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Africa, Unchained From China

by Gordon G. Chang | April 2025

Elon Musk on March 22 accused the Economic Freedom Fighters of inciting racial hatred. “Very few people know that there is a major political party in South Africa that is actively promoting white genocide,” he posted on his X platform.¹

The leader of that party, Julius Malema, led the singing of “Kill the Boer, Kill the Farmer” at a March 21 rally to commemorate the anniversary of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, a seminal event in South Africa’s history.² The song was a call to action during the Apartheid era, and now the obviously racist lyrics have caught the attention of the world’s richest human, who was born in Pretoria and retains South African citizenship.

South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa called Musk’s claim of persecution of whites a “completely false narrative,”³ but the notion has nonetheless taken hold in Washington. “‘Kill the Boer’ is a chant

that incites violence,” Secretary of State Marco Rubio posted on X on the 24th of last month. “South Africa’s leaders and politicians must take action to protect Afrikaner and other disfavored minorities.”⁴

Ramaphosa now has a problem. Malema, leader of the fourth-largest party in the lower house of South Africa’s Parliament and a political opponent of Ramaphosa’s African National Congress, has further riled an American administration that was already irritated with Pretoria over a range of matters.

And the ruling party is not helping its leader either. A coalition including ANC figures has been trying to change the name of the street on which the U.S. consulate in Johannesburg sits, wanting to rename Sandton Drive for Leila Khaled, a Palestinian who helped hijack TWA Flight 840 in 1969.

“Do not engage in any action that will further inflame the situation,” said Vincent Magwenya, the president’s spokesman, referring to the continuing flare-up with the United States. “We have a major diplomatic situation that we are managing. Please support us.”⁵

Ramaphosa at the moment is trying to ease tensions with President Donald Trump, who on February 7 issued an executive order, “Addressing Egregious Actions of the Republic of South Africa.”⁶

Among other things, the order cut off aid and assistance to the country—in 2023 the U.S. extended about \$440 million to South Africa⁷—and promoted “the resettlement of Afrikaner refugees escaping government-sponsored race-based discrimination, including racially discriminatory property confiscation.” Afrikaner is another term for Boer.

Bucknell University’s Zhiqun Zhu accuses Trump of “unnecessarily” creating discord with South Africa.⁸

Clearly, there is discord aplenty. In a statement, the South African government charged that “the foundational premise of this order lacks factual accuracy.” The government accused Washington of “a campaign of misinformation and propaganda aimed at misrepresenting our great nation.” “We will not be bullied,” Ramaphosa said in his State of the Nation address on February 6.⁹

So Zhu is correct insofar as Trump has roiled relations with perhaps Africa’s most important state, but the Bucknell academic is wrong to suggest that the tension serves no purpose.

Unfortunately, the actions of the South African government threaten American core interests. Trump’s executive order states, correctly, that “South Africa has taken aggressive positions towards the United States and its allies, including accusing Israel, not Hamas, of genocide in the International Court of Justice, and reinvigorating its relations with Iran to develop commercial, military, and nuclear arrangements.”

“South Africa’s political leadership, under heavy pressure from the People’s Republic of China, has not only shown disrespect toward the U.S., while holding its hand out for free cash, but also disrespect to U.S. friends and partners, Israel and the Republic of China,” Gregory Copley, president of the International Strategic Studies Association, told me.¹⁰

“South Africa is China’s front man, the con man, the guy with three balls on the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue,” says Jonathan Bass, who watches Africa from his perch at Argent LNG. Why, asks Bass, should the U.S. support a Chinese front?¹¹

The United States, surprisingly, does. Now, however, Washington is defunding humanitarian programs in South Africa, such as HIV and other health-oriented initiatives, as Trump moves from soft to hard power tactics.

Hong Kong journalist Shi Jiangtao argues that Trump “could push the continent’s most advanced economy towards China and alienate much of the Global South.”¹²

Zhu is correct insofar as Trump has roiled relations with perhaps Africa’s most important state, but the Bucknell academic is wrong to suggest that the tension serves no purpose.

That may occur, but Trump does not appear to care. He has been clear what he thinks of the continent—in January 2018 the president infamously called African states “sh-thole countries”¹³—and apart from Boers has shown little interest for anyone else on that troubled landmass.

Trump is wrong about Africa’s importance, however. It is, after all, “fast becoming a key global center of gravity,”¹⁴ poised for takeoff in most countries.

At the moment, China dominates the rising continent. China is Africa’s largest bilateral trade partner, the leading bilateral creditor, and the biggest investor.

African leaders acknowledge Chinese dominance. Fifty-one of the 54 African heads of state attended the Ninth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, in Beijing in September. Senior representatives of two other African countries were also present as was the chair of the African Union Commission.¹⁵

The attendance of the African elite in the Chinese capital is no accident. Chinese diplomats flood the zone, as can be seen from Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit in January. According to Beijing, 2025 was the 35th consecutive year a Chinese foreign minister made his first international trip of the year to Africa.¹⁶

From the founding of the People’s Republic, Beijing prioritized relations with the continent. Mao Zedong saw African nations as natural allies in his struggle with the Soviet Union for leadership of the worldwide communist movement. He especially coveted Africa’s votes in the U.N. General Assembly.

Yet the position of the People’s Republic is eroding, and in some respects eroding fast. As Xi Jinping’s ambitions have expanded, Africa has necessarily slipped in relative importance. Now, Xi’s case of “imperial overstretch”—the popular term coined by Yale’s Paul Kennedy—is getting worse.

Also worse is China’s economy. The economy is not growing at the 5.0% pace claimed for last year, and it may not even be growing at all. As a result, Beijing is now having trouble funding promises to Africa. “From a new capital in Egypt to cement factories in Ethiopia, major Chinese projects have quietly been shelved, reversed, or scaled down,” writes Stewart Paterson for the Hinrich Foundation in October.¹⁷

Cash for Xi’s grand infrastructure project, the globe-spanning Belt and Road Initiative, has been drying up. “This initiative, which sought to replace Euro-American investment on the continent, has essentially run out of cash, and Beijing is now only doing minor deals around the continent, leaving many major infrastructural projects unfinished,” says Copley, also editor-in-chief of *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*. “Beijing had sought to create a network of road and rail links from the interior of Africa to ports on the Indian Ocean, but it has not been able to complete this.”¹⁸

For instance, one of Beijing’s signature projects in Africa, the rail line connecting Kenya’s Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Uganda, remains unfinished. After cutting through Kenya’s national parks, the tracks stop in a field near the town of Duka Moja in the Rift Valley, more than 200 miles short of the Ugandan border. The Export-Import Bank of China initially financed the line but has since refused to extend any more funds for completion.¹⁹

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Beijing is also scaling back trade commitments. In 2021 at the FOCAC Eighth Ministerial Conference, Xi Jinping announced “a bid to reach \$300 billion in total imports from Africa in the next three years,”²⁰ a pledge he did not make again in 2024. Last year, he only said that China would open its markets unilaterally.²¹

China’s lending to Africa has also been hit. The country in 2023 extended \$4.61 billion, but that was the first annual increase since 2016.²²

China’s eroding position is creating a new era. “Africa is entering a period where, for the first time in modern history, it will not be dominated by external powers,” Copley told me in March. “The influence of Europe, Russia, the United States, and the People’s Republic of China is giving way to what now appears to be a vacuum.”²³

Vacuums never last, of course. For one thing, China’s main rival in Africa, India, is moving to exert influence.

“India puts a lot of diplomatic effort into its outreach in Africa, including using its 2023 leadership role in the G-20 to successfully push for membership for the African Union,” Cleo Paskal of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies told me. “This has been well received, especially by countries trying to find a ‘third way’ that isn’t the West or China.”²⁴

“The Indian economy being much smaller than the Chinese one means that New Delhi at present is not in a position to project geo-economic influence in Africa in the way that Beijing does,” Kamran Bokhari, a senior director of the Washington, D.C.-based New Lines Institute, says.²⁵ “India,” Copley reminds us, “was thought to be an ideal candidate to replace the People’s Republic of China in Africa, but

it has been extremely slow off the mark to seize the opportunity.”²⁶

India will play a larger role in the future, however. “China’s economic downturn and India’s growth trajectory,” Bokhari notes, “could provide the Indians with opportunities to enhance their footprint on the continent in the years ahead.”²⁷

New Delhi has made progress, but mostly in peripheral areas. India’s influence is largely limited to peripheral states such as Seychelles and Mauritius.

Recently, New Delhi has been making a concerted effort to woo the continent. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s November trip to Nigeria—he was the second foreign dignitary to receive the nation’s Grand Commander of the Order of Niger, following Queen Elizabeth II in 1969—highlighted New Delhi’s renewed interest.²⁸

India knows for it to advance it must first push China out of the way. At the end of February, at the Japan-India-Africa Business Forum, the Indian government’s external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, took “a thinly veiled swipe” at China’s exploitation of African states.

“Unlike extractive models of engagement, India believes in capacity-building, skill development, and technology transfer,” Jaishankar said, “ensuring that African countries not only benefit from investments but also develop self-sustaining growth eco-systems.”²⁹

Beijing immediately took offense. In response, the semi-official *Global Times* tarred India’s African diplomacy, calling Jaishankar’s words “sour grapes” and boasting that “China has remained Africa’s largest trading partner for a 15th consecutive year.”

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The Chinese defensiveness is an indication that New Delhi is making progress on a continent that China has long dominated.

The competition between Beijing and New Delhi—the *Global Times* denied there was a “rivalry for leadership over the Global South”—is another indication that such a rivalry exists and China knows trends are not favorable.³⁰

This gives even the U.S. an opening. Although Africa is not a priority for America, America is a priority for Africa. Ramaphosa’s South Africa, for instance, wants a trade deal with Trump.³¹ As Yun Sun of the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. pointed out to Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*, almost nobody on the continent wants to get on the wrong side of a country with “overwhelming power and influence.”³²

India and America have one big advantage over their big adversary. Chinese mythology holds that all Chinese are descendants of the Yellow Emperor, who is thought to have ruled in the third millennium BCE. The Chinese consider themselves to be a branch of humanity separate from the rest of the world, a view reinforced by indoctrination in schools and other means.

Many in China, including officials, “believe themselves to be categorically different from and impliedly superior to the rest of the humankind,” writes Fei-Ling Wang, author of *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*.³³

The racism, therefore, is institutionalized and openly promoted. That was painfully evident in 2018 in the 13-minute skit on China Central Television’s Spring Festival Gala, the premier television show in China. In “Let’s Celebrate Together,” publicizing the opening of the Mombasa-Nairobi rail line in Kenya, a Chinese actress in blackface played a Kenyan mother, who had an enormous bosom and ridiculously large buttocks. Worse, her sidekick was a human-size monkey. The combination of the monkey and the woman was an echo of the Hubei

Provincial Museum exhibit “This is Africa,” which in 2017 displayed photographs of Africans flush next to images of primates.³⁴

In recent years, there have been many ugly portrayals of Africans in Chinese media, and although the skit was not the worst, it was striking because the main state broadcaster, by airing it to about 800 million viewers, made it clear Chinese officials think of Africans as both objects of derision and subhuman.³⁵

China’s communist regime has never been able to shake the racism inherent in its Han nationalism. These attitudes today stand in the way of China ever having durable relations with Africa. So when the Chinese money dries up, as it will at some point, angry Africans will send the Chinese “neocolonialists” packing.

“As many African states are recognizing, Africa is being left to look after itself,” says Copley.³⁶ That, ultimately, will be good for the continent. Africa will have the opportunity, for the first time in centuries, to build its own future.

Gordon G. Chang is the author of *Plan Red: China’s Project to Destroy America* and *The Coming Collapse of China*. Follow him on X @ GordonGChang.

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