**Interview with Director of government institute doing work in Africa, February 21, 2025**

**Fundamental difference between China and Russia**

In many ways China is more traditional and conventional external actor…. Institutional relationships, investments, etc, Russia more focused on short term objectives and low cost tools, more of a regime capture type of model and in the process, you are seeing a defacto annexation and cooption of those regimes with Russia interest.

Senegal would be a good country to include bc it is a high target, all of those countries re Russia targets, less so for China.

**Todd: Need to maintain non-attribution for all organizational activities**

Given that the issue is more controversial than a month ago, part of a pattern we have seen over the last year; we are not sure how much we want to be highlighted and celebrated.

**About the organization**

In operations for 25 years, set up as. Regional center for DOD, operates under department for international security cooperation. Under sec def for policy. Purpose of XXX center are to help provide executive level strategic education for African professionals for civilian and military. Help shape and give them a strategic framework. Build relationships between Africa and the United States. Do independent research and publication to help fill information gap and analysis of Africa security challenges and in that way help elevate and inform the conversation. **We maintain alumni networks in countries where we have participants join us for different programs, we have alumni in 54 countries in Africa. They set up community chapters in 34 countries.** Alumni chapters, groups of alumni want to keep the dialogue going so they form a chapter and alumni participate, like an NGO. But they are a voluntary org created by alumni to keep network of professionals in touch and …. You only have impact with a single seminar but maintaining that over time makes a difference. They are a capacity building initiative in some way because you are building that network…. One of the issues we feel all the time is that a gulf between civilians and uniform professionals but getting them all together, sometimes they don’t know each other, that is a win, helps gain appreciation of skillsets. That is an ongoing benefit we can provide.

**Initiatives in west Africa?** If trying to get a broad stroke, we do a lot with violent extremism, maritime security, cyber security, national security, strategic development, we support professional military education, we support managing security sector resources, aligning resources with strategy, we do a lot with illegal logging, trafficking. A host of things we have going on.

One of the sectors we work on is external actor influence in Africa. We arguably have done more on China and Africa and Russia Africa and to unpack these than anyone else. Pitch a policy audience we have been consistent for a long time. Over 60 publications we have done between the two countries. We do try to unpack the broad range of foreign malign influence and I think it is important to recognize this is part of a broader strategic effort on

**Overview of Russian/China information operations in Africa: Russia works to co-opt juntas**

Russia and China to gain more traction in Africa and global south through the use of information influence, I wrote a piece for the national endowment for democracy last year for authoritarian narratives and the point was there was a purposeful effort at using information and framing ideas how the west engagement has been predatory and undermining African and global south interest, that democracy has failed. <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NED_FORUM-Authoritarianism-Narratives.pdf>

That the international order been a disservice to Africa and developing countries and that Russia and China are better partners. Subliminally, they are saying, authoritarian strong man rule is needed, more predictable, more stability, and you can’t eat democracy, need something that can deliver security and development. A lot of my work disputes that. That is the message they push out, they seized on access to social media as a tool that can reach millions of Africans who they could never touch before so unfiltered direct message where they consistently push out these narratives that help advance their interest. Asymmetrically enhances their posture. Some of that is direct pro Russia/China, often it is about softening the ground for helping local allies organize. In Russia’s case, it invests less than 1percent of direct foreign investment to Africa but expanded its influence over the last 7 years by identifying a local political actor and talking them up. **In Sahel, where most influence, they use their information capabilities to relentlessly undermine democratic gov in BF, Niger, Mali before each of those coups and then was the first gov to recognize those juntas and was prominent supporter, they are not investing any more, not trying to create jobs, not committing many security resources**. But by coopting those military juntas, Russia able to achieve strategic objectives of displacing the west. And … I think recognizing that information manipulation is the tool but it is part of a strategy and tactic of regime cooption, **if you can coopt that political structure than you have state capture and those regimes lack legitimacy domestically and international and they gravitate to and welcome Russian recognition and there is synergistic relationship to keep them in power. Junta’s win, Russia wins** but is detrimental in security protection, econ development, freedom of express, civil liberties, political rights.

**China more sophisticated: Media investment**

It is more layered and strategic than we can appreciate. China is more sophisticated, getting into the overt manipulation game. Over 10 years it invested a lot in the media sectors, part of China’s more institutional approach, not just trying to put out false info but reshape the entire media sector and information space. Supporter of state-run media, sponsors private media, provides free information services for cash strapped outlets. So they can get CCGN broadcast content for free or next to nothing. So more institutionally pushing out Chinese narrative… 5g… local phones, subscription services with star tv network and when ppl on those platforms they see more Chinese content.

**Chinese influence less malicious; pushes narratives that support China**

**Is Chinese influence less malicious?**I agree, Chinese info is less malign and less malicious than overhanded messaging we see from Russians. A lot of it is filtering out negative stories of China, pushing out positive stories of China, it is about trying to key up algorithms so those China messages are advanced so collusion between different Chinese embassies and broadcasters so message put out and shared and repeated across different channels, creating amplification effect. **So in many ways it is propaganda than information manipulation.**

**China starting to mimick Russian approach: China supporting political parties over the state**

We have seen in last 7 years, with China seeing effectiveness of Russia’s approach, they have been more anti-wester, pro authoritarian, again this fits within a model, Chinese engagement in Africa tries to support them, providing training and investments professionally, advancing notions the army is subservient to the party, pushing the CCP model. Where our notion of a political military, the Chinese say no, no problem backing the predominant party.

It is about influence…. Call it cooption, creating indebtedness. You can invest in creating a favored power and then you keep them there, that becomes your friend, proxy and the ideas that sustains enduring influence.

The China model is more institutionalized, Russia is more pernicious, once they establish themselves, they have no inhibitions about pushing domestic actors against one another. So they use that capability to put pressure on the initial proxy to try to affect outcomes in the domestic political space, seen this in Libya, Sudan, Mali, south Africa, **Russians much more aggressive in domestic political space while China is more focused on predominant political party and to keep them in place.**

**OSINT Training of civil society remains important to countering china**

**Relevance of OSINT training to civil society to China?** I think they are also important. Take a step back about question of what is malign and not, for a country to be free and for there to be genuine political discourse, you need access to information unbiased information. If your info space is being tilted then you don’t have the capability to have those conversations, it is already a narrower space you are working in. So helping African journalists and media and leaders, civil society leaders, political actors, know and raise awareness how their space is being manipulated is important so they can take steps to safeguard it. A lot is happening under the radar and you have these dependencies created about relying on Chinese content or infrastructure…so working with researchers, fact checkers, civil society actors and journalists to be aware is important for African sovereignty of their information space.

**Important to support governments: Yes. build policy, authorities, coalitions**

We focus on civil society because the dominant party or ruling party is colluding with the external actor so they don’t have an incentive to deal with these things so change comes from civil society. **In democratic countries where there is still space it is good to be working with governments and helping them understand what is happening.** What we see from Russia side they are being targeted, that is part of the strategy. We wrote up analysis of 27 different countries Russia was trying to undermine democratic space. Point is it is a systematic effort, their influence can be enhanced working in a system with fewer checks and balances that block ways of gaining influence… defending democracy in information space is a huge priority. Democratic backsliding in Africa for 10 years, host of reasons for that. For last five years, accelerating currents of disinfo from external actors has contributed to it, spate of coups we have seen but also creating this negative attitude for democracy. Esp in west Africa. Mentioned Senegal earlier. They are getting hit heavily by that. Cot d’Ivoire is another target. To some extent, trying to create perception of disillusionment and malaise that opens the door for authoritarian forms of gov. working with governments and democratic…

**What kind of support to gov?** raising awareness about what is going on, open source info, to realize this is a pattern, best practices and lessons learned for countering disinformation, building capacity to identify and trace manipulative behaviors, best practices in terms of closing infor space from malign actors, how do you shut down fake accounts. A lot of it is awareness raising, skills development, different software and detection skills they could be using. Part is working with social media platforms to take down known foreign influence peddlers. Eu has done a good job with this, models that could be shared.

When I say working with gov, they should not have to deal with this alone, they are being targeted bc of democratic gov they represent. There should be a collective response, … fend off much larger external actors who are trying to undercut their form of gov. in the same way, places that are more closed, you can’t work domestically, supporting regional information systems, regional radio, internet, media, kind of a radio free Europe for Africa is really important bc the info space is monopolized now. The military juntas, their strategy is to present them as reformists, but they are using repressive tactics to squeeze out any independent actors bc they are threatened by that, they are not tolerating the open space so it reinforces the info background. Alternative sources of info that can advance critical thinking is very important for helping people to have that info space that can lead to more sovereignty, but also to make ppl aware of how much of that space is being skewed currently.

**Should efforts include building gov institutions but at what risk?** There is certainly a risk and a risk that individual gov and subsequent authoritarian gov will go after civil society experts who are leading the counter disinformation charge, not dissimilar to what we are seeing here. These counter disinfo actors are a threat. There is a risk and that is why we have been careful. **There is an argument to keep the two separate, work with civil society and gov separately. Important to work with gov, they are being attacked, they should know what is happening and build defenses.** They might have communications, the might treat it as a national security issue and work with the ministry of defense. Our cyber security work, on a parallel effort, we talk about a multistakeholder approach. A lot of expertise is in the private sector so they need to be part of that convo but **gov has policy and certain authorities they could use, to build coalitions across public private sector is most effective way to develop robust security framework.** So we need to do something to counter foreign.

**ECOWAS?** We should be engaging them and our center has a good relationships with them, **they have ECOWARN that is robust and works to build capacity of member states for sources of instability** **and thy have info component there** and **ECOWAS is a good dissemination tool for getting best practices out, helping to share lessons, facilitating dialogue on these issues for places that might be slow to do so more not make it a priority.** They have to deal with the political sensibilities, they have been attacked by Russian disinformation as part of effort to support juntas. They created a parallel org to ECOWAS (**in Niger, BF, and Mali) and that is a Russian effort to undercut credibility of ECOWAS. They are more important for helping to implement policy and sharing than anything operational.** That is a good place to plug into, require more work but helping create viable private media outlets.

**Internet access rapidly growing; need to support trusted media platforms that are viable**

So we see that foreign info manipulation l works in places that don’t have established trusted media and that has been unfortunate sequence in Africa for enclosed media space. As it was democratizing and opening that is when social media, in 2007, started to grow. **In 2007 4% of population had access to broadband media now it is 70something percent**. Billions of people came online during that time came on line and had access to information but lacked the filters. Now getting access to info from all these sources, easier to manipulate. Trying to create trusted media platforms in these countries, that are financially viable, that… USAID focused on this. That is the institutional development that they would be well suited for.

**IO useful for monitoring and outing disinformation; IO, esp that which uses disinformation is dangerous.**

**Value of IO?** I’m not as versed in this and I am also skeptical. Being able, to the extent that mod has capability to identify foreign manipulation information that is important, knowing what is going on is the first step and gov can help deny access. As you alluded to, it is tricky and dangerous as without strong controls that could work against domestic actors. So if you have authorities to call out disinfo, you can label something a rival political actor is saying is disinfo and take them offline or bring charges. It is dangerous

**IO helpful/not helpful?** Other than monitoring and sharing I am leery. If the us were to engage in its own disinformation. Then it gets exposed, and you undercut the differentiation that existed. One of the arguments we make it tha…trying to create open society and rules based… even one or two incidents that get exposed and it is a high likelihood it gets exposed and comparative difference in how…. So I am very leery of that.

Contacts? Mark can follow up with the names and organizations we would suggest. Make a lot of sense, no need to reinvent the wheel. I think we’re seeing more interest on part of Europeans to help build this space and eu, Hirondelle institute (https://hirondelleusa.org). They are modeling what we are doing, replicating what we are doing. We encourage that. We don’t have the resources and space to disseminate and counter… Europeans have a good model for countering fimi. They see the threat. So interest in doing more.

Contact at herendelle? Yes.

In south Africa we have contacts mark might have mentioned, Murmur group.