



# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Chinese Surveillance Tools in Africa

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### Key Points:

- The spread of Chinese surveillance tools is shaped by local African demands for state capacity building and Chinese supply motivations.
- China's "no strings attached" policy does not result in neutral outcomes, but is an obfuscating frame, which systematically presents China as a generous actor towards African governments while also de-emphasizing its bias for benefitting state actors.
- Chinese surveillance raises important questions about the capacity of local African state law to safeguard citizens' rights.

### Introduction

The heightened attention to Africa-China relations is prompted by the growing investment, trade, and aid between African countries and China. Such ventures are being both embraced, on the one hand, and met with scepticism, on the

other hand. Although academic and media discourses are examining both the encouraging and detrimental aspects of the relationship, the way we explore the subject matter frequently obfuscates African agency.

Present China-Africa research has many lines of thought. One major thread considers the contemporary challenges surrounding Africa-China relations. This is best represented by remarks on China's assumed neo-colonial ambitions that seek to harvest natural resources while undermining civil liberties, African independence, global governance norms, and environmental concerns. More precisely, in the digital and telecommunication area (which includes information and communication technology (ICT), artificial intelligence (AI) etc.), investigations scrutinize China's behavior and ask questions about the degree to which the Beijing government is enabling surveillance practices. As one report noted, countries across the globe are applying Chinese-sourced AI technology.<sup>1</sup> Accounts of this kind speculate on the

<sup>1</sup> DANIELLE CAVE ET AL., *MAPPING CHINA'S TECH GIANTS*, AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE (Apr. 18, 2019), <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/mapping-chinas-tech-giants>.

coordination between Chinese private corporations, like Huawei, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Critically, they link China's generous loans that aid African procurement and Huawei's selling of surveillance technology in Africa. In this view, the adoption of these technologies is a reflection of Beijing's aims to promote its geopolitical objectives. Amidst other forms of global trade and investments, governments across Africa are also securing Western and Chinese sourced governance and surveillance technology. While the driving factors for this trend are complex, it is clear that these circumstances are shaped by Chinese strategic interests, the expansion of Chinese corporations, and African domestic demands.

Engaging with these critical debates, this research is primarily concerned with mining the links between Chinese (state and private) actors and African states. Importantly, my work theorizes how enhanced surveillance capacities are transforming African countries such as Ethiopia, South Africa, and Uganda, and how such technologies may enable the implementation of repressive practices. The scope and size of this Research Brief does not permit an exhaustive effort to fully explicate the links between African states, Beijing, and Chinese corporations. The main contribution of this Research Brief is to underscore the demand and supply factors that contribute to the growing use of Chinese surveillance technology in Africa.

### Demand and Supply Factors

Concerns about China's autocratic ambitions to distribute surveillance technology are well founded. However, it is true that many advanced democracies supply surveillance technology. AI surveillance equipment is traded by American enterprises. For instance, the American company IBM has sold its monitoring tools to eleven governments.<sup>2</sup> This includes one African country - Egypt. Other advanced democracies such as Israel, Germany, Italy, France, and Japan have also contributed to the international distribution of surveillance technology and there are now attempts to track the transnational trade of AI technology.<sup>3</sup>

To date, at least 12 African countries are using Huawei digital surveillance technology.<sup>4</sup> The technology is mostly installed as part of Huawei's safe city (*anquan chengshi*) projects. A popular example is the first safe city system in Kenya; Huawei was able to connect 1800 high-definition cameras and 200 high-definition traffic surveillance infrastructures across Nairobi<sup>5</sup> and a national police command center was established which provides support to over 9000 police officers and 195 police stations.<sup>6</sup>

Such surveillance projects are often patchworks, which illustrate how various Western and Chinese corporations are enabling surveillance practices in Africa. For example, Ethiopia's hybridized surveillance system demonstrates the state's aptitude to patch diversely sourced technology

<sup>2</sup> Steven Feldstein, *The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance*, Sept. 2019, [https://blog.fdik.org/2019-09/WP-Feldstein-AISurveillance\\_final.pdf](https://blog.fdik.org/2019-09/WP-Feldstein-AISurveillance_final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Id.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Olander, *China and the Rise of AI Surveillance Technology in Africa*, THE CHINA AFRICA PROJECT (Sept. 19, 2019), <https://chinaafricaproject.com/analysis/china-and-the-rise-of-ai-surveillance-technology-in-africa/>

<sup>5</sup> *Video Surveillance as the Foundation of "Safe City" in Kenya*, HUAWEI INDUSTRY INSIGHTS (Aug. 2017), <https://www.huawei.com/us/industry-insights/technology/digital-transformation/video/video-surveillance-as-the-foundation-of-safe-city-in-kenya>.

<sup>6</sup> Id.

together. Put differently, the government has purchased monitoring tools through various commercially-available channels, namely, the UK and German-based Gamma International FinFishers company, Cyberbit an Israel-based cybersecurity enterprise, and the Italian based Hacking Team's Remote-Control System.<sup>7</sup> These devices boost Ethiopia's governance and surveillance capacities and, effectively, enable access to files on targeted laptops. They also log keystrokes and passwords as a means to turn on webcams and microphones by stealth, and, critically, these tools run on Chinese-funded ICT systems.<sup>8</sup>

In this light, it must be said that we currently occupy a salient technological inflection point, which is defined by the emergence of digital surveillance and the growing transnational surveillance economy that connects public and private actors. For example, Huawei's 2018 annual report maintained that its safe city project now serves over 100 countries.<sup>9</sup> As such, nation-states like Ethiopia and Uganda have greater means to deploy invasive, broad, and targeted surveillance. In 2019, Uganda purchased \$126 million worth of Huawei digital surveillance technology.<sup>10</sup> African governments hope these digital technologies enable effective policing. Yet political opponents to the Ugandan government maintain that the state uses it to spy on their political events. Additionally, activists have raised concerns over

privacy. As noted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of expression and opinion, technological advancements mean that countries' efficacy in conducting surveillance is no longer impeded by duration or scale.<sup>11</sup>

Crucially, these information and communication technologies are being deployed at the request of host African countries. In the quest for instruments to curb crime, African national and city officials in South Africa and Uganda are reaching out to companies such as Huawei to help support their domestic aims. Huawei commonly cites this factor to explain how technology advances local efforts to reduce crime and bolster African state capacity. For instance, the Rustenburg Smart City project, in South Africa, aims to address state inefficiency and crime by purchasing Huawei's ICT products.<sup>12</sup> Mpho Khunou, Rustenburg Mayor, said, "The Rustenburg Smart City project aims to develop the economy, enhance citizen participation, improve public safety and transportation, expand the scope of government services, and implement digitalized public utilities through leading technologies."<sup>13</sup> This proposition indicates that Chinese surveillance technology is responding to African demand factors driven by governance concerns. This argument essentially challenges the narrative that the adoption of Chinese surveillance technology is solely a reflection of China's aims to promote suppressive practices. African domestic

<sup>7</sup> Felix Horne, *Ethiopia's Borderless Cyberespionage*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Apr. 7, 2014), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/07/ethiopia-borderless-cyberespionage>.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> HUAWEI, HUAWEI INVESTMENT & HOLDING CO., LTD. 2018 ANNUAL REPORT (2018), <https://www.huawei.com/en/annual-report/2018>.

<sup>10</sup> Elias Biryabarema, *Uganda's Cash-Strapped Cops Spend \$126 million on CCTV from Huawei*, REUTERS (Aug. 15, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-crime/ugandas-cash-strapped-cops-spend-126-million-on-cctv-from-huawei>.

[cash-strapped-cops-spend-126-million-on-cctv-from-huawei-idUSKCN1V50RF](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-crime/ugandas-cash-strapped-cops-spend-126-million-on-cctv-from-huawei)

<sup>11</sup> THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE. REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (June 30, 2014), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/777869?ln=en>

<sup>12</sup> *Rustenburg: World Platinum Capital Becomes Smart City*, HUAWEI CASE STUDY, 2017, <https://e.huawei.com/us/case-studies/leading-new-ict/2019/rustenburg-south-africa>

<sup>13</sup> Id.

aims may or may not overlap with Beijing's assumed geopolitical objectives.

### China's 'Neutrality'

Supposedly loans mostly from China's Exim bank make Huawei's AI technology financially reachable. The Exim bank has performed a critical role in advancing the expansion of Chinese trade and investments in Africa with its lending practices following China's foreign policy ambition.<sup>14</sup> Many media outlets speculate about coordinated efforts between Huawei, a private corporation, the People's Liberation Army, and the Chinese government to promote surveillance technology and practices.<sup>15</sup> Even though this hypothesis is not completely convincing, it nevertheless suggests that Chinese supply factors prompt the proliferation of Chinese surveillance tools. However, what these examples suggest is a pattern of adoption which is informed by both Chinese supply factors and local African demand features. In my research, I will attempt to underscore how these complexities are not solely driven by Chinese motivations, but also by African leaders' aims to bolster state capacity.

AI technology sold by Chinese corporations has reached many countries under the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>16</sup> Many observers speculate about coordinated efforts between Chinese private actors and the state to drive the proliferation of surveillance tools and practice. Adam Lane, a Senior Director of Public Affairs, Southern Africa

Huawei Technologies, in conversation with Eric Olander on the China-Africa project podcast rejects this premise and maintains a strict divide between Huawei and the Chinese government.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he contends that any abuse of AI technology is a result of domestic political realities and the inadequacy of African legal regimes. To be sure, the speculation, which alleges collaboration between private enterprises and the state cannot definitively illustrate the degree to which the Chinese government aims to promote surveillance technology.

China repudiates the idea that it is exporting its values and surveillance practices. During the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), President Xi specifically pointed to the "five no" approach in African policy: "no interference in the development paths of individual countries; no interference in their internal affairs; no imposition of China's will; no attachment of political strings regarding assistance; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation."<sup>18</sup> China's strategy towards Africa has never been coercive, but always remunerative in orientation. If China is not actively exporting its surveillance practices, the same way Western donors explicitly demand compliance with particular democratic procedures, then the fact that it financially supports African authoritarian governments, and their ambitions to build telecommunication systems, engenders doubt on its neutrality. I

<sup>14</sup> Steven Feldstein, Hearing on China's Strategic Aims in Africa, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (May 8, 2020), [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Feldstein\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Feldstein_Testimony.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Kathrin Hille, *Huawei CVs Show Close Links with Military, Study Says*, FINANCIAL TIMES (July 7, 2019), <https://www.ft.com/content/b37foage-a07f-11e9-a282-2df48f366f7d>

<sup>16</sup> Paul Mozur, *Made in China, Exported to the World: The Surveillance State*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Apr. 24, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/technology/ecuador-surveillance-cameras-police-government.html>

<sup>17</sup> Olander, *supra* note 5.

<sup>18</sup> Liangyu, *China's five-no approach demonstrates real friendship towards Africa: Kenyan Analyst*, XINHUA (Sept. 6, 2018), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/06/c\\_137447556.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/06/c_137447556.htm)

maintain that its remunerative engagements with Africa – as it relates to political regimes – is not completely negligible but is reinforcing present political processes. Particularly, its willingness to do business with authoritarian states, like Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, which results in strengthening the nondemocratic nature of those regimes.

Additionally, Beijing's claims of neutrality do not eliminate concerns or negate the possibilities of other nations imitating and adapting Chinese practices of surveillance, particularly after receiving support to establish the digital systems.

Many questions remain about the impact of surveillance technologies on African legal provisions and democracy. Currently there is no empirical work that shows a correlation between levels of democracy and the probability of adopting Chinese surveillance tools in Africa.

Chinese surveillance technology is not only going to authoritarian countries with poor human rights records. Such states are indeed clients of Chinese corporations. However, advanced democracies like South Korea are also procuring Chinese AI surveillance tools. The wide distribution of Chinese AI technology, especially when viewed across the political spectrum, implies that regime type is a poor predictor of AI surveillance usage.

What works better as an indicator for Chinese surveillance adoption are the crime rates of the recipient state.<sup>19</sup> Mayors like Mpho Khunou are deploying governance and surveillance technology to increase the effectiveness of policing. And, critically, some academics challenge the notion that China has explicit ambitions to export its values. Alves and Alden argue compellingly that

China's financial and technical support does not advance the export of its normative values. Rather, China helps reinforce the processes that were already in place in African countries.<sup>20</sup> African domestic ambitions drive the implementation of governance and surveillance tools, but it is also true that Chinese supply creates the possibility of local projects.

The appeal of Chinese ICT systems to African countries is, in some part, due to the lack of conditions attached and also the perceived ability to retain and bolster sovereignty by gaining access to surveillance and governance technology. I contend that this “no strings attached” approach does not result in impartiality, but is, in fact, another kind of ideological framework. So while U.S. and U.K. donors have made aid and loan development conditional upon the adoption and maintenance of particular democratic values and characteristics, which have enabled projects benefiting the private sector and civil society, Chinese state-led financial and technical support tends to benefit state actors in Africa, some of whom may be authoritarian<sup>21</sup> Thus, how China chooses to intervene “neutrally,” simply means that its intentions are to maintain a strict separation between conditions and funding. Inevitably, this has created a specific change in African development where regime type, regardless of its democratic level, is fortified. Chinese support results in governments being better financially resourced in the information and technology arena. China's notion of neutrality, which is predicated on the lack of conditions, shrouds the fact that, while offering generous deals, China supports state capacities to surveil,

<sup>19</sup> SHEENA CHESTNUT GREITENS, DEALING WITH THE DEMAND FOR CHINA'S GLOBAL SURVEILLANCE EXPORTS, Brookings (Apr. 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dealing-with-demand-for-chinas-global-surveillance-exports/>

<sup>20</sup> Chris Alden & Cristina Alves, *History & Identity in the Construction of China's Africa Policy*, Rev. of African Political Economy 35:115 53 (2008).

<sup>21</sup> IAN TAYLOR, CHINA'S NEW ROLE IN AFRICA (2009).

including those in authoritarian states. How long Beijing maintains its “no-strings attached” posture is a salient matter as it further integrates itself into the global system and assumes a leading role in the order.

### Conclusion

At the end of the day, whether these surveillance instruments are being deployed for legitimate or illegitimate ends can only be determined on a country-by-country basis. African field research is all but absent in these threads of discussion. Future analyses must be sensitive to African domestic realities, which underscore a nation’s public security goals, legal environment, municipality service delivery capacity, economic growth prospects, and autocratic practices. This point stresses the diversity of interests - governmental and corporate - that produce the conditions for the distribution of Chinese tools as a viable solution for domestic political problems of various kinds. Pressingly, while most studies examine asymmetric consequences in China-Africa relations, they tend to focus on how Chinese ventures play out in the African arena. Indeed, the disparities between Africa and China should inspire some astute scepticism. Yet, such concerns should not rely on assumed African ineptitude, which only succours distortion.

Pertinent questions remain about the effect and impact of using Chinese surveillance technologies in Africa. Put simply, do they even meet local, African, objectives to reduce crime rates? How do they alter legal arrangements? Do they bolster state capacity? Or are they a key instrument in underpinning politically-motivated oppressive practices? At present, there is limited rigorous

empirical work that examines the outcomes of using Chinese surveillance tools across Africa. Importantly, all these lines of investigation and thoughts are not mutually exclusive. In other words, we can imagine enhanced public governance, which contributes to economic growth, but also the targeting of political opposition and ethnic minorities. These circumstances demand locally-informed research that explores the particularities of the African political and legal landscape.

Research also needs multi-layered viewpoints on the matter of African actors. Such perspectives will challenge the current tendency to disregard African efforts in moulding China-Africa developmental relations. These assertions do not wish to exaggerate African volition. In short, it is shrewd to be wary of one-sided analyses. Yet, we must try to find proportional theories that demonstrate the degree to which African efforts are shaping these unfolding relations. To presume agency without illuminating obstacles to its expression romanticizes African actors. On the other hand, its recognition is salient in rescuing discourses from crudely representing Africans as victims in a cold tale of disputing global powers.

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