

FIGHTING KLEPTOCRACY IN AN ERA OF GEOPOLITICS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ushered in a new era in the fight against kleptocracy defined by high-intensity great power competition. This report examines how the anti-kleptocracy agenda has been shaped by geopolitical concerns across three key spheres of foreign policy: great power confrontation with Russia; the superpower challenge from China; and the competition for influence in the Global South, in particular among the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the world in Africa. Ultimately, democracies will not be successful in advancing either their geopolitical interests or combating kleptocracy unless they recognize that these challenges are deeply related.

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion, policies that anti-kleptocracy activists could previously only dream of were enacted rapidly in Washington, London, and Brussels. Now, nearly two years into the war in Ukraine, how can we evaluate efforts to push back in earnest against the Kremlin's global kleptocratic machinery? In the plainest terms, it can be judged a resounding success. The Kremlin's power actors have been promptly informed that access to the West is a privilege, not a right. Access and assets that could have been used to undermine Ukraine and its allies, and promote or prosecute the war, have been immobilized and seized. Finally, in material terms, the success of the "seize, block, and freeze" policy coordinated by leading democracies can only be judged a success.

On a strategic level, however, the results are more nuanced. While there were hopes among some analysts and activists that the severity of the sanctions might result in Putin changing his behavior, the reality is that the sanctions, while vital, demonstrate anti-kleptocracy's shortcomings as a vehicle of lasting political change. Russia is not simply a kleptocracy—where personal enrichment is the core political principle of the ruler or ruling class—but a hardened resourceful autocracy which has weaponized kleptocracy to attack the West.

Like Moscow, Beijing also weaponizes kleptocracy to undermine western institutions. Most concerning, China supports an intricate web of anonymous shell companies that abet and execute industrial espionage at-scale, specifically in the realm of intellectual property (IP). The use of IP theft as a state-

sanctioned tool costs the United States up to \$600 billion annually. Moreover, state-connected Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE have been documented as using shell companies to avoid U.S. sanctions on Iran, and Chinese banks have been involved in laundering money for North Korea. These activities underscore Beijing's role in enabling sanctions evasion and facilitating transnational kleptocracy to the anti-kleptocracy movement's detriment.

Democracies have often failed to prioritize combating Beijing-backed kleptocracy adequately or appreciate the degree to which these kleptocratic tactics contribute to the growth of Chinese influence worldwide. These shortcomings have granted China an advantage on the global stage, allowing it to evade what anti-kleptocracy measures exist and operate under their own preferred set of rules.

Counter-kleptocracy activists need to adapt to this new competitive and increasingly chaotic geopolitics of competing great power interests. The anti-kleptocracy community should develop a "geopolitics for anti-kleptocracy," focusing on the following measures:

- **Prioritize the pursuit of international kleptocratic activities by authoritarian powers.** Adopting a broad, transnational approach that takes regional contexts into account will move counter-kleptocracy efforts toward those based on geopolitical priorities, rivalries, and the establishment of allied institutions;
- **Develop a determined effort to close the loopholes in rule of law systems that enable transnational kleptocracy.** Since it is extremely difficult to make reform inroads in deeply kleptocratic and authoritarian settings, civil society should focus on the international structures and pathways that enable it to flourish. This effort would include awareness-raising activities and building democratic-led, counter-kleptocracy institutions beyond ad-hoc policing operations currently in place;
- **Confront Chinese kleptocratic networks on a global scale.** It is important to recognize the role Beijing plays in enabling transnational kleptocracy and industrial espionage—and it is equally critical to counter it. Democracies should tackle this issue with the same robustness with which they targeted Russian kleptocratic activities following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine;
- **Establish a centrally-coordinated institution to organize democratic responses to transnational kleptocracy.** For the geopolitics of anti-kleptocracy to succeed, this approach needs a central coordinating institution. Ideas include the creation of a Transatlantic Anti-Corruption Coordination Council, where allied nations would align their approaches, share information, pool resources, set priorities, and unblock data and legal sharing obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ushered in a new era in the fight against kleptocracy that has transformed the playing field in ways the community of democracies is only beginning to understand. The post-Cold War world order had been on life support since Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, but the full-scale invasion signaled a new geopolitical reality defined by high-intensity great power competition. China has shown that it stands ready to provide limited but tangible support to Moscow while engaging in a geopolitical offensive of its own that has challenged the community of democratic states. Around the world, the invasion triggered what Fiona Hill has called "an open rebellion" by deeply frustrated countries in the so-called Global South against American demands to support its diplomatic and sanctions campaigns against the Kremlin and to the terms of the Western-led international order more generally.¹

This report examines how the anti-kleptocracy agenda has been deployed, deprioritized, or ignored in light of the following geopolitical concerns: great power confrontation with Russia; the superpower challenge from China; and the competition for influence in the Global South, in particular among the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the world in Africa. Democracies will not be successful in advancing either their geopolitical interests or in combating kleptocracy unless they recognize that these challenges are deeply related. Even where there is a genuine desire to fight kleptocracy among democratic policymakers, relying solely on developing a technocratic set of national and global rules alongside coordinating institutions and deeper enforcement practices will not suffice. The new era requires adapting the kleptocracy agenda to a new competitive and increasingly chaotic geopolitics of competing interests.

AN ANTI-KLEPTOCRACY REVOLUTION UPENDED

Since the 1960s, Western governments have discussed international corruption in earnest as an overseas development problem with serious foreign policy implications, and frequently since the 1990s as one facing Western globalized firms that needed strong international regulations to protect their assets abroad. It grew in intensity following the release of the 2016 Panama Papers, thanks to a new collaborative reporting model in which more than one hundred media organizations across the globe worked to expose offshore finance in ways that had not been seen before. Yet it was Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 that forced democracies to reckon with weaponized corruption and widespread international money laundering as a serious strategic threat to their survival.²

Thus, an anti-kleptocracy revolution began and it coalesced around four main approaches.³ The first centered on ending anonymity in the financial system by discouraging the use of anonymous shell companies to hide assets—long a key tool of illicit finance—and building registers of beneficial owners that make transparent those who own or control a company. The second approach involved attempts to sanction Western enablers by criminalizing working for hostile actors. The third strategy was characterized by a push to prevent authoritarian kleptocrats from accessing Western financial institutions and holding assets there through sanctions such as visa bans and asset freezes. The final approach called for greater international coordination among the rule of law democracies concerning their anti-kleptocracy initiatives.

The policy revolution establishing anti-kleptocracy as a first-tier priority in Washington, London, and Brussels culminated with President Biden establishing it as a core national security interest of the United States with a National Security Study Memorandum in June 2021, and the unveiling of the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption of December that year, ahead of the first Summit for Democracy built around an anti-corruption pillar.⁴ Similarly, after growing concern about foreign corruption moving into the United Kingdom, the government of then-prime minister Boris Johnson oversaw the passage of the Financial Services Act in 2021, modeled on European Union (EU) legislation on financial services, and the National Security and Investment Act, which increased oversight over foreign investments into the United Kingdom.⁵ Meanwhile, in the EU, the European Commission (EC) issued several anti-

money laundering directives, including the fifth and sixth directives to strengthen customer due diligence, and more restrictions on transactions with politically exposed persons, with implementation deadlines for member states in 2020 and 2021, respectively.⁶

Regrettably, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked the beginning of a new era of geopolitics. Under Putin, Russia has become a textbook kleptocracy. Public wealth has been plundered by government officials and oligarchs, and these assets have been hidden outside the country—often finding a home in the United Kingdom or other European countries where the proceeds are protected by rule of law. This wealth is used to co-opt foreign officials and business leaders, spread corrosive information campaigns, and even interfere in democratic elections. The impact of geopolitics on the fight against kleptocracy is felt not only in Russia but in China and the Global South as well.

THE CONFRONTATION WITH RUSSIA

A perfect illustration of the degree to which the post-Cold War relationship between Russia and the transatlantic community of democracies deteriorated can be found in the arrival of elite police squads at luxurious berths of private superyachts across the Mediterranean in 2022. Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Western establishment looked the other way as Russian elites accumulated more and more wealth, properties, and luxury goods. Western leaders hoped that Russian elites' ability to benefit from this system would make them invested in the current world order and that the Kremlin would not challenge that order by force of arms. This hope was put to the test by the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, and collapsed when Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, Western countries have seized or frozen assets worth tens of billions of dollars, including yachts, private jets and helicopters, and homes.⁷ One of them included the *Scheherazade*, a \$700 million superyacht linked personally to Putin that was seized by Italian authorities in May, while on the other end of the continent his forces entered the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol.⁸

This was the geopolitics of kleptocracy at work. For decades, Russia had weaponized kleptocracy against the West; and after the invasion, the anti-kleptocracy agenda was being used to push back in earnest against the Kremlin. Policies that activists could only have dreamed of were enacted in hours. Britain, long home of what came to be known as "Londongrad," issued measures leading the charge in a single day in February 2022. Boris Johnson announced to a House of Commons reeling from Russia's rapid advance in Ukraine that the government would hit over a hundred Russian companies and oligarchs with visa bans and asset freezes—crucially affecting all major Russian banks.⁹ The legislation limited the amount of money a Russian citizen could deposit in a U.K. bank account, prohibited Russian companies from raising finance on U.K. markets, and took steps to stop the Kremlin from issuing sovereign debt on the London market. The British

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capital, for decades a leading corruption services center to the Russian elite and where Transparency International has estimated over £100 billion (\$127 billion) is laundered annually, was going after what was hiding in plain sight.¹⁰

Soon thereafter, a collective response to cracking down on Russian kleptocracy took shape, drawing on three core principles promoted by anti-kleptocracy activists for over a decade. First, a central international coordination body was established to go after transnational kleptocrats. Second, a combination of visa bans and asset freezes would be wielded to cut off access to the West and the privilege of holding assets there. Third, financial institutions, such as banks compromised by kleptocrats, and other assets would be shut out of the Western financial system through sanctions.

The core of the democratic response was the formation of the Russian Elites, Proxies, and Oligarchs (REPO) Task Force between the Group of Seven (G7) and Australia, which was charged with going after the Kremlin's transnational network of assets.¹¹ This task force brought together, among others, the three recently formed key entities on both sides of the Atlantic: the U.S. Task Force KleptoCapture, the U.K. National Crime Agency's Combatting Kleptocracy Cell, and the EU's Freeze and Seize Task Force. This kind of central node to take the fight to the kleptocrats was exactly what activists had been calling for and it came coupled with another long-highlighted demand: a dialogue among the parties on developing new financial regulations against Russian kleptocracy.¹²

The REPO Task Force's establishment was only a small part of a much broader sanctions policy, core components of which were straight out of the anti-kleptocracy playbooks developed before the war. The first focus of these was the assets of Russia's elite, which was so far-reaching as to impose sanctions on the majority of the Russian government and the State Duma, who lost visa access to the West as well as to any assets that they may have sequestered there.¹³ There was no shying away from designating key officials like Putin himself or his defense minister, Sergey Shoigu.

The second component went after key elite financial resources. This effort saw sanctions placed on all major Russian banks and the Russian Central Bank, including, most boldly, its vast overseas reserves the Kremlin had been building up for war. As a result, most Russian banks were removed from the critical SWIFT financial network.¹⁴ Moscow's elite, which for the previous decades had enjoyed the benefits of Western openness and American-led globalization—during what the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul called “the hot peace” that followed the Cold War—now found themselves without Western access, assets, and connectivity.¹⁵

These initiatives were the first application of an anti-kleptocracy response at scale. Now, nearly two years into the war in Ukraine, how can we evaluate it? In the plainest terms, it can be judged a resounding success. Russian power actors have been promptly informed that access to the West is a privilege, not



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a right. Access and assets that could have been used to undermine Ukraine and its allies, and promote or prosecute the war, have been seized or immobilized. In material terms, too, the success of the seize, block, and freeze policy coordinated around the REPO task force can only be judged a success. By March 2023, an astonishing \$58 billion had been frozen by REPO, with the EU alone freezing over €17.4 billion (\$18.9 billion) of Russian individuals assets and the United Kingdom a startling £18 billion (\$22.2 billion).¹⁶ Meanwhile, the financial blocking of Russian banks and the freezing of its \$280 billion worth of central bank assets represent the largest financial sanctions regime ever undertaken.¹⁷ This financial disruption, with its impact on the ruble, has clearly impacted Russia's economic strength and removed resources from play that would have helped the Kremlin intensify its war efforts in Ukraine.

On a strategic level, however, the results are more nuanced. While there were hopes among some analysts and activists that the severity of the sanctions might result in Putin changing his behavior, the reality is that the sanctions, while vital, demonstrate current anti-kleptocracy shortcomings as a vehicle of lasting political change.¹⁸ The continued viability of the Russian economy and substantial war production also illustrate the limitations of sanctions in this regard. Taken together, these deficiencies of current anti-kleptocracy initiatives and the blunted impact of sanctions show that Russia is not simply a kleptocracy—where personal enrichment is the core political principle of the ruler or the ruling class—but a hardened resourceful autocracy that has weaponized kleptocracy to attack the West.

The wider geopolitical analysis we can draw from the deployment of the anti-kleptocracy agenda against Russia is that it is principally defensive. It can protect the West, but it is not transformative; it cannot break hardened great power autocratic regimes. The fact it had to be deployed against the backdrop of war only underlines the deep misread the West had of the so-called “hot peace” with Russia after the end of the Cold War. Western diplomats and Russian analysts mistook the globalization of the Kremlin's corrupt elite networks as part of a long-term integrative process which would see them become stakeholders in the current world order. In fact, the oligarchs depended on the regime, not vice versa, and Russia's leaders harbored deep desires to overturn the post-Cold War settlement by force of arms. The build-up of Kremlin-linked assets in the West ultimately had been offensive, not integrative. In this sense, the fact that the anti-kleptocracy agenda had to be called into full force can be judged a policy failure.

The West has gone after Russian kleptocrats and their assets proactively as it has not done in any other theater or toward any other major great power adversary. Anti-kleptocracy is part of an active strategy in building up Britain and the EU's domestic defenses against Russian weaponized corruption. Such action brings us back to the image of the arrival of elite police squads to impound the superyachts of the Russian elite in the Mediterranean. Just out of frame of these iconic photos are all the undisturbed superyachts of countless other kleptocratic networks across the globe. This unfortunate reality reflects the different ways these geopolitical concerns play out in other parts of the world.



\$280 billion

worth of **Russian state assets** have been frozen since 2022.

THE CHALLENGE FROM CHINA

While many policymakers believe there is a clear distinction between the way China and Russia operate in the kleptocracy sphere, the reality is that, in terms of weaponized corruption, China is not so different from Russia. Indeed, it plays by different rules when it comes to competing with the West, but it is also a great power rival that weaponizes corruption and enables transnational kleptocracy to its benefit. Illicit financial flows from China exceeded \$1 trillion between 2002 and 2011 alone, and the Panama Papers leak exposed a large number of Chinese officials who maintained offshore accounts, including relatives of Chinese general secretary Xi Jinping.¹⁹ Though there is a clear trade-off between access to cheaper Chinese goods and services and accepting Chinese influence in countries where the United States is competing for influence with Beijing, at home and abroad the tools of anti-kleptocracy—from exposing graft to stopping Chinese influence-buying networks—remain underutilized.

This failure to tackle Chinese-backed kleptocracy is notable given the extensive documentation that anonymous shell companies, which anti-kleptocracy activists have long called the “weapons of mass corruption,” serve as vehicles for industrial espionage and are enabling nefarious Chinese activities that undermine the United States.²⁰ The use of IP theft as a state-sanctioned tool costs the United States up to \$600 billion annually.²¹ The U.S. IP Theft Commission has labeled China as “the world’s principal IP infringer” and several organs of the government have argued that Beijing is pursuing technology theft from the United States as a matter of policy to build up rival capacities.²² One particularly shocking case from the Government Accountability Office found that out of 1,406 U.S. federal high security leases, officials were unable to identify the owners of around a third of them because the sites were owned by shell companies. Moreover, where the owners could be identified, nine out of fourteen government agencies working on sensitive national security matters were unaware they were leasing sites whose ownership ultimately could be traced back to China.

More widely, state-connected Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE have been documented as using shell companies to avoid U.S. sanctions on Iran, while Chinese banks have been involved in laundering money for North Korea as well, making China a key enabler of sanctions evasion and facilitator of kleptocracy around the world.²³

China has also used an opaque network of anonymous shell companies, crony contracts, and suspected bribing schemes to expand its influence globally through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) global infrastructure investment project. A conservative estimate from AidData found at least 35 percent of BRI projects were suspected of failing to comply with environmental, labor, and anti-corruption standards in the countries where they operate.²⁴ Unusual confidentiality clauses that prevent borrowers from revealing the full terms, and



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sometimes even existence, of debt complicate investigations of these charges.²⁵ Controversial cases of China attempting to wield influence in this way have been documented in several countries, including Sri Lanka, Zambia, and Honduras. Malaysia's infamous 1MDB corruption scandal offers a particularly egregious example. According to reports, Chinese officials, seeking infrastructure deals, promised to bankroll the siphoning of \$4.5 billion out of the country's development fund into shell companies and other opaque investments.²⁶ They even purportedly pushed U.S. officials not to investigate—and spied on Western journalists doing so. None of these tactics or techniques is fully countered by current anti-kleptocracy policy.

A lack of appreciation in the U.S., U.K., and EU of the degree to which kleptocratic tactics including intellectual property (IP) theft are part of the growth of Chinese influence has led them to deprioritize fighting kleptocracy in their diplomatic engagement with China. Unlike Russia, there is no similarly proactive strategy to confront Chinese kleptocracy and weaponized corruption. Given Beijing's growing influence and the complexities of the relationship between China and many western democracies, attitudes toward Chinese kleptocracy are as lax as those toward the Russian elite prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with fears that prioritizing this issue might upset other crucial aspects of diplomatic relations.

Downplaying kleptocracy grants China an advantage on the global stage by allowing it to operate under its own, preferred set of rules. Beijing's efforts to influence western politics evinces this trend. In the United Kingdom, China has been running alleged spies and agents of influence in the House of Commons.²⁷ British intelligence services have warned of Chinese influence operations, and a refresh of the U.K. Integrated Review identified Chinese corruption, particularly as part of a greater political interference campaign, to be a growing threat to national security. Similar patterns have been observed in politics in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.²⁸ Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Justice has accused China of seeking to bribe officials, and intelligence agencies have also warned of spying with economic enticements.²⁹ Still, a proactive and meaningful full-scale counter strategy is lacking.

For Europe, although the EC has committed to "de-risking" relations with China,³⁰ this commitment has not yet translated into greater examination of Chinese investments in all EU jurisdictions. Yet, Chinese investments into Central and Eastern Europe, much of them under BRI, have recently come under greater scrutiny due to links with the lowering of environmental protections and rising debt in the region.³¹ There are also some wider signs of change. China's investments declined significantly in Europe after 2022 due to Europe's ongoing efforts to decouple economically from Russia following its invasion of Ukraine (most BRI infrastructure was reliant on transit through Russia) and China's slow economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, among other factors. EU policymakers, however, remain concerned that China is spreading its influence into Europe, including through corruption.³²

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Italy, for instance, has become more cautious of Chinese investments into its companies. In addition to withdrawing from the BRI, Italy has halted Chinese investments into its car and drone companies out of concerns that it might be part of an ongoing technology capture campaign.³³ Unfortunately, Italy's actions remain one of the few outliers among EU members so far, with Lithuania's assertive stance against Chinese influence in Europe offering one of the few other examples of such significant action on the continent.³⁴

ANTI-KLEPTOCRACY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The limits of current, technocratic approaches to kleptocracy and geopolitics are most visible in Africa. If one were looking for a case study demonstrating how geopolitical concerns can often clash with countering kleptocracy beyond Russia and China, the oil-rich autocracy of Equatorial Guinea would be the place to start. President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has held power since a military coup in 1979, and his family have been confirmed by U.S. and European courts and law enforcement to be textbook examples of kleptocrats. In a 2014 settlement with the U.S. Justice Department, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, the president's son, agreed to relinquish \$30 million in assets acquired through corruption-related activities, including a mansion, a luxury car, and Michael Jackson memorabilia. U.S. authorities estimated he had accumulated more than \$300 million in illicit assets and wealth.³⁵ In France, the president's son was also convicted on several counts of corruption and money laundering, had an arrest warrant issued for him, and received a suspended sentence, all in absentia. His French assets, which were seized, were estimated at over \$175 million.³⁶ Meanwhile, the United Kingdom chose to place sanctions on the younger Obiang for his kleptocratic behavior.³⁷

Given these legal responses to the Obiang family's kleptocratic activities, it should not be surprising that the anti-kleptocracy activist community expected Washington to follow the British lead and target the Obiangs under the Global Magnitsky Act, which allows the U.S. government to sanction individuals who are responsible for large-scale corruption or human rights abuses globally. The United States, however, has not punished or even pushed them, and geopolitical concerns accounts for this inaction.

Equatorial Guinea has skillfully created leverage for itself in the intensifying competition between the United States and China in Africa. China has openly been seeking a military base in the South Atlantic for many years, courting different countries along its African coast. The establishment of such a base would be a dramatic first for Beijing in this theater, and would be seen as a significant new threat by the United States. Given the Obiang family's troubles with the existing rules-based international order, it should come as little surprise that there was a warm reception for a planned Chinese military installation.³⁸ Plans advanced to such a stage that Washington was forced to

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engage in extensive diplomacy with the Obiang regime, culminating in an 11th-hour visit by Jon Finer, principal deputy U.S. national security advisor, to the country in October 2021. There was no mention of corruption or kleptocracy in the readout of the meeting, to the shock of activists. Worse still, Obiang Jr. posted on social media a thank-you video showing a silver platter engraved with the U.S. national crest—a gift from the U.S. delegation.

Here the U.S. kleptocracy agenda lost out to a higher priority for Washington: great power competition with China. Unlike when facing Russia, where anti-kleptocracy proved a useful means to confront the Kremlin, it was judged in the competition for global influence with Beijing to have been too difficult to implement and consequently downgraded. The Chinese base has so far not materialized, and U.S. security officials have expressed deep frustration that Equatorial Guinea is playing them against China to maximize its advantages.

Equatorial Guinea offers a stark illustration of a wider problem. In order to compete with China, the community of democracies needs to build partnerships with a range of countries that are not democracies. Developing such relationships may help expand a strategic relationship that limits Chinese influence, deny China a military foothold, or deepen an American military position. In many ways, it is a return to aspects of the Cold War, which gave leverage to states in what was then called the Third World and now often referred to as the Global South to choose which superpower would be their sponsor.

For example, the United States has not highlighted corruption in its relationships with key swing middle powers such as Turkey, even when Transparency International has argued that the country's corruption extends to the point of "state capture." The global intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force has listed Turkey as a jurisdiction that requires increased monitoring, and it remains flagged by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as being at significant risk for bribery.³⁹ Still, the United States has not prioritized addressing these issues in its relationship with Ankara given the strategic importance Turkey holds on military and Black Sea issues in its dealings with Russia, and the wider geopolitical imperative of ensuring the country remains closer to the West than to China.

The United Kingdom, like the United States, officially prioritized addressing foreign corruption in the refresh to its Integrated Review in 2023.⁴⁰ At times, however, it has also turned a blind eye to instances of kleptocratic regimes gaining influence in the country. This dynamic is especially evident as Gulf monarchies' state-owned companies have increased their investments into U.K. sports teams, such as the acquisition of the Newcastle United soccer club by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and Qatar's similar bid to acquire another Premier League team, Manchester United.⁴¹ The prospect of such investment came despite the British public's increasing wariness of the foreign acquisition of sports teams, especially after Britain imposed sanctions on Roman Abramovich,

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a Putin-aligned Russian oligarch and then-owner of Chelsea, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁴² Although Abramovich was forced to sell his shares in Chelsea, the U.K. has not taken a significant stance against potential weaponized corruption through the acquisition of ownership stocks of other teams.

Meanwhile, the Qatari corruption scandal in the European Parliament has been one of the highest-profile cases of weaponized corruption in the EU, illustrating the selective implementation of anti-corruption measures. In December 2022, Eva Kaili, a European Parliament vice-president, along with Antonio Panzeri, a former member of the body, and other leading political figures were arrested after evidence emerged that they had received bribes from Qatar to advocate on behalf of the Gulf state to strengthen its ties with the EU.⁴³ Prior to these revelations, the EU was attempting to secure increased imports of natural gas from Qatar following its plans to phase out imports from Russia. Even after the exposure of these illicit connections, investigations and legal proceedings have progressed slowly, and EU members have continued to increase their imports of Qatari natural gas.⁴⁴ Notably, Shell has concluded a 27 year supply deal with QatarEnergy, despite political pressure in the Netherlands and elsewhere to cut natural gas demand. The urgent need to replace Russian gas due to the energy conflict between the West and Moscow over the invasion of Ukraine illustrates that despite the EU's best intentions, the politics of anti-kleptocracy does not happen in a vacuum.

Globalized kleptocracy, enabled by a Western-led financial system, also undercuts broader goals of infrastructure development and sustainable and inclusive economic growth in the Global South. This issue is particularly evident in Africa, where the OECD estimates \$60 billion more has left the continent in recent years through illicit financial flows than enter it in development funds or in foreign direct investment.⁴⁵ According to quantitative data on developmental aid, pushing anti-corruption reforms in less-developed states has not had much impact. Whereas development aid is rarely misappropriated to line kleptocrats' pockets due to increases in stricter oversight on funding, little evidence has emerged over the past few decades that development aid conditioned upon anti-corruption reforms has succeeded in resolving the problem. In fact, across more than 15,000 projects and 400,000 contracts of developmental aid between 2000 and 2017 overseen by the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and EuropeAid, reforms were unable to constrain corruption, instead merely displacing it to new sectors of governance.⁴⁶ The failure to address corruption's systemic causes—embedded in authoritarianism and the loopholes of the global financial system—is likely to blame. Another study across a wider range of 122 countries between 2005 and 2017 concluded that foreign development aid had no impact on corruption.⁴⁷

These figures paint a grim picture of resentment and disappointment with the West. The September 2023 speech at the UN General Assembly by the leader of Guinea's military junta, Mamady Doumbouya, offered a telling picture. Doumbouya called on the West to stop "lecturing" Africa, saying the Western



\$60 billion

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democratic model of governance has been “imposed” on the continent. His comments came in the wake of eight coups in West and Central Africa since 2020, including in Guinea, and reflected a resentment toward a multi-generational Western tendency to prop up corrupt and unpopular leaders.⁴⁸ The coups have primarily been anti-French in tenor and geopolitical orientation, reducing the postcolonial influence that France has traditionally wielded in the region drastically.⁴⁹ Most coup leaders have also sought greater alignment with non-Western security providers, such as Russian-backed Wagner and other groups.⁵⁰ Overall, these developments mark a serious reversal for a Western foreign policy in the region whose main tools had been security and development aid.

Kleptocracy plays two roles in this story. First, these reversals make it harder for democracies to promote good governance and increases the likelihood of corruption proliferating when countries backslide into military rule. The West African coup belt has cut off the West’s ability to influence governance and institutions, with authoritarian powers like Russia, little concerned about kleptocracy, filling the gap. For instance, in Mali, an anti-French coup successfully forced the French military to retreat from the country, with the resulting power vacuum partially filled by the Wagner Group.⁵¹ This example raises a difficult question: if a weak state has a corrupt and authoritarian regime, which might lean toward Russia or outright military rule if pushed too hard, what is the correct course of action for Western policy? This dilemma is particularly evident in the Central African Republic, where, having swung toward Wagner and away from the West, the country now finds itself beholden to a foreign kleptocratic power.⁵²

The second side of the kleptocratic coin is the fact that France and the West in general have become acutely unpopular across West and Central Africa in recent years and are blamed for many of the region’s ills, as evidenced by Doumbouya’s speech. The recent coup in Gabon is another illustrative example. The Western partner in question, ousted president Ali Bongo, was not democratically elected; rather, he is a dynastic, oil-rent siphoning kleptocrat with extensive properties and bank accounts abroad.⁵³ Not only did the French and American governments embrace this regime willingly, for decades they ignored the parallel financial system of anonymous shell companies, off-shore accounts, and tax havens that had allowed Bongo and his cronies to fleece the Gabonese people and embezzle their money in the West. Western governments look like the enablers of kleptocracy to many in Gabon, not the defenders of democracy. Gabon’s experience is part of a wider pattern where more wealth leaves Africa than enters it—either illicitly through corrupt gains seeking a safe harbor, or through the profits of multinational corporations.⁵⁴ Western neglect of the kleptocratic financial system has proved a decisive factor in delegitimizing the current Western-led political order, alliances, and development model.

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DEVELOPING A GEOPOLITICS FOR ANTI-KLEPTOCRACY

In an era of great power competition, anti-kleptocracy activists need to develop a “geopolitics for anti-kleptocracy.” The anti-kleptocracy advocacy community must recognize its policy agenda inhabits—and is often subordinate to—contemporary geopolitics, and may be for the foreseeable future. Therefore, a more political and less technocratic understanding and set of responses in which competing geopolitical realities are taken into account is now necessary.

In this new approach, the pursuit of international kleptocratic activities by authoritarian powers should be prioritized. Also, there should be a determined effort to close loopholes enabling kleptocracy in rule of law systems and to build allied-led, anti-kleptocracy coordination institutions that go beyond the current ad-hoc policing operations. Prioritizing anti-kleptocracy efforts in the West’s relations with authoritarian regimes will necessitate confronting Chinese kleptocracy around the world with the same vigor with which democracies have targeted Russian kleptocratic activities. Beijing has weaponized kleptocracy extensively to extend its influence across the Global South and inside Western democracies, in an effort to avoid sanctions or mask illegal activities, such as IP theft, that are deeply harmful to Western interests. The BRI’s decline, however, presents an opportunity for the West to highlight the underhanded methods of debt entrapment and self-enrichment that China promotes, which would make the case to African countries for the anti-corruption policies that the West supports.⁵⁵

The United States’ inability to counter Chinese kleptocracy effectively advantages Beijing. This shortcoming is informed by the false assumption that Russia and China challenge the community of democratic states in fundamentally different ways. In fact, when it comes to illicit finance, the techniques used and the ways to stop them are very similar. Focusing efforts on great power competitors will provide a greater rate of return on investigations both in terms of funds and influence for the West. Yet, such action should only be taken with a clear awareness that there is no silver bullet for curbing the kleptocratic activities of hardened and powerful autocracies. These initiatives would be undertaken to limit their ease of operations in the global financial system and potential influence in rule of law settings.

The second core component of anti-kleptocratic geopolitics is a more prominent role for European nations. The United States, as it focuses on great power

The United States’ inability to counter Chinese kleptocracy effectively advantages Beijing.

competition, should encourage its European allies to take a lead role in fighting kleptocracy. Ideally, this collaborative approach will focus the West's attention on peer rivals and counter the kleptocracy-enabling environments in middle powers and weaker states by closing down access to the Western financial system and establishing domestic reforms and institutions fit for the task. This policy agenda moves anti-kleptocracy from a technocratic and rules-based set of assumptions to one based on geopolitical priorities, rivalries, and the building of allied institutions.

Finally, for the geopolitics of anti-kleptocracy to succeed, this concerted approach needs a central coordinating institution. Several ideas have already been proposed. One example is the creation of a Transatlantic Anti-Corruption Coordination Council, where allied nations would align their approaches, share information, pool resources, set priorities, and unblock data and legal sharing obstacles.⁵⁶ Such an initiative could be combined with making the REPO task force permanent, expanding its brief to not just go after Russians but kleptocrats of all kinds, with a strong endowment of resources and capacities to scale up the pursuit of Chinese corruption in particular. Anti-kleptocracy cannot succeed as a policy agenda without this kind of structured and institutionalized transnational cooperation.

The geopolitics of anti-kleptocracy is not an overarching quest like decarbonization, which cannot be conceived of as a project any single government on its own can fix, but is instead something that must be the legacy of a political generation of allied governments. Finally, as the great power rivals of the West are accumulating new sources of strength, authority, and technology, this area is one where the West has the levers to shut down and expose many their activities inside Western democracies themselves, as the success of REPO against Russia demonstrates. An anti-kleptocracy drive has the ingredients for real domestic popularity.

How will this approach help the community of democracies regain influence on the wider geopolitical chessboard? When making their case, anti-kleptocracy activists should pitch their agenda as one of the few areas in contemporary geopolitics where the West has the ability and the hegemony to stop a dangerous pattern of behavior. Many problems the West faces are chronic conditions that can only be managed, such as the challenges presented by the rise of China or revanchist middle powers, as economic weight shifts away from the Atlantic world to create a more crowded and competitive field.

The stronger the West is, the better—and a new transatlantic body that removes hostile kleptocratic networks and exposes the global kleptocratic systems of rivals would benefit democracies worldwide. Western democracies can help salvage their reputation as an enabler of kleptocrats by going after them in this new forum. The old technocratic rules-only approach to anti-kleptocracy does not fit this moment, when decisions will have to be made based on geopolitical priorities. We must become much more assertive in rooting out corruption and standing up for democracy. There is no time to lose, and the tools we need to act are ready and waiting.

When making their case, anti-kleptocracy activists should pitch their agenda as one of the few areas in contemporary geopolitics where the West has the levers and hegemony to stop a dangerous pattern of behavior.

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