

KLEPTOCRATIC COOPERATION IN AFRICA

HOW RUSSIA AND CHINA UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 showcased to the world the grave national security threat that kleptocracy poses to democracy. The bizarre and short-lived mutiny in Russia by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group in June 2023 put a spotlight on one of the shadowy global tentacles of Russia's influence. At a time when Moscow is increasingly isolated diplomatically and economically, the Wagner Group's corrosive commercial interests and cozy relationships in parts of Africa with some of the continent's most diplomatically isolated regimes reveal the extent to which a global kleptocratic support network has taken shape.

The two essays in this report highlight ways in which two global authoritarian powers, Russia and China, provide surge capacity to kleptocratic networks in Africa. In his essay, "Criminal States, Militarized Criminals, and Profiteers: Russia, Africa, and the Evolving Ecosystem of Transnational Kleptocracy," J.R. Mailey (senior expert at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime) dissects the Wagner Group's illicit activities in key parts of Africa. The Wagner Group's activities are complex, but Mailey zeroes in on the fact that the military support offered to African kleptocrats has little to do with providing security and stability for the African people. Rather it is focused on extracting resources, advancing geopolitical goals, and serving as a brutal cog in the authoritarian mutual support machinery. Even if the ultimate fate of the Wagner Group remains unclear, these trends are unlikely to abate. The opaque economic relationships that the Wagner Group has developed on the continent no doubt are too lucrative for the Kremlin to surrender.


China's party state and its proxies are entrenched in corrupt networks in Africa as well. Chinese-linked kleptocratic networks are tapping into like-minded networks on the continent, helping to embolden and empower local kleptocrats seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of their populations. Andrea Ngombet Malewa's (activist and founder of the Sassoufit Collective) essay, "How China Fuels African Kleptocratic Networks: The Case of Congo-Brazzaville," highlights the ways in which Beijing facilitates Congo-Brazzaville's deeply kleptocratic regime. In addition to long-standing Chinese involvement in the timber and extractive industries, Ngombet's analysis spotlights the

establishment of a Sino-Congolese Bank for Africa that could allow kleptocrats to bypass the transparency requirements of Western-linked banks, thereby affording opportunities to launder money with impunity. This development has significant implications for accountability norms worldwide.

Civil society and independent media seeking to identify and expose kleptocratic networks in Africa face enormous challenges. They often lack the resources, specialized knowledge, and skills needed to track illicit financial flows, and the complex vehicles kleptocrats use to move money around the world. Resource-rich regimes in countries such as Congo-Brazzaville, Sudan, and the Central African Republic already suffer from gaping deficits in accountability and transparency. Despite these odds, both authors identify critical steps to elevate civil society's essential work exposing and combatting kleptocracy:

- Given the knowledge deficits about Russian and Chinese activities in kleptocratic networks, **nongovernmental organizations should focus on educating the public on the true nature of Russian and Chinese activities in their countries, as well as on the financial, social, and ecological costs of initiatives pushed by Beijing and Moscow;**
- Leading authoritarian regimes, China and Russia first among them, rely on lucratively financed media enterprises to distort and manipulate information about their own activities. Accordingly, **civil society should challenge authoritarian narratives, for instance those that use long-standing anti-colonial rhetoric to justify their corrupting activities and support for kleptocratic networks;**
- Since the threat corrosive kleptocratic networks pose is inherently transnational, **there should be concerted efforts to bring often-isolated civil society activists and journalists across regions together and to encourage collaboration and cross-border learning;**
- **Civil society organizations should meticulously document the activities of authoritarian actors in their countries,** with the hope that this information could later be used to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions;

Transnational kleptocracy is a global challenge; it is not limited to Russia. China is playing an under-appreciated role in global kleptocratic networks, including in Africa. An effective response must tackle this pervasive, complex challenge at a systemic level. Until countries committed to the rule of law act collaboratively to tackle this challenge, kleptocratic mutual support networks will continue to adapt and elude the measures taken against them.



CRIMINAL STATES, MILITARIZED CRIMINALS, AND PROFITEERS

RUSSIA, AFRICA, AND THE EVOLVING ECOSYSTEM
OF TRANSNATIONAL KLEPTOCRACY

// J.R. MAILEY, THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

In late June 2023, Russia's own state-owned media outlet, TASS, confirmed an open secret: the Russian state budget covers all expenses associated with the Wagner Group's mercenary and influence activities abroad. After years of denying a connection, Vladimir Putin made the admission during a speech in which he thanked his troops for putting down the mutiny led by the Wagner Group's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, that surprised—and confused—much of the world earlier that month.¹

At least until recently, Prigozhin represented a part of an evolving ecosystem of transnational kleptocracy: he was a prominent member of Putin's inner circle, and the Wagner Group had been a major component of Russian operations in Ukraine as well as foreign military cooperation, mining ventures, information manipulation, and other influence activities elsewhere around the globe. At a time when Moscow is increasingly isolated diplomatically and economically, **Wagner's kleptocratic support network has developed a robust portfolio of opaque commercial interests throughout Africa and cozy relationships with some of the region's most notable autocracies.** These governments have outsourced some military and training operations to mercenary troops under its command, relying on the company as a source of weapons and leveraging its technical capabilities to disrupt and distort the flow of information.²

With a resume that mixes attributes of a crime boss, oligarch, cowboy, and mercenary, the story of Prigozhin's meteoric ascent defies archetypes despite recent tensions with Russia's uniformed military. Prigozhin spent most of the 1980s in prison for fraud, armed robbery, and a string of burglaries.³ After his release in 1990 following a pardon, he worked his way up the hospitality food chain, eventually opening a series of upscale restaurants, including one frequented by Vladimir Putin.⁴ Prigozhin's background has earned him the nickname "Putin's Chef."

By June 2023, Wagner troops had been deployed to half a dozen countries across Africa and the Middle East, leaving a trail of investments and accusations of corruption and predation in their wake. According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Prigozhin's relationship with Putin yielded lucrative contracts from the Kremlin and the ability to engage in illicit activities with impunity. In return, Prigozhin served as a staunch supporter of some of Putin's highest profile gambits, including through his partial control of the Russian Internet Research Agency, an internet troll farm that gained infamy for disseminating disinformation and propaganda ahead of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections—a charge Putin's Chef has willingly confirmed.⁵

While the fate of the Wagner Group and its leader remains unclear following its failed mutiny against the Russian state, it is difficult to imagine that the Kremlin would entirely abandon Wagner-style influence activities in Africa. Africa's natural resources are too lucrative and, on much of the continent, too easy to exploit, and mercenary activities—like those conducted by the Wagner Group—offer a means of extending the Kremlin's global influence. Civil society and others in the democracy community will need to reckon with the impact of Wagner's activities there, as well as with the vulnerability of some African countries to this form of malign security and kleptocratic influence.

A Tale of Modern Kleptocracy

"Kleptocracy" literally means "rule by thieves," and the rise of Prigozhin illustrates how modern kleptocracy operates. Strongmen may attract some supporters who revere their authority and the order it brings, but few rulers would relish being labelled a thief. They therefore seek to hide the sources of their illicit wealth and use international institutions to launder ill-gotten gains in rule of law societies abroad.

Transnational kleptocracy is not a club of totalitarian rulers or an underground fraternity of supervillains. Anne Applebaum rejects the caricature of a strongman and his henchmen using violence to thwart resistance from brave dissidents. "In the 21st century, that cartoon bears little resemblance to reality," she said. "Autocracies are not run by one bad guy but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (meaning police, military, paramilitary groups, and surveillance), and professional propagandists."⁶

This dynamic ecosystem consists of senior government officials, state security forces, armed groups, and organized criminal syndicates. It also depends upon a host of enablers in the private sector—bankers, lawyers, Fortune 500 firms, accountants, lobbyists, publicists, and an endless stream of middlemen and fixers who help conceal the flow of money or goods—based in Western capitals and financial centers across the globe. This dynamism allows kleptocratic networks to shift, adapt, and form alliances with each other, making kleptocracy difficult to address if the main tools are targeted prosecutions or sanctions on individuals.

The notion that kleptocrats around the world would work together may seem to evoke images of a society controlled by criminal masterminds aboard SPECTRE's yacht, conniving together to outmaneuver James Bond on their quest for unimaginable wealth and global domination. Yet together, these cross-border networks and the institutions they commandeer form the transnational kleptocratic system.

In Africa, a new vehicle for kleptocratic collaboration has emerged in recent years with the Wagner Group. It has been the preferred one-stop-shop for kleptocrats in need of mercenaries, weapons, cyber capabilities, or markets for their precious minerals. For the Kremlin, Wagner has provided the opportunity to export kleptocracy while simultaneously safeguarding its interests worldwide.

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Propping up Kleptocratic Networks in Africa

Prigozhin and Wagner's ascendance reflect broader trends in Russia and its relationship with Africa. In Sudan, for example, the Wagner Group has been active for several years, helping to prop up former President Omar al-Bashir. In exchange for the support, Sudanese authorities permitted Meroe Gold, a mining company owned by the Russian company M Invest, to be established—the company was later sanctioned by both the U.S. and EU for being a cover for the Wagner Group.⁷ The EU further added that they suspected the Wagner Group of using the gold-mining resources derived in Sudan to help fund the Kremlin's war in Ukraine.⁸

In the Central African Republic, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra granted Russian access to its vast diamond and gold mines in exchange for arms, mercenaries, and a protection force. Approximately two thousand Wagner Group mercenaries were deployed, supposedly to provide stability, but instead have been accused of protecting the mines and keeping Touadéra in power.⁹

In other countries—including Libya, Mali, and Mozambique—Wagner's presence has been limited to the political and military realms. Other countries, like Cameroon and Kenya, have emerged as possible logistics hubs for Wagner's operations in neighboring countries. The Wagner Group's activities on the

African continent are complex and shadowy, **but much of the evidence suggests that the military support offered to African kleptocrats has little to do with providing security and stability for the African people and more to do with extracting resources, advancing geopolitical goals, and providing support to regional authoritarian actors.**

A clear pattern has emerged in Wagner's Africa gambit. Prigozhin's profiteering security forces do not simply target countries where the rule of law is weak; they take direct action to undermine institutions and strengthen their autocratic partners' hands. As the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime states, "the group has been accused of using whatever means necessary, including criminal activity, to achieve its aims: from indiscriminate use of violence against civilians in its military engagements, to disinformation campaigns and election-rigging to industrial scale smuggling of natural resources, like gold and diamonds."¹⁰

For Putin, Prigozhin and the Wagner group essentially provide a full-service, militarized, criminalized, technically capable, and loyal ruse for operations abroad. However, while there is a cottage industry of Wagner watchers that has undoubtedly contributed timely and insightful analysis of a dynamic and dangerous predator, when it comes to fighting transnational kleptocracy, the real challenge is the vulnerability of its prey.

Until these vulnerabilities are addressed through stronger oversight and accountability mechanisms, more robust civil societies and independent media, and consolidated democratic institutions, the hunt for kleptocratic partners will continue in vain. **It is not enough to attempt to address the Wagner's Group actions in Africa alone; the African kleptocrats that welcome them must also be targeted with sanctions and other measures designed to increase accountability.**

Building an Effective Response to the Kleptocratic Support Network

Even if Wagner ceases to exist, African kleptocrats have found this model of "security cooperation" to be a useful exchange for keeping their regimes in power. Other partners will certainly emerge, be they from Russia or other countries that can package security and economic benefits to prop up these regimes. Building an effective response to the Wagner Group and Russian oligarchs' assets and dirty money—or any future iteration of this threat—has decades of lessons from which governments and civil society can draw.

Before the term "kleptocracy" had become mainstream, activists and policymakers pushed for reforms to curb illicit financial flows, reduce bank secrecy, and find ways to impose consequences on the perpetrators of corruption and financial crime worldwide. In some ways, progress toward

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this goal has been remarkable. Many U.S. allies have begun to develop tools that mirror the U.S. Treasury’s toolkit, imposing sanctions, seizing assets, and prosecuting the perpetrators and enablers of corruption. Some key jurisdictions have even taken steps toward closing the loopholes—many of which were designed and maintained by Western governments—that make it easier for criminals and kleptocrats to operate under the radar and evade authorities.

The United States and several European governments have taken numerous steps to disrupt Wagner’s operations and target the wealth of other Russian state-linked entities and oligarchs. While the impact of the sanctions on Wagner and its affiliates is difficult to assess, there is a clear indication that a rift has emerged between Prigozhin and the military establishment in Moscow. In June 2023, the Kremlin moved to take more direct control over Wagner after Prigozhin had become increasingly outspoken in his criticism of Russia’s defense minister, culminating in a rebellion against the Kremlin and Ministry of Defense for a lack of adequate supplies for Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. **Even if Prigozhin were put out of business, however, vanquishing Wagner would amount to treating symptoms of a much larger problem.**

Civil society and independent media in Russia and Africa face enormous odds and often lack the resources, specialized knowledge, and skills needed to track illicit financial flows and the complex vehicles they use. Russian civil society does focus on these issues—since the invasion of Ukraine, often from exile—yet they need opportunities to connect with African activists to tell the full story of Russian kleptocracy and the Wagner Group’s activities on the continent. African civil society, with a long history of fighting state-bound corruption, is increasingly setting its sights on transnational kleptocracy, but few have an understanding of Russia or read Cyrillic. **Until a concerted effort is made to bring activists together from both regions, it will be difficult to understand the full spectrum of this kleptocratic cooperation and respond accordingly.**


Furthermore, some autocratic regimes with geopolitical ambition—such as the United Arab Emirates and Turkey—are forming new outposts for dirty money and thus becoming more visible, repressive, and corrupt.¹¹ While these governments are often identified as allies of the West, they are also destinations for parking illicit wealth in real estate, purchasing luxury goods, docking oligarchs’ superyachts, incorporating anonymous shell companies, and processing precious minerals. Even governments that show little interest in power projection that have formed robust security partnerships with Western governments—like Chad, Uganda, and the Philippines—have become major conduits for illicit flows of money, trafficked persons, drugs, wildlife products, and more.¹² Democratic countries, in part due to competing geopolitical demands, have been slow to address the role these “third countries” play in facilitating kleptocracy around the world. Until they do so, transnational kleptocratic networks like those that bind Russia and parts of Africa will continue largely unabated.

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Vanquishing kleptocracy will not be achieved by smothering individual kleptocrats but by depriving the entire system of the oxygen it needs to continue burning—and that means having the discipline to resist the short-term gratification of tactical victories that sabotage the larger mission. Expanding the tools and resources available to investigators and law enforcement agencies tracking dirty money is part of the solution, as is increasing support for civil society activists and independent media.

Ultimately, it will require making the dismantling of the global architecture of kleptocracy a policy priority—at home and abroad—for democracies around the world. Systemic change will require rolling back long-standing practices in democratic societies such as golden visas, anonymous shell companies, flags of convenience, shadow banks, and even jurisdictions that provide a safe haven to kleptocrats—and it will likely mean disrupting relationships with illiberal allies.

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HOW CHINA FUELS AFRICAN KLEPTOCRATIC NETWORKS

THE CASE OF CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE

// ANDREA NGOMBET MALEWA, THE SASSOUFIT COLLECTIVE

Over the past decade, Beijing has emerged as a powerful accelerator of long-standing kleptocracy in the Republic of the Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville. The Central African state is far from alone in this respect, but it is a useful example for understanding the political, economic, and cultural consequences of the growing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence in the region and in Africa more broadly.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is now the primary importer of petroleum and timber from Congo-Brazzaville. While developing this trade, Beijing and CCP-linked businesspeople engaged with local kleptocratic elites and situated themselves within corrupt networks. Moreover, in 2015 the two countries established the Sino-Congolese Bank for Africa, an entity whose practices have troubling implications for transparency and accountability in Congo-Brazzaville and beyond.

Kleptocracy is a leading cause of underdevelopment, human rights abuses, and war on the African continent, particularly in Central Africa. Ten of the eleven countries in the region are classified as Not Free by Freedom House,¹ and three of the five longest-ruling national leaders worldwide—monarchs excluded—are from Central Africa.² In Congo-Brazzaville, kleptocrats have siphoned off billions of dollars in revenue from natural resources and amassed portfolios of private property worth tens of millions each. Meanwhile, nearly 40 percent of the country's people are forced to live on less than two dollars a day, and public health institutions struggle to provide basic services.³

The kleptocratic monopolization of power in Central Africa follows a general—and widely repeated—pattern. First, would-be kleptocrats in government and their allies in the business world identify key natural resources that have the potential to generate tremendous wealth and influence. Then, rather than using the proceeds to deliver public goods, kleptocrats enrich themselves and work to neuter accountability mechanisms that might hinder their theft, including independent auditing and judicial systems, a free press and civil society, and political competition through fair elections. Finally, as the system becomes more closed, authoritarian, and violent, more extensive plunder becomes possible, fueling a downward spiral.⁴

The CCP's emergence as a crucial enabler of regional kleptocrats makes it more difficult for local democratic forces to advocate for open and responsive governance. In the struggle to rein in kleptocratic networks in Central Africa, civil society within these countries must be empowered to play a more coordinated and purposeful role in exposing the CCP's corrosive influence.

Growing Chinese Influence over a System of National Plunder

In the Republic of the Congo, Beijing has long supported the regime led by Denis Sassou Nguesso, who first captured the presidency in 1979, fomented armed rebellion against his successor in the mid-1990s, and returned to office in 1997.⁵ **Chinese engagement with Congolese kleptocratic networks ranges from murky relationships at the elite level to commercial activity in the country's highly lucrative oil and timber industries.**

As with many resource-rich African countries, the Republic of the Congo has "local content" provisions that require the involvement of Congolese businesses and employees in the extraction and export of Congolese crude oil. Due to the deeply kleptocratic nature of the Congolese state, foreign entities aiming to acquire Congolese oil must purchase from locally-run businesses that are likely to be compromised by corruption and operated by members of the ruling family; an unsavory proposition for companies based in democratic countries where they could face legal or reputational repercussions. The French-owned Total and Italian-owned ENI oil companies have historically enjoyed a dominant position in the sector, but today most of the high-quality oil from the Djeno region of Congo-Brazzaville is exported to China, where the trade entails far less liability.⁶

The region's timber industry was similarly dominated by European companies in the past, but the PRC has become its largest market, accounting for 46 percent of the Congo Basin's timber exports in value as of 2016.⁷ The Deji Group, a bloc of companies controlled by Chinese tycoon Xu Gong De, has allegedly used its corrupt local connections in Gabon and the Republic of the Congo to amass territorial concessions illegally, exceed harvesting quotas, and avoid paying millions of dollars in corporate taxes in the two countries.⁸

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The Rise of a New and Opaque Banking Network

One of the most alarming results of Sino-Congolese cooperation in recent years has been the establishment of a banking structure that allows money to move across international borders without the standard accountability and transparency measures associated with financial institutions based in the democratic world.

Central African kleptocrats have a long history of establishing banks that help them funnel ill-gotten wealth out of their countries. During the late 1990s, President Sassou Nguesso and Gabon's President Ali Bongo started the BGF Bank, which now has subsidiaries in ten countries in West and Central Africa and has been accused of involvement in large-scale money laundering.⁹ In 2021, a leak of BGF data—later known as the “Congo Hold Up”—that was obtained by the Platform to Protect African Whistleblowers revealed a massive corruption scheme involving the bank, two PRC state-owned enterprises, and family members of then president Joseph Kabila in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁰

The PRC entered the regional banking sector in 2015 with the creation of the Sino-Congolese Bank for Africa, a joint venture between the state-owned Agricultural Bank of China and the government of Congo-Brazzaville. The bank may be particularly attractive to Sassou Nguesso and his allies because it limits their exposure to French prosecutors, who have turned their attention to the president and his relatives after obtaining corruption convictions against Equatorial Guinea's ruling Obiang family in recent years.¹¹

While the amount of money going through the Sino-Congolese Bank is currently unclear, the dangers associated with this alternative banking system are quite apparent. Kleptocrats in general, rely on foreign banks to convert the local proceeds of corruption into stable currencies like the dollar or the euro, and to store these funds in ways and locations that will make them safe from scrutiny or seizure. But banks operating in the United States and Europe—or connected to those democratic settings through correspondent banks—are increasingly obliged to operate under strict anti-money-laundering and “know your customer” provisions that make them riskier partners for corrupt actors. Furthermore, any financial transaction conducted using the U.S. dollar has the potential to be examined by U.S. law enforcement agencies.

A reliable Chinese banking option could allow Central African kleptocrats to better obscure the origins of their assets or avoid the democracy-based financial sector altogether. Crucially, the Sino-Congolese Bank offers access to the PRC's renminbi-denominated interbank payments network, a rival to the Belgium-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT). The SWIFT network, which enables member banks around the world to communicate quickly, also provides data that the U.S. Treasury Department uses to trace financial flows, combat illicit finance, and ensure third-party compliance with sanctions.¹²

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Strengthening Civil Society's Push for Transparency

African civil society faces daunting obstacles in its efforts to expose Beijing's corrupting influence in Central Africa. Tackling the local dimensions of kleptocracy is difficult enough, but the CCP's growing interest in the region compounds the problem significantly. Like their counterparts in much of the rest of the world, African civil society organizations often lack the capacity and specialized knowledge that are essential for tracking Beijing's financial flows and PRC actors' complex economic relationships with local kleptocrats. Anticorruption activists also run the risk of being labeled as enemies of progress and development, since much of the continent's modern infrastructure has been built by Chinese firms. Indeed, many have regarded these economic contributions as reasons to stay silent. Such observers tend to overlook the fact that the opening and globalization of the continent's economies can, if managed improperly, also facilitate corruption and hasten the movement of both resources and wealth out of Africa.¹³

In addition, whereas civil society activists seeking justice for abuses in Africa by European or American companies, for example, have had some chance of bringing their cases before an impartial court in the firms' home countries,¹⁴ it is almost impossible to pursue similar cases against PRC-based companies. The court system in China is tightly controlled by the CCP and does not enforce international standards of transparency and accountability.

Despite these barriers, there are concrete steps that civil society can take to counter corrupting PRC influence in the region. **First, civil society organizations must meticulously document the activities of Chinese actors in Africa.** They must collect information on cases of rights violations, interference, and corruption to give the public a clearer understanding of Beijing's engagement and, over time, greater agency in their countries' relationship with the PRC. Such documentation should also be preserved in the hope that it could be used in court to hold Chinese perpetrators to account if political or legal conditions were to change in the future.

Second, civil society activists should focus on educating the public about the financial, social, and ecological costs of the development projects Beijing has pushed. For example, working with the youth of Congo-Brazzaville's remote Cuvette-Ouest Department, the Sassoufit Collective—a Paris-based nongovernmental organization advocating for democracy, human rights, and anti-corruption efforts in Congo-Brazzaville and elsewhere in Africa—shed light on the environmental destruction caused by a Sino-Congolese enterprise, AGIL Congo.¹⁵ After this news was released, journalist Blanche Simona, a grantee of the Pulitzer Center's Rainforest Journalist Fund, followed up with a compelling series of reports about the pollution caused by AGIL Congo's operations.¹⁶

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Third, African civil society should actively respond to CCP narratives aimed at promoting Beijing as a partner that understands and will not duplicate Africa's experience with European colonization, given that China and Africa share histories of exploitation at the hands of European powers. To debunk this benevolent image of the PRC regime, African activists should forge relationships with the civil society sectors and democracy movements of Hong Kong and the Tibetan and Uyghur diasporas. It is also imperative to open dialogues with Asian democracies such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, as well as establish collaborative initiatives to uphold democratic principles and build resilience in the face of CCP influence. By pledging \$100 million to support democracy around the world, President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea is making a significant step in the battle for a free and open international system. The Sassoufit Collective called on President Yoon Suk Yeol not to overlook African civil society organizations by dedicating a significant part of this support fund to the continent.¹⁷

Above all, it is up to African civil society to compile a comprehensive list of Chinese state-affiliated businesses and their African enablers. Just as international organizations like Public Eye, Global Witness, Environmental Investigation Agency, and Traffic prepare such reports on their respective issues, African civil society communities should work together to share their knowledge of Beijing-enabled kleptocracy across Africa.

An Interregional Problem that Calls for Interregional Solutions

The PRC and its affiliated enterprises are making deep inroads in Central Africa and the continent as a whole, fueling kleptocratic networks that seem to be intensifying corrupt practices and human rights abuses in an already fragile region. Some novel approaches will be required to meet this complex challenge, including heavy investment by democracies that understand the urgent need for an alternative to Chinese funding—one that is grounded in respect for human rights, good governance, transparency, and the rule of law. When offering economic assistance to African governments, democracies and international financial institutions should insist on these conditions, and couple any funding with effective public outreach that explains the benefits of relying on democratic partners.

But Beijing's support for kleptocracy in Africa cannot be addressed solely by governments or lenders in Europe and the United States. The region's authoritarian leaders are adept at using past abuses by colonial powers to deflect present-day pressure to combat corruption. **African activists must look elsewhere, particularly to their colleagues in the PRC's own neighborhood, to cultivate networks of support and collaboration that will be more effective at exposing the tendrils of illicit money and influence linking Beijing to Africa.** By working together and sharing their findings with local and international independent media, civil society groups could help persuade the citizens of Congo-Brazzaville and other African countries that opaque CCP-led development is not the path to a brighter future.

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ENDNOTES

Criminal States, Militarized Criminals, and Profiteers: Russia, Africa, and the Evolving Ecosystem of Transnational Kleptocracy

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