sub-Saharan Africa is a major geopolitical force, one that shaped our past, is shaping our present, and will shape our future." He called for a joint effort to combat disinformation and highlighted the importance of using public diplomacy tools such as academic and leadership training programs to counter information manipulation campaigns.

I am delighted to welcome this distinguished panel, who will help us to better understand these challenges and explore some solutions.

Once again, thank you for joining us.

Now back to Vivian.

Vivian Walker: It is a distinct pleasure to introduce today's panelists: who, as their bios indicate, bring a wealth of experience and dedication to the issues.

The order of appearance is as follows: Nadège Rolland, Anita Plummer, and Mark Duerksen.

Nadège Rolland: Thank you, Ms. Walker. And thank you to all of you for being here today.

I like the title that you have chosen for today's session, which puts the emphasis on understanding the nature of the influence challenges we face. Before we address, or counter, or think about solutions, we need to understand the problem. We need to have a diagnosis before we think about prescriptions. And we need to understand what is there to counter or to address.

As we do that, I think it is important to refrain from projecting or mirror imaging. Not all countries are doing the same things as the United States does in this information space. They do not necessarily use the same structures. They do not necessarily think about the issues the same way that we do. And they do not necessarily have the same concepts in framing their activities in this space.

There are several unique characteristics in the case of China, which is the focus of my presentation today. Let's start with terminology. The phrase they use is the "struggle for international public opinion," part of which includes external propaganda, which is part of what the Chinese Party-State calls "United Front work." Already we are starting with different terminology: what we call "public diplomacy" is, for China, a "public opinion struggle." So, you can see the difference from the beginning.

United Front work is essential to what the PRC is doing both domestically and internationally. It is a concept that has been inherited from Leninism, that the communist party of China (CCP) has used it since its creation in 1921. It is a key part of how the PRC operates domestically and internationally. It is deeply engrained in their bureaucracies, and it also informs Chinese behavior internationally.

This is not just about disseminating narratives or promoting public policy. It is mainly a concerted strategy to form tactical alliances to engineer an environment that is favorable to the accomplishments of the party's goals, or, at a minimum, a neutral landscape that does not work against the advancement of the party's goals. This strategy is quite different from what we usually understand as public diplomacy.

While they are trying to form those tactical alliances, they are also trying to marginalize or isolate those who might stand in the way of those objectives that the party sees as hostile to its own interests. Such activities have been expanded and accelerated over the past decade, with the Xi Jinping-led CCP identifying them as a priority and their method of choice in support of their global agenda.

It used to be that this United Front work conducted abroad was mainly focused on attempting to control and manage overseas Chinese communities. But the scope of the United Front work has expanded and now includes efforts to coopt foreigners as well as influencing the perceptions of wider audiences.

Another unique characteristic is that these activities also have a sharper edge. The voices that clash with the PRC are usually either scorned, slandered, or silenced. So, there is an offensive

aspect. It is not just positive messaging. The PRC attempts to isolate and reduce the voices that do not speak the same way as the state. The use of persuasion through words is supplemented by attempts at coercion, intimidation, retaliation, and even outright disinformation. The spectrum is much broader than what we might think in terms of objectives.

That is a very broad picture of the information space from the perspective of the Chinese party state. So how does that translate to Africa and the topic of today's discussion? I am not an Africa specialist. I am trying to look at what China is doing in terms of strategy in the global space. I do not have the granular knowledge of my co-panelists. But from Beijing's perspective, the African continent is increasingly seen as a strategic battleground for a struggle against the West, and the U.S. To counter and isolate those who are not in line with China's interests, the PRC strives to create an international United Front mostly comprising emerging and developing countries, including Africa.

There are several layers to what China is trying to achieve in that space. The first one has an international or a global component that plays out mostly in international institutions and multilateral institutions in which Beijing seeks to redefine international norms and values in a way that conforms to its own practices. That requires the help of other countries who might be willing to support or endorse these concepts and norms. One prominent concept Beijing wants to promote, for example, is the right to development instead of human rights. Beijing is also seeking some African votes (or neutrality) on PRC policies that may be problematic, such as those at work in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, or those related to the origin of COVID, for example.

Beijing's diplomacy has also tried to discourage the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and isolate it on the international stage. Much work has been done on that in Africa. Now there is only one country that still has diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Beijing is also trying to ensure that its political, economic, and strategic interests are well served. Think about endorsements received and agreements signed for the belt and road initiative. These examples reflect the PRC's strategic efforts at the national level.

What is slowly emerging, but not yet completely visible, is China's willingness to "share" its experience with African countries and to convince them to replicate China's model of governance (albeit not necessarily fully). This model is promoted as a better path to development and stability than the one offered by liberal democracy.

A very broad spectrum of identities, actors, and front organizations participate in the promotion of Beijing's voice in African countries. Many of them are organized in associations and organizations that look like civil society groups but are strictly controlled by the CCP. They target specific local groups, business and trade networks, media, knowledge centers, universities, think tanks, and youth audiences, including through what we call people-to-people exchanges. In most cases, these exchanges are organized by party-state actors on the Chinese side.

I want to finish with the question of whether China is successful in doing all of that. I think these activities do not necessarily prevent China's image from facing some local criticism and backlash. There have been protests concerning labor conflicts, incidents of racism, and perceived

corruption. Beijing is indeed aware of this backlash and therefore is preparing to adjust its approach, away from a top-down, elite-centric approach to a broader spectrum of audiences.

Vivian Walker: Thank you so much, Nadège. I especially appreciated how, at the outset, you reminded us to think about the issues from the Chinese perspective. For example, the explanation of the very different way in which Beijing defines public diplomacy is illuminating, and one that should compel us to rethink and deepen our approaches to addressing these challenges.

Now we are fortunate to hear from Anita Plummer, who will dig more deeply into the question of Chinese soft power effects in Africa and particularly the way in which China relies on history and culture to project its influence.

Anita Plummer: It is a pleasure to join you today. I want to thank the members of the Commission, along with Dr. Vivian Walker and Deneysel Kirkpatrick, for inviting me to participate.

I want to focus my comments on China's efforts to engage foreign audiences in Africa--Kenya. This is just one case study from which some generalizations can be made.

My research focuses on how Kenyan publics are understanding, deliberating, arguing, and responding to policies of state actors in the Sino-African sphere. Not only in Kenya but across Africa, the presence of diverse actors is not only visible but also felt as people are experiencing profound changes, especially in their local economic landscapes.

For example, university students are competing for scholarships to study in China. Coastal artisanal fishers are increasingly worried that China's own trawlers are depleting fish stocks. As roads and railways are being built, young people want a fair shot at working in one of the multi-million-dollar Chinese-funded infrastructure projects. Global activists and business owners alike are bracing for the prospect that the Kenyan government, in particular, may not be able to service its bilateral debt to China.

On a local level, there are anxieties about increased ties between Kenya and China. China's soft power strategies are firmly rooted in the imperative to access resources and markets while elites on the other side use China's engagement to promote their own interests both politically and economically. Even though we are focusing on China, African elites also have a lot of skin in the game in how these narratives are shaped.

A nation like China, whose visibility has rapidly increased on the ground in Kenya, must cultivate a positive reputation to build credibility. The most important tool of China's public diplomacy are Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, which are located across Africa and designed to teach Mandarin and Chinese culture to foreign publics. Michael Kunczik defines public relations between nations as "the planned and continuous distribution of interest-bound information by a state aimed (mostly) at improving a country's image abroad."

In practice, China's public relations also includes robust engagements with Kenya's print, television, and radio outlets along with social media channels like Facebook and Twitter. This is in addition to Chinese state-run media outlets that also operate in Kenya. China's public diplomacy and soft power efforts are creating state-produced narratives aimed at influencing Kenyan publics and shaping discourses.

Across Africa and worldwide, Confucius Institutes are the Chinese's government's primary tool for diffusing language, culture, and values to foreign publics. The Confucius Institutes are non-profit institutions partially funded by the Chinese government aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture to foreign audiences.

In addition to these institutes, the Chinese government also uses several mechanisms to spread its influence such as China Radio International and Chinese Central Television, or CCTV. In January of 2012, China's Central Television launched its first African based studio in Nairobi. CCTV is estimated to have seven hundred million viewers in one hundred and seventy countries. And now we are seeing news from Africa.

There have been two recent studies that look at the impact of China's public diplomacy and media staffed in Kenya. Both found little to no evidence that their efforts are shaping the views of Kenyans about China. The effectiveness of these big projects is in question. Chinese assistance to Kenya in the form of food aid to drought-stricken regions and medical aid to support COVID-19 responses is significant. These initiatives demonstrate the Chinese government's desire to influence Kenyan publics and shape perceptions around China's regional economic and global presences.

According to *Afrobarometer* polls conducted in Kenya in 2019 and 2020, 65 percent of Kenyan respondents thought China's economic and political influence was positive. However, there was an 11-point drop in favorability from 2014, when 76% of Kenyan respondents had a positive view of China. So, something is happening here. Despite the perception that China's influence is positive, there has been a shift in public opinion and attitudes remain tenuous. And this has been the focus of my research.

The Chinese government's ability to shape its image in Kenya among diverse publics depends on many complex factors, such as which audiences they intend to influence, how they reach them, and what messages they want to communicate. For example, narratives targeted at local political officials emphasize external interference in domestic affairs, invoking historical connections and struggles for independence. Chinese officials, by contrast, wish to appear non-threatening, saying that they do not seek hegemony.

At the same time, they are challenging the power of the west, saying "stand with us as international bodies or at least do not oppose us." Their intensive messaging and programs specifically target entrepreneurs, students, journalists, and political parties, as Nadège has already mentioned. These strategies are not particularly new or novel, having been used during the Cold War and since.

The major difference is the way in which social media has affected engagement in the public sphere. There are diverse state and non-state actors from China operating all over Africa. Migration, for example, has become a hot-button issue in many African nations. China's ability to manage its image has become a little bit more challenging because the lines between the state, the private sector, and individuals from China are blurred. Managing people's understanding of the complexities of the presence of these different forces from China is very challenging.

Today, I want to provide one very short example of the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi and how both Kenyan leaders and Chinese government officials attempted to shape discourses that were materially and spatially tied to China's public diplomacy on this campus. This case demonstrates the divergent perspectives of individuals and students directly engaged in political projects aimed at China's image enhancement.

In February 2020, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi was trying to gain access to a classroom. The classroom was located on the same floor as the Confucius Institute. And of course, in the age of cellphones, students started recording him as he was complaining about his experience. He started talking about how the institute was blocking members of the university community from a common space.

In the video he mentioned that the university had already given three acres of land in Nairobi—high value real estate--on a campus that is already over capacity in terms of dorms and classroom spaces. He complained that the university and the Kenyan government would give this valuable space to a foreign actor to set up the Confucius Institute headquarters. He said (and this is all on YouTube), "They are closing us out. Where do we go? Are we supposed to go learn under trees? This is Chinese colonialism. Colonization has gone too far." The response on Kenyan social media was swift. The Chinese Embassy very quickly weighed in along with University of Nairobi officials. Online posts on Kenyan Twitter and Facebook called for the institute to close. Among other things, they accused China of being either a colonial or neocolonial force in Kenya.

The idea that China is exploiting African resources and people is common among individual Kenyans. Here Kenyans are using the term colonialism to criticize both the Chinese and the actions of their own government. China's cultural diplomacy in Africa exists to counter such negative narratives. And the Chinese government's insistence that it is not a colonial force shows that it is worried about the counter discourse generated by Kenyan publics in this case.

There seemed (and I say seemed because I do not have evidence of this) to be a social media campaign as well as a traditional media campaign frame during the grand opening of this institute, a beautiful compound with dedicated buildings, highly securitized even though it is on the college campus. There were multiple statements--Facebook posts, Tweets, photos. The Chinese framed the opening as a handover--that the Chinese government was handing over the administrative headquarters of the Confucius Institute to the University of Nairobi. That does not even make any sense.

The point of this case with respect to public diplomacy is that the Chinese government had to contend with what we call the "Africa pavement radio." These are powerful informal

communication networks that used to be in person but now have jumped into social media. Now the public sphere has gotten wider. And more and more people are participating.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has become more willing to openly state that as a global power, it wants to shape international politics to meet China's interests. For example, Xi revised a long-standing national political doctrine originally called the Three Confidences—which centers on the idea of a socialist pattern of development, Marxist theory, and political systems--by adding a fourth: culture or cultural confidence.

This includes the concept that Chinese culture is a form of national strength essential to connecting its past to its future. This provides a foundation for innovation and contributes to the perception of China as a great global civilization. The dissemination of its language and culture is part of China's larger project to position itself as a global power. This was addressed during the 95th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. Xi discussed the power of culture as an affirmation of China's developmental path and political values and contrasted China's values to the capitalist values of the West. China's activities in Kenya are small, but part of a broader project and a global discourse.

I will end with a question too. It is an open question as to whether China's cultural exchanges in Africa and elsewhere will have ethnocentric or hegemonic impacts on local communities in Africa.

Vivian Walker: Thank you so much, Anita. I especially appreciated your insight that when we talk about Chinese influence efforts, the main actors are not solely confined to the Chinese or their platforms or their resources. African elites and leaders also have a key role in manipulating China's strategies to their own ends. And I think that is an important reminder for all of us as we address these challenges.

Now it is my pleasure to welcome Mark Duerksen to talk about Russian disinformation strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mark, please start while we get the technology rolling for you.

Mark Duerksen: Thank you, Vivian, and the members of the Commission. In about half the time, I will attempt to do for Russia what my colleagues have done for China and Africa. I will provide a brief overview of Russian disinformation strategies.

[SEE SLIDE DECK POSTED ON SITE]

[SLIDE 2] Russia is presently very active on the African continent. For the past several years this action been described as "Russia's return into Africa," which has involved the signing of numerous arms deals and of military cooperation agreements, and the deploying of Russian mercenary forces to African countries along with a host of other Russian activities across the continent.

Vladimir Putin and oligarchs connected to him are pursuing several specific strategic objectives on the continent. Sometimes Russia's engagements on the continent are portrayed as haphazard

or opportunistic, but there are clear strategic objectives underpinning these actions. One of them, a central one, is displacing western influence while undermining democratic processes.

In pursuit of these objectives, Russia utilizes coercive and asymmetric tools. A key part of this toolbox is the use of disinformation to manipulate Africa's information spaces in ways that are beneficial to Russian interests while avoiding or redirecting public scrutiny of Russia's track record on the continent.

In thinking about these pursuits, it is helpful to think about Russia as deploying a two-prong approach to its messaging. On one hand--on the deliverable or country-specific level--disinformation architects tailor campaigns to cheerlead the regimes and the autocrats that Russia is working with. These are often isolated, weak regimes who do not have many options for international partners, so they turn to Russia. These campaigns cheerlead these countries rulers during election campaigns. They help to put out phony election polls or election monitors. They also, especially in the social media space, inflame domestic debates, trying to distract and scapegoat away from Russia's record in the country.

[SLIDE 3] At the overarching, broader pan-African level, Russia is promoting three interconnected narratives. The first is that Russia is activating a weariness with the West in many of the countries in which it operates. These are not generally countries in which things are going well, politically, economically, or in terms of the security situation, such as the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali, and Zimbabwe. In these places, Russia is popularizing the idea that the West, largely Europe, is to blame for their problems. Russia is messaging that Europe continues to control Africa's financial and natural resources and is the root cause of the challenges these countries are facing.

Second, these scenarios fan negative feelings towards the West through disinformation around the actions of the UN and EU peacekeeping counter-terrorism actions. Some of the African countries mentioned are particularly targeted and vulnerable to this type of messaging, which seeks to paint Russia in a comparatively more positive way by pointing to past Soviet support for anti-colonial movements as a precedent.

Third, the Russian narrative makes the case that Russia is positioned to back African countries' independence to allow people to make their own decisions for themselves. Russia is positioning itself as a promoter and champion of "African solutions for African problems." This concept is appealing to ordinary young Africans, especially those in urban settings who often feel powerless to change their circumstances or who perceive the west as dictating their country's politics, policies, and development programs. Of course, the irony of all this is that Russia's own track record on the continent entirely contradicts this claim. Nevertheless, this scenario provides an enticing shield for African elites working with Russian oligarchs to pursue their own political and economic campaigns and goals without citizen oversight or protection.

[SLIDE 4] This image of a storm system is a helpful way to think about how Russia employs its messaging and the media and channels it uses to spread these narratives. The system operates through multiple channels simultaneously to reinforce and amplify its messaging by continuously pumping out a high volume of skewed, misleading, and false information.

At one end, these channels are closely tied to the Russian state. Through official statements and official state visits to the continent, the Russian state denies or redirects accusations of its reported abuses in Africa and, often, even denies the existence of official connections between these events and Russia—for example Russia denies official ties to the Wagner Group mercenaries and their actions in African even though they are closely tied to the Kremlin. Then at the other end, there is the more opaque side of Russia's disinformation system that it is harder to detect. It involves false flag operations and well disguised online disinformation campaigns. I could go into each of the five channels and spend a long time talking about the mechanics of how they each operate and how they function collectively, but we don't have the time.

[SLIDE 5] Out of those five channels, I just briefly want to highlight how social media disinformation campaigns are central to Russia's efforts. As you can see on the map, there have been at least 16 countries specifically targeted by these campaigns. These disinformation campaigns have been connected to the Wagner Group. Yevgeny Prigozhin runs these operations and is a Russian oligarch very close to Putin. He was indicted by the U.S. for influence operations in the 2016 U.S. elections. He and his gang fell off the map and then reappeared again in African running similar campaigns. These campaigns have been active everywhere the Wagner Group mercenaries have shown up on the continent.

As they have grown and adapted, a number of these attack campaigns have been taken down by social media companies. But they come back in a new form. They are very adept at adapting to the on-line environment, coming up with new layers to disguise their origins, franchising some of their operations to local actors, and paying people to do some of the posting on behalf of the Wagner Group. The 16 campaigns on the map are only those that have been detected and publicly documented. There remains much we still do not know about what is going on in these spaces. A disinformation open-source researcher I speak to regularly says that every time she looks at a social media ecosystem in a country in Africa, she finds this kind of disinformation. It is just not fully detected or documented, and it has not been a priority for social media companies to date.

[SLIDE 6] Russia is actively pursuing what I call an anti-communication strategy. What that means is active opposition to any effort to engage in constructive dialogue and communication. This is obviously much easier than conducting conventional communication strategies based around the promotion of truth, building credibility, and avoiding contradictions. Anti-communications do not have to worry about any of that. They do not slow down for contradictions. They flip accusations around when called out and accuse the accuser of doing the same thing. They are shameless in promoting falsehoods and bad faith arguments. Often the goal is simply to confuse and sow enough doubt so that people do not act. If targeted citizens become disillusioned, that is a win for anti-communication. It is clear that this strategy is effective in the pursuit of Russia's goals.

As you can see here, despite Russia's coercive track record and the facts on the ground regarding human rights abuses by Russian paramilitary forces in several countries, stories such as the murder of journalists tied to Russian actors, blatant election interference, and false flag operations in Mali—all of which have become well documented and well reported on--despite all

this, African approval of Russian leadership has in fact increased over this time. What accounts for this? The story of Russia and Africa that many Africans are seeing is heavily influenced by Russian information warfare.

[SLIDE 7] What can we do to disarm and mitigate malign influence operations in Africa? What can the U.S. potentially do to support these efforts? The first thing that cannot be over-emphasized is keeping to a high ground and continuing to do the hard work of constructive and credible communications. Crafting messaging and finding channels to send credible and accurate information can help raise awareness about what Russia and China are doing in these spaces. Currently many countries lack a basic understanding of--and familiarity with--what is happening. It is not being reported on. It is not being researched locally. There is just not a lot of information out there on these disinformation campaigns and their influence.

A Nigerian journalist who contacted me earlier this year had no idea that Russia was doing these kinds of things in Africa until the accounts of his friend group of reporters were hacked in the days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Their accounts were used to spread hashtags such as #IStandWithPutin, and other pro-Russian propaganda so that it seemed to be coming from Nigerian journalists and other authentic African voices. So, awareness needs to be built. We must not only spread the word about these campaigns but highlight their negative impact on Africa's information ecosystems and, ultimately, on African ownership of and sovereignty in these spaces.

I cannot emphasize enough how important these spaces are for public life, for the democratic process, for African citizens to find good information that they can use in their everyday lives.

These awareness-raising efforts can be supported by publishing and promoting well-researched reports that Africans can use to identify disinformation and connect the dots to understand the political objectives behind these campaigns. Ideally, this work will come from African voices. African actors need the tools and training to do this research and to report on these campaigns.

Secondly, it is important to focus on the young people who are active online as well as civil society groups in African countries that are advocating for democracy, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures. These groups are specifically targeted by--and vulnerable to--disinformation campaigns. They need to be front and center in initiatives to understand, raise awareness, and ultimately counter and build resistance to disinformation.

[SLIDE 7] On a more practical level, I would suggest funding and supporting sustained capacity building programs to empower research efforts. We should also establish and support digital media and communications institutions to promote research on the continent. That is how trust will be built—when there are institutions in Nigeria and in Kenya publishing this information, disseminating it, and understanding it. Building this kind of capacity ties to how the U.S. can then support efforts through these institutions or other similar mechanisms to apply and sustain pressure on social media companies to monitor Africa's digital spaces, to build guardrails around disinformation, and to take down disinformation campaigns when they are detected. Similarly, it is also important to establish aggressive fact checking and digital literacy programs.

Finally, I think the U.S. really does need to continue to impose costs on the architects of these campaigns. For the purposes of today's conversation, it is important that these costs are paired with strategic communications that make it clear why these individuals are being sanctioned and the damage that these individuals are doing to African agency and ownership of information spaces. We must not allow the perception to germinate that these are punitive measures as part of a proxy struggle between the U.S. and Russia. Instead, we must make it clear that the U.S. is taking steps to limit campaigns that are damaging African information and communication spaces for the citizens of the continent.

Vivian Walker: Thanks so much Mark. I especially appreciate your insight that Russia's approach is not pro-Russian but rather anti-western. In other words, the disinformation architects do not make it about Russia. They make it about everything that is wrong with the west. It is an interesting contrast to the Chinese approach, which touts the Chinese model without explicitly denigrating the west. That creates a comparison that we would do well to remember as we think about our own public diplomacy approaches.

Another point you raised—which we heard from all three of our presenters today--is the need to keep to the high ground. In the global information space, the United States must continue to use soft power tools in a hard power environment. If we stray away from the use of the soft power tools--openness, transparency, inclusion, accuracy and calling people out--there would be nothing to distinguish us from the authoritarian actors.

That is enough from me. We really want to have questions from all of you. Traditionally the first question goes to the Commissioners. Mics are available if you are comfortable using them. Otherwise, please stand up to ask your question. I see Sim has a question. And then Anne.

Sim Farar: My question is to Mark. You talked about taking the high ground. Meanwhile, I look at those numbers and we are losing. With the higher ground deflating, what do we do to combat these challenges?

Mark Duerksen: That is a great question. I think we have not been doing enough frankly. The problem is that Russian disinformation in Africa has just flown under the radar. There are only a handful of people researching and reporting on it. That is, I think, part of why it has been so successful. A number of these countries that Russia is targeting do not have strong journalistic practices or rule of law. There are not much capacity or awareness of disinformation in these countries and so disinformation has been allowed to simmer.

At the same time there has been success in shining a light on what Russia is doing in Europe and Eastern Europe in terms of disinformation. The Global Engagement Center at the U.S. Department of State and other entities have done a lot of work to really understand and make public what Russia is pursuing there, what its objectives are, and how disinformation works. I think scaling up to focus on those issues in Africa can help.

Nadège Rolland: Can I add please?

Vivian Walker: Go ahead.

Nadège Rolland: I would add it is not just about Russia. It is the idea that we first need to understand what is going on and pay attention to it. I think there are a lot of gray zones, and we are just starting to understand there are many patterns of information and influence in our own systems, starting in our own countries. There is still a lot of work to do because we are not there yet. When we are looking at countries in the developing world, sometimes it seems like they do not even exist. Powers like Russia and China are paying a lot of attention to those countries for exactly the reasons we have described. We are not doing our work properly.

Anne Wedner: I will turn this question over to Anita because Sim stole my question as usual. The question really is, why are Americans so uninterested in Africa? Why?

Sim Farar: It is an easy question.

Anita Plummer: That is a complicated question. You know, I think the starting point of the popular U.S. perception of Africa is that it is not a place of potential. It is a place that has constantly and historically been in decline. It is a place you do not want to go to. It is a bad business address.

Chinese companies and the Chinese state, they see the potential that the average American does not see, and American companies do not see. What do they see? They see changing demographics. You look at growth rates, and it is not just the wealthy countries in Africa. There are growth rates in smaller competing countries. I know they have large populations. They are creeping up, but they are growing. They are not declining. They are not shrinking. If you look at demographics, these are markets.

When we think of Africa, we think of it as a place of extraction. As a zone where consumers exist now and will exist in the future, especially looking at demographic decline in the west. We need to take the long-term view, as Nadège mentioned. It is not about what is happening this year and next year. It is about what will happen 15 years from now. Twenty years from now.

Then I will fall back on the traditional perception of Africa as being a place where we can obtain natural resources. Think of the environmental imperatives that drive our need for clean energy. Where are we going to get some of those resources to build our batteries on electric cars? It is Africa. Africa is a place of potential. That needs to be a starting point in terms of how we view Africa.

Then of course geostrategically and geopolitically you have a continent of small weak states. International organizations have some power. Not much, but some. Just look at the geography of Africa in relation to North America and Europe. Compared to the other regions, Latin America and Asia—Africa's location is central to global trade across the developing world.

Africa is a place with immense human resources and intellectual capacity. There are brilliant minds, well-educated minds, but because of the weak institutions which we talked about, they have not been harnessed. I think China sees that. We need to take the long view of our strategic interest in this country as being linked to all the young people in Africa. We will not survive unless they are thriving.

Our planet will not survive unless there are stable institutions that will allow us to engage in innovation and technological development on the continent. We cannot just see Africa as a place of extraction because if we are not supporting political and economic institutions that will work for its growing youth population, the continent will not be very stable-- politically. We need to look at it as a place of immense potential. We are not their saviors, and the potential in terms of human capital is more important than natural resources. It is a complicated question.

Vivian Walker: Nadège, did you want to add to that?

Nadège Rolland: No, I think I agree 100%. Thank you for that.

Vivian Walker: Mark, did you?

Mark Duerksen: Sure. I think it has also been a public relations issue for the United States. We do have embassies and development programs across the continent. We have been engaged in Africa. There are all kinds of initiatives happening, so it is just a matter of making those known. It is getting the word out that the U.S. is active on the continent and engaged. Of course, more can be done, but I think making that more prominent should be part of public diplomacy efforts.

By comparison, Russia has a miniscule amount of foreign direct investment, or long-term investment, in Africa. So much has been made of Russia's return to Africa and so much has been written about it that it helps to support the perception that Russia is a "great power" on the continent. Maybe the U.S. should make more of an effort to talk about its own investments in Africa's future.

Nadège Rolland: On second thought, I will add just one thing. It is frustrating to hear that we are turning our attention to the African community because of the presence of those external big powers. Maybe there is something good that we can take from this and start looking at the continent for itself and the potential it has because those external powers are forcing us to do so.

Vivian Walker: Thank you, Nadège, for that powerful insight. I just want to highlight the paucity of USG public diplomacy resources that have been devoted to Africa. According to the ACPD's 2021 annual comprehensive report, Sub-Saharan Africa received just 11.5% of total PD funding--\$99.32 million. Europe by far receives the most funding, coming in at one quarter of total PD funding. The Near East and Asia are at 20% and so on. There has been a consistent pattern over the years of underfunding public diplomacy in Africa, while at the same time there has been a growing acknowledgement of the enormity and the importance of the issues.

With that, let's take some questions from the audience. If you are comfortable with a mic, please take one. Sherry?

Sherry Mueller: Thank you so much. My name is Sherry Mueller, and in real life I teach cultural diplomacy at the School of International Service in American University. I serve as the co-president of something called the Public Diplomacy Council of America. Thank you for an excellent panel. I wanted to drill down a little bit to the scholarship question. How about the scope of Chinese scholarships perhaps in Kenya and perhaps more broadly? A couple of years ago I had the occasion to meet the director of the Center for the Study of the U.S. in South Africa. We got to talking. His PhD was from China. He wanted to come to the US, but there were no scholarships. Just to give you that as an example.

Anita Plummer: The Chinese government began giving scholarships to African students in the 1950s. You have a whole generation of faculty in Africa that were educated in China. There is a very interesting history there linked to race. African students wrote about their experiences there, so this is a long tradition. Generally, during their Forum on China-Africa Cooperation conference, the Chinese government will state how many scholarships will be given to students over the next two or three years. One would have to drill down and see how many scholarships go to each country, but generally the scholarships are funneled through the Confucius Institute. That is one pipeline.

Then there are the associations that Nadège was talking about. Journalists, for example, can get a scholarship to get a master's degree in China. They tend to be very narrow topics in terms of the programs that are available, but that data is generally released. Who knows the retention rates of the students who go? Do they actually graduate?

Then there is the perennial issue of what happens after they are educated. Do they return? A lot of students overstay their visas and remain in China because there is more economic activity to engage in. Then they are undocumented. Do those who come back have employment prospects?

In my interviews, students clearly state that they would prefer to go to the U.S. or to Europe, but the opportunities are just not available. The data is there on the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation website. Generally, you can also find the information on the Chinese embassy websites of each individual African country. There are press releases because it is generally a huge ceremony when they send students off to Africa. They really publicize the numbers and the different programs that they are going to across China. They really do record that information and share it widely.

Again, it is about the effort to influence student attitudes and their imaginations of what is possible. If you are a university student and you want to get your master's degree, the west is just one alternative. I literally interviewed university officials who said, "my students want to look East."

Vivian Walker: Thank you.

Unidentified Male: Hi everyone. Thank you so much for the presentations. My question was answered a little bit in the question earlier as to why there was no interest in Africa. I think the answer that was provided was great, because especially China has been there for a very long time.

I am from Ethiopia. I grew up seeing so much about China, especially with roads and bridges, to the point where the word China was synonymous with construction. I think there is a strong presence of Chinese foreign direct investment on the continent. But foreign attention goes back to the Cold War when Africa was being used as a proxy rather than a genuine interest.

For my question, I wanted to ask how the west could remedy some of the evidence and findings that you have shown. It is clear that China has the greatest influence on and say into what is happening on the continent, which is dominated by young people. There are countries where the median age is below 18. What they have seen and what they know is Chinese construction. They do not know much about colonization and the past.

At the same time, the west--especially European countries--has not taken the steps to apologize or to even acknowledge this dark past. Young people today would rather go with the China that they see than the west that they have heard about, but do not see much of. That is really my question. How can we go forward to remedy that knowledge gap? The west is really being more reactive than proactive.

Anita Plummer: When I talk to folks my age and younger on the continent, they say: "We do not want handouts. We do not want aid. We want to engage in trade. We want economic opportunity. We want to be able to make a way for ourselves just like young people in the U.S. want to make a way for themselves."

The difference between China and the U.S. is that things are bundled together. When we think of China's public diplomacy, it is linked to infrastructure development. It is linked to migration and to Chinese entrepreneurs and merchants setting up shops. It is linked to new supply chains from China and to low-cost goods hitting rural markets. More and more people from China are serving as middlemen, migrating, and participating in this robust economic activity. When an African government deals with China, they can negotiate a trade deal, a loan for infrastructure development. Then tack on a Confucius Institute and some media trainings. It comes as a package.

By contrast the culture in the United States, the way we operate, is a bit different. We have lines that divide the private sector and the public sector. Yes, there are relationships, but people tend to stay in their lanes. That does not advantage African or U.S. policymakers when they are engaging in these real discussions.

I may be wrong. We have diplomats in the room. But I think who is telling the story and how we are telling the story also becomes important. When we look at the imaginations of young people globally, we need to ask—"What do you aspire to? If you could emigrate anywhere, where would it be? If you want to create a path or a vision for development in your country, would you rather take the 'China model' or the U.S. model?"

I say the China model in quotes because, what is that really? It is really complicated. It is this idea of drive. It is defying the odds, being able to lift millions out of poverty within a generation. China was able to do this. It is also not having a democratic state. China was able to develop without democracy. Young people say: “Wait. They had stable institutions, but they were able to do it without democracy. Am I willing to compromise for development?” These are real conversations that people are having.

As the U.S., we need to be humbler in who is telling the message. We need more black people talking to black people, to be frank, if you want Africa. We need young people on social media who are influencing young people in Africa more so than state agents and state officials. How are they telling the story of the hustle in the United States? It is making a way with less. That is the American dream.

I hate to evoke Beyonce, but I am going to. She had the album *Lemonade*. Our story is “how do you turn lemons into lemonade?” That is the American story. I think that is relatable. We are trying to make lemonade out of our democracy right now. Seriously, we are trying to make our democracy work in the same way that Kenyans are trying to make their democracy work. I do think, even as we talk about the high ground, we need to take it down a few notches and say “Wait a second. We are working out our economy just like you are. We are working on our democracy, just like you are. How can we help you? What is the appropriate role of the US in helping your young people make African democracy work for you?” That conversation is different from China’s narrative, which says, “Hey state, we will support you. We will not interfere. We will help you politically repress your citizens. We will help you surveil all your citizens.” That is not something that we would say. I am going to get off my soap box.

Vivian Walker: Thank you—great insights! I think we have time for one or two more questions. There is one here, and I think there is one back there. Let us make it quick.

Unidentified Male: Thank you for this excellent and timely panel. I have been working a lot with China and especially for it, so this is relevant to me. Two things. I wanted to follow Vivian’s very astute point that it looks like a contrast between the Russian and the Chinese approaches. Russia seems to be in the dark arts of being aggressively anti-west. China seems to be more, here is our story. It is an alternative to the west. Could you comment on other aspects of the contrast between Russia and China? Are they really much the same, and do they travel together?

The other question I wanted to ask is, where are the clay feet? Where does this fall apart for Russia and for China? In the Russian case, that is the Ukraine war. How is that playing out in terms of African responses to what is happening there? On the Chinese side, you have the zero Covid policy. You have the Uyghurs. You have debt trap. These things are really causing second thoughts on the part of Africans about the Belt and Road Initiative, for example. I was just wondering how you see how they are dealing with their own clay feet. Thank you.

Nadège Rolland: Regarding Russia and China, I do not think that the contrast is so stark as we have made it sound. It is possible that Russia is more abrupt in its messaging, but China is

pretty out there too, saying the path that the liberal democracies and former colonialist powers have decided for you does not work. It is exactly what Anita said earlier. We have in our own development chosen to have an authoritarian approach and state-led approach. It has provided us with stability and prosperity. The road to stability and prosperity does not necessarily go through democracy. Look at what we have achieved without choosing the path that “they” want you to adopt.

This idea of African solutions for African countries is very prominent in the way China also develops its narrative for these countries. You are your own master. You have this history of independence. You can choose whatever you want. We are not here to impose a model on you. Here we have solutions that can help you with surveillance systems. How do you develop a state-led economy? How do you think about political governments that put aside the human rights questions? It is just like we have done.

It is maybe not as blunt, and the lines I think are not as clear. China and Russia actually complement each other quite well, which is another thing that we should think about. They are not two separate entities going in two different directions. There is a lot of overlap.

Vivian Walker: Mark, can you make it quick? We have one more question, and I do want to be mindful of time. If you want to take the clay feet, that is a good one.

Mark Duerksen: Sure. I will get into that. My presumption is that there is some contrast between Russia and China—the Chinese model is much more state controlled, and state directed in its narratives. The Kremlin is much more comfortable just living in a chaotic information environment. Especially around Ukraine. An outcome that would please Russian disinformation architects would be if somebody in Nigeria is asked about the war in Ukraine and responds by saying that “I really do not know. I have heard so many different things. I have heard that it was NATO. I have heard whatever.” If these are all competing and equally believable narratives that Africans cannot really make heads or tails of, or if Africans perceive Ukraine as a just a fight between the West and Russia that it has nothing to do with, then Russia is winning. I think that finding a way to cut through that is where the clay feet are for Russia.

I was in an Uber on the way over here catching parts of President Biden’s speech at the UN General Assembly. He said for everyone around the world, anyone who believes in their country’s right to exist and to have a future, that Russia’s invasion of a sovereign country should make “their blood run cold.” That is exactly right. That is a message that needs to cut through. What are the implications of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine for Africa? What does the Russian international order look like? It is a world without legally protected borders, without sovereignty for states and their right to exist. What does that look like for Africa, a continent with its history of colonialism, countries whose borders, sovereignty and autonomy were not respected? Does the continent want to go back to that? There have been some really moving speeches, including one by the Kenyan Ambassador to the UN, Martin Kimani, who said, we have fought so hard against this kind of world order in Africa, and we do not want this to be the future international order.

Vivian Walker: Thank you. We have time for one more question. If we could make it brief that would be wonderful. Thank you so much.

Unidentified Female: I am both a journalist and a researcher originally from Zimbabwe and South Africa. I find it interesting that the United States, the Biden administration, and previous successive administrations have not done enough for public diplomacy efforts.

Anita, is there a particular study you have done on Zimbabwe? I would very much be interested.

Mark, I just want to disagree with you on one point. Well, agree and disagree. I have personally experienced some of the aggression and attacks on the media you described. I just want to say that I disagree with you. We are doing something about these issues. There are just not enough of us. There has not been enough engagement from the current administration. How do you then operationalize the recommendations that you suggested today? I just do not see how those can happen quickly. Thanks.

Anita Plummer: Thank you. We can talk offline, and I can give you a list of articles. A lot of innovative research is coming out of South Africa, Southern Africa, and China.

Mark Duerksen: Yeah, I think we can agree. My point was that in somewhere like Nigeria, which has not been the direct target of these attacks, there is not a widespread public understanding of what Russia has done next door in Niger, in Burkina Faso, and Mali. There is impressive and important work being done to correct this. Efforts are being made to convene a working group of practitioners and people on the continent doing this kind of work. People keep recommending Zimbabwean journalists. I feel they need to be high on our list for having a long track record of reporting on and thinking about ways to combat disinformation in an authoritarian state putting out and benefitting from disinformation campaigns. Thank you.

Anne Wedner: All right. I am sorry to bring this to a close. I am so appreciative of Nadège, Anita, and Mark today. I think that the comments were amazing, and the discussion was even better. This conversation is obviously long overdue. It is one of the things that the Commission tries to do--to focus our light on issues that are insufficiently reported, assessed, and thought about. That is why we exist.

I just want to make an announcement. We will have another public meeting. I think we are planning to get Beyonce to come and sing *Lemonade*!

Anyway, we will have a future meeting, and we will have an equally stimulating topic. Maybe we will also come back to talking about Africa soon, because I think we have a lot of undiscovered conversation yet to come. Thank you to the Commission staff, Vivian, Deneysel, and Kristy. Thank you to the International Student House of Washington, DC for hosting us. We will see you guys next time.

END OF TRANSCRIPT