



# Taking Liberties: Trade with China and Civil Liberties in Africa

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# **Taking Liberties: Trade with China and Civil Liberties in Africa \***

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I address the impact of China's trade on civil liberties in African states during the period 1992-2016. China's growing economic involvement in African countries has drawn concern from Western policymakers and scholars, who contend that China's activities threaten African democratization and political and economic independence. I argue that the unconditional nature of partnership with China (as opposed to the somewhat conditional nature of Western engagement) allows authoritarian leaders to avoid liberalizing civil liberties conditions in their country without concerns about access to funds. Using Time-Series-Cross-Section analysis, I find that countries more dependent on trade with China are less likely to improve their protection of civil liberties, but no more likely to experience decline in civil liberties. This article contributes to the growing authoritarian diffusion literature and provides nuance to the typically oversimplified discussion of Chinese engagement with Africa.

## Introduction

An increasingly controversial topic in Africa and global politics more broadly is the rise of China as a major player in developing areas. Since the 1990s, China has moved from largely irrelevant on the global stage to great power, driven by a booming economy coupled with an authoritarian political system known for its extensive security state. One manifestation of China's newfound power is its presence in global development efforts: China is highly active in trade and aid with developing states in Africa and to a lesser extent Latin America (Sullivan and Lum 2020). These development activities have elicited negative responses from US officials in particular. While outlining the Trump Administration's Africa policy, National Security Adviser John Bolton (2019) said that "China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands". Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (2018) welcomed China to aid in Africa's development, but echoed Bolton's concerns that China's current approach "encourages dependency using opaque contracts, predatory loan practices, and corrupt deals". It is not clear that China poses as active of a threat as these policymakers allege, but scholars have argued that China is leading an authoritarian resurgence against liberal democracy (Kagan 2019).

A major concern in both public and scholarly circles surrounds China's policy of mutual non-interference, which may enable authoritarian leaders in Africa to abuse human rights and civil liberties without repercussions. Mutual non-interference is a long-held Chinese foreign policy principle, first enshrined in the 1954 Panchsheel Treaty between China and India (see for example the Chinese Consulate in Karachi). But the refusal to consider partner countries' domestic politics can lead to de facto support for abusive regimes. For example, Human Rights First (2011), a US-based advocacy group, accused the Chinese government of funding and arming the genocidal Omar al-Bashir regime in Sudan in exchange for access to Sudanese oil. The report specifically highlights the non-interference principle as leading the Chinese government to "[refuse] to condemn the perpetrating regimes [of Sudan, Burma, and Zimbabwe] for these mass abuses while it supports them financially, militarily, and politically" (p. 2). Non-interference is increasingly competing with the post-Cold War Western dogma of neoliberal economics, which is coupled with democracy and human rights conditions when economic and security objectives do not outrank them (see Hook 1998). Without conditions, leaders are free to violate human rights without fear of losing vital funding. Other concerns include worsening corruption, labor law violations, environmental damage, and product dumping that undermines local markets (Meredith 2011). While these concerns are worthy of exploration, I will focus here on the effects of Chinese trade on African civil liberties. In

this article, I argue that Chinese economic engagement shields African leaders from the requirements of Western leverage; by aligning themselves more with the Chinese than the West, leaders can access needed funds to strengthen their regime without conforming to requirements to liberalize policies in areas like civil liberties.

In this article, I take advantage of the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) dataset to test for the relationship between trade and performance on civil liberties indicators. I begin by reviewing the existing literature on the international sources of democratization, authoritarian diffusion, and the implications of Chinese linkage with African states. I present my theory of Chinese trade as an insulator that disincentivizes the improvement of democracy, in this case in the area of civil liberties. I use trade because it has some connection to political priorities of states and is an arena that was traditionally dominated by the West in Africa. However, China has increasingly matched or surpassed the West's presence in recent years. I use civil liberties conditions because they are known to be poor in China, so leaders have a distinct Chinese model to emulate if they so desire. Further, civil liberties in Africa are unrelated to China's objectives in Africa. I then describe my empirical model, which tests first for the impact of trade on overall civil liberties levels and then for the impact on the chance of an improvement or decline in those metrics. These "upturn" and "downturn" models, used by Teorell (2010) in his seminal book, have not yet been used to test for the presence of authoritarian diffusion, to the best of my knowledge. I find no support for a negative impact on overall civil liberties levels and no support for trade leading to an increased likelihood and magnitude of decline in civil liberties; in other words, the downturn model is insignificant. The upturn model is highly significant, providing strong evidence for the theory that China insulates countries against substantial positive change in their level of civil liberties.

## **Literature Review**

### **China and International Factors in Regime Trajectories**

Scholars have found that ties to the liberal democratic West (broadly defined to include liberal democratic powers like Japan and Australia) increase the likelihood of democratization. Levitsky and Way (2010) describe linkage and leverage as two key international forces that motivate democratization. Leverage is a government's vulnerability to external democratizing pressure and can include factors like bargaining power with the West and potential impact of punitive actions that are rooted in size and strength of a state and its economy. Linkage, the more important of the two,

is defined as dense ties between states and can be economic, intergovernmental, technocratic, social, informational, and civil society-based in nature. Levitsky and Way (2006) write that “Leverage in the absence of linkage has rarely been sufficient to induce democratization since the end of the cold war” (p. 379). In this paper, I focus on trade, which is less centrally directed than aid but still related to a state’s political ties. Additionally, the relative prevalence of Chinese state-owned enterprises means that Chinese trade and foreign policy may align to a greater degree than the typical state.

Linkage and leverage can be limited in a number of ways. The presence of vital Western interests can limit leverage where it would otherwise be high. In Egypt, for example, the United States has demonstrated a preference for the authoritarian regime in the face of the grassroots Arab Spring movement. This stems from US goals in the Middle East: the prevention of an Arab-Israeli war and maintenance of steady relations with Gulf oil producers. Ironically, in Egypt the US takes a similar position to China, choosing stability over democracy (Brownlee 2012). Importantly for the China-Africa case, Western democratizing pressure can also be limited by non-Western linkage and leverage, in what is described as a “blunting effect” by “black knight” authoritarian states (Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 41-50). Non-Western partners allow authoritarian states to avoid the relatively high cost of cooperation with liberal democratic states and lowers the potentially high costs of abuse.

Linkage facilitates diffusion, which is of particular interest for this study. When autocracies are in “democratic neighborhoods,” they are significantly more likely to become democracies due to demonstration effects (Brinks and Coppedge 2006). Pevehouse (2002) finds that regional international organizations can assuage elite fears about democracy: business elites can be assured of the maintenance of their property rights and military elites of their protection and shift away from domestic politics. While traditionally diffusion is thought of as spreading democratic norms and ideas, there is a growing literature on authoritarian diffusion (see Vanderhill 2011). This is of particular interest to the case of China in Africa. African governments that are heavily linked to China could hypothetically adopt authoritarian Chinese government practices like an extensive security state or persecution of ethnic minorities. Recent events have given legitimacy to these concerns; the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Chinese telecoms giant Huawei helped the Ugandan and Zambian governments spy on opposition leaders and media (Parkin, Bariyo, and Chin 2019). This repressive behavior, which is not always (and in fact usually is not) violent, may be enticing to authoritarian leaders looking to lessen the chance of regime collapse by silencing or eliminating perceived challengers to their regime or simply seeking to avoid the costs of complying with

Western conditions (Frantz 2018). In fact, Tanzanian President John Magufuli expressed a preference for Chinese aid, saying “The thing that makes you happy about their aid is that it is not tied to any conditions.” These statements followed Western concern and suspended aid over the lack of LGBTQ rights, restrictions on civil society actors, and expulsion of pregnant girls from Tanzanian schools (BBC 2018).

Scholars who have empirically evaluated the impact of authoritarian linkage are hesitant to declare a global democratic breakdown and authoritarian resurgence. Brownlee (2017) deems four conditions to be necessary for a state of authoritarian resurgence to exist: a net decline in the number of democracies; democratic rollbacks in unexpected places; rollbacks in Russia and China’s respective spheres of influence; and rollbacks through autocracy promotion. He finds substantial support for none of these conditions. In fact, the only successful case of autocracy promotion seems to be Venezuela’s actions in Nicaragua. According to Brownlee (p. 1339), “Chavez openly supported Ortega as the Nicaraguan leader weakened the rule of law and strengthened his own authority...[Ortega] manipulated the judiciary to set aside term limits and allow a blatantly unconstitutional bid for extended power. Chavez abetted these manoeuvres”. He finds no relationship between linkage and democratic rollback, with one exception key to this study: a slight asymmetry exists in African countries connected with China, such that the number of countries with democratic breakdowns exceeds the number of sustained democracies. While largely dismissing the global influence of so-called black knights, or authoritarian abettors of bad governance, Brownlee leaves open the possibility of Chinese-led autocratization in Africa. This provides a basis for isolating Africa as the region of interest in this study.

The Chinese foreign policy emphasis on stability means that purposeful ignorance of domestic politics in partner states can lead to de facto support for unsavory partners. While China might not encourage authoritarianism, it does not discourage it either (Vanderhill 2011). The Chinese argue that criticism for this hands-off policy is unfair: Christensen (2017) writes that “Chinese officials [...] argue that China cannot be so finicky as to turn down oil and gas partnerships with regimes considered unsavory in [the West] simply because these partnerships might serve to undercut global humanitarian or non-proliferation efforts” (p. 162). Regardless of normative considerations, there are benefits for authoritarian regimes that China is involved with. Bader (2015a) builds on this, finding that autocratic regimes in countries that rely on China as an export market tend to survive longer, which could be related to the ability of elites enriched by trade to maintain power through patronage and related mechanisms.

Access to Chinese trade and associated aid creates non-Western linkage and leverage, allowing autocrats to avoid the costs of cooperating with Western donors' conditions. A number of studies have shown that foreign aid that is explicitly tied to democratic conditions, as is increasingly common among donor states, is quite effective at facilitating democratization (e.g. Dietrich and Wright 2014, Finkel, Perez-Linan, & Seligson 2007). By increasing the incentive to democratize, autocrats are more likely to risk elections, especially in dominant-party regimes with low costs of leaving office (Frantz 2018). But Chinese trade and aid removes the risk altogether: autocrats can gain access to sufficient funds without the risks associated with holding democratic elections. They can thus avoid dependence on conditioned aid and more comfortably retain power. This makes cooperation with China an attractive option for autocrats.

## **China's Motivation**

In order to study the effect of China's activities in Africa, it is important to first understand Chinese intentions. Weyland (2017) identifies the two main vehicles of autocratic influence as diffusion – uncoordinated, unilateral, horizontal processes through which innovations are spread from an innovator to emulators – and cooperation – deliberate coordination guiding economic, political, and military exchanges. Since I am examining trade, both are important: the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) facilitates such exchanges, and trade is a form of economic linkage that can facilitate diffusion through the exchange of ideas and examples. Within these two categories, autocratic states are motivated by some combination of ideology and interest. Extreme ideology-driven states are deeply committed to a cause that they advance out of devotion or conviction, whereas extreme interest-driven states are concerned solely with cost-benefit analysis and pursuing optimal resource allocation. In practice, states generally rely on some mix of the two motivators. States without strong ideologies will tend towards the interest side of the spectrum. Most recent and current autocracies are more interest-driven, with the exception of Venezuela during Chavez's rule, which believed in the inherent superiority of its system with “messianic fervor” (pp. 1238).

China falls near the interest-driven end of the spectrum. China has long been considered a realist power; Christensen (1996) calls it “the high church of realpolitik,” with notable exceptions in policy with Japan and Taiwan. This aligns strongly with the calculating nature of interest-driven powers, a broad categorization that includes Western states as well as many authoritarian powers. China's main foreign policy goals are access to resources (especially petroleum and other commodities), access to markets, arms sale profits, and progress towards diplomatic goals like the

isolation of Taiwan and the Dalai Lama and support for less intrusive international rules (Vanderhill 2011, Nathan and Scobell 2012). To achieve these objectives, China does not necessarily need authoritarian regimes, just familiar ones. The goal of Chinese foreign policy in this instance is not to counter democratization, but to promote stability and avoid the inherent uncertainty associated with regime change (Von Soest 2015). It is important to remember that China is a self-interested state and is not simply a charitable actor driven by feelings of Global South brotherhood, as it has claimed in the past (see for example Deng 1984).

## **Chinese Trade and Autocratic Decision-making**

Much of the existing literature leaves two gaps: it does not predict how the decision to change policy is affected by authoritarian trade and does not focus on a specific facet of liberal democracy such as civil liberties. I hypothesize that China acts as a shield for governments, serving to insulate leaders from Western leverage. Levitsky and Way note that governments of weak states with aid-based economies are most vulnerable to pressure from the West. However, having an alternative source of support like China can limit leverage. Under certain circumstances, leverage can raise the cost of abuse by triggering punitive actions from the West. As Levitsky and Way (2006) write, “Regional powers [like China] at times provide critical financial, military, or diplomatic support to neighboring autocracies” (pp. 382-383). While Levitsky and Way include contiguity as a requisite of this effect, other scholars have noted that any notion of influential countries should include both neighbors and other significant countries, such as trading partners (Beck 2001). Thus, China can be considered an influential country that can serve as a backstop for African authoritarians. This effect is magnified by China’s professed aversion to involvement in other states’ internal affairs. However, there is no reason that Chinese aid would lead to worsening conditions: China is not imposing conditions that would require the adoption of the Chinese system. Instead, it is providing support for the status quo. Shullman (2020) argues that “China is offering large-scale training on how to manipulate public opinion, censor and surveil journalists and civil society activists, and implement CCP-style cybersecurity policies”. As I noted in the Ugandan case, Huawei is indeed providing access to surveillance technology, possibly with government encouragement. What is unlikely is that this represents a significant departure from existing Ugandan government policy. It is certainly problematic that Chinese equipment is facilitating repression, but it is most likely not inspiring it.

We can utilize the disaggregation of the dependent variable to further explore this hypothesis. If partner countries were learning from China and adjusting their behavior as such, we would expect convergence with Chinese civil liberties policies. China scores relatively well on measures of physical violence (e.g. torture) compared to its scores on private and political liberties (e.g. freedom from forced labor and media censorship, respectively). Because, under my theory, African autocrats are seeking to preserve the status quo and not emulate China, we should not expect negative significant coefficients in a particular brand of civil liberties. This type of effect can only be expected in autocratic regimes where government policies are not directly accountable to citizens. Therefore, I do not expect a negative impact on civil liberties and actually predict null results:

*H1: A higher proportion of trade with China are not significantly associated with overall civil liberties levels, either in aggregate civil liberties or a particular subset of civil liberties.*

Leaders generally seek expanding power and security in their rule, both of which outside donors can influence. If leaders value their regime's survival, they will seek outside funding that may circumscribe their power to some extent; this explains why leaders do in fact accept conditioned aid at times. If leaders are unable to "trick" donors into continuing conditioned aid without actual reforms, they may eventually arrive at an improvement in civil liberties and democracy more broadly. But the rise of China changes the calculus of external aid: now, leaders are not forced to liberalize in order to secure steady aid, instead receiving the money with no checks on their power. This does not provide an incentive for a leader to tighten civil liberties, but it does remove the incentive to liberalize. As such, we would expect the likelihood and magnitude of liberalization to decrease:

*H2: Countries that conduct a greater proportion of their trade with China are not more prone to experience decline in civil liberties.*

*H3: Countries that conduct a greater proportion of their trade with China are less prone to improve civil liberties.*

## **Methods**

As civil liberties are so famously violated in China, I have chosen them as my variable of interest. The Varieties of Democracy dataset incorporates 21 variables into its civil liberties index. The dataset bases its ratings on *de facto* practices rather than *de jure*: if laws prohibit the abuse of a civil liberty, but they are not followed, then a country is treated as if it has no laws prohibiting said abuse

(Coppedge et al 2018). Table 1 lists the civil liberties that the V-DEM dataset measures, divided by the sub-indices that make up the civil liberties index:

**Table 1: Civil liberties index component indices and variables**

<b>Sub-index</b>	<b>Component variables</b>
<b>Private civil liberties</b>	Freedom of religion, freedom of foreign movement, freedom of domestic movement (men and women), freedom from forced labor (men and women), property rights (men and women), religious organization repression
<b>Physical civil liberties</b>	Freedom from torture, freedom from political killings
<b>Political civil liberties</b>	Freedom of cultural expression and academic freedom, freedom of discussion (men and women), media censorship by government, harassment of journalists, media self-censorship, political party bans, barriers to political parties, opposition autonomy, civil society organization entry and exit, civil society repression

The main variables I am testing are the portion of its total trade a state does with China and the civil liberties index and three sub-indices described above. For trade, I used the World Integration Trade Solutions database to find imports and exports between every African state and China, and then did the same for that state and the world. I use the aforementioned Varieties of Democracy dataset to approximate the civil liberties situation in the 53 countries from 1992 to 2016 to follow the end of the Cold War, which is when Western conditionality began to be more meaningfully enforced (Hook 1998). This dataset is multidimensional and highly disaggregated, allowing for empirical examination of the specific civil liberties that I examine here. It distinguishes between different conceptions of democracy, attempts to avoid arbitrary assignments of variables, and relies on inter-coder tests and country experts (Coppedge et al 2011). Table 2 presents the summary statistics of the civil liberties indices and trade data.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Civil liberties index</b>	1,385	0.5942	0.2302
<b>Private civil liberties index</b>	1,385	0.6327	0.2385
<b>Physical civil liberties index</b>	1,385	0.5297	0.2692
<b>Political civil liberties index</b>	1,385	0.6253	0.2462
<b>Proportion of total trade with China</b>	1,332	0.0784	0.0967
<b>Proportion of total exports to China</b>	1,332	0.0686	0.1285

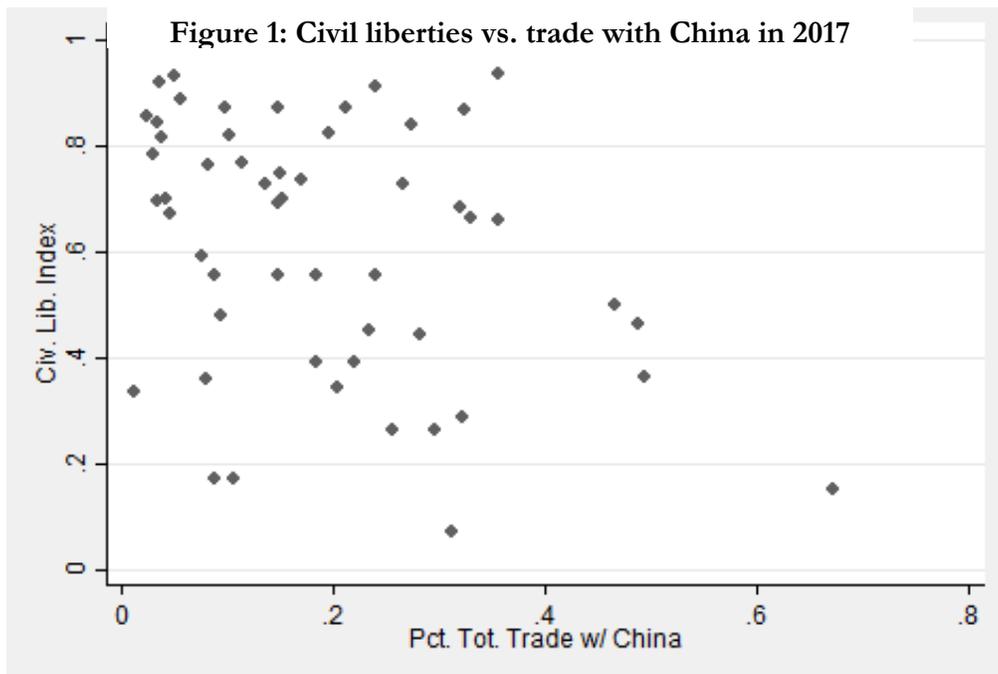
I construct two models to test my hypotheses, both of which are time-series-cross-section models and take country-year as the unit of analysis. The first model is a standard OLS regression. In this model, the various civil liberties indices are the dependent variables and the proportion of total trade is the independent variable. In the second model, I follow Teorell (2010) in constructing upturn and downturn models. In the upturn model, all negative changes in civil liberties indicators are set to 0 to isolate the impact of the independent variable on an increase in the dependent variable; the opposite is true in a downturn model. Negative coefficients in the upturn model indicate a lower likelihood of increase in the dependent variable, whereas a positive coefficient shows a higher likelihood of increase. The downturn model tests my second hypothesis, while the upturn model tests my third. All of these models include country-year fixed effects.

I introduce a number of key controls to best isolate the relationship between trade and civil liberties. The role of economic development in democracy has long been debated, with the most accepted finding coming from Przeworski et al. (2000), who find that development contributes to stability in a democracy, but not democratization itself. This is relevant to the China-Africa case in particular; it is unlikely China gains much in the way of influence when trading with developed countries like the US or European countries. Developing countries are more in need of assistance in the way of infrastructure, which China can provide cheaply. I emulate other studies and use the natural log of GDP per capita to simulate a decreasing marginal impact; as countries develop, the next marginal dollar of income matters less (e.g. Brinks and Coppedge 2006). There is an extensive literature documenting the negative effect of oil on democracy (e.g. Ross 2001). One recent study that uses the Varieties of Democracy data finds that oil wealth negatively impacts private liberties (Wigley 2018). Because the civil liberties can be expected to change little year to year, I also control for the previous year's score on the index being measured.

Because the latitude for leaders' decision-making is inversely related to accountability to citizens, it would be reasonable to expect that an autocracy dummy would be necessary for my theory. However, any dichotomous measure of regime type in Africa would be troubled due to the common regime types in Africa; as Van de Walle (2002) writes, regimes range from thinly veiled personalist dictatorships to liberal democracies, but often deploy measures to appear more democratic than they are. It is thus difficult to distinguish dichotomously between democracies and autocracies. Further, even countries that are democracies may be unaccountable due to clientelism or similar processes (Wantchekon 2003).

## Results and Discussion

In this section I present the results of my statistical analyses. As seen in Figure 1 and Table 3, a cursory look at recent and historical data suggests a negative relationship between trade with China and civil liberties practice, although the relationship is insignificant. I discuss the signal provided by the standard OLS regression results, before presenting my upturn and downturn models. I find support for my main hypothesis that Chinese trade decreases the size and magnitude of civil liberties liberalization but does not cause leaders to tighten civil liberties policy.



<b>Table 3: Standard OLS regression results</b>				
VARIABLES	(1) Civ. lib. index	(2) Priv. civ. lib.	(3) Phys. civ. lib.	(4) Pol. civ. lib.
% of total trade with China ( $t-1$ )	-0.0164 (0.0231)	-0.0174 (0.0209)	-0.00317 (0.0353)	-0.0202 (0.0275)
Natural log of GDP/capita ( $t-1$ )	-0.000661 (0.00288)	-0.00175 (0.00259)	0.000529 (0.00442)	-0.000480 (0.00343)
Oil rents as % of GDP ( $t-1$ )	-6.35e-05 (0.000225)	0.000106 (0.000203)	-0.000161 (0.000345)	-0.000133 (0.000269)
Score on index ( $t-1$ )	0.840*** (0.0137)	0.843*** (0.0139)	0.831*** (0.0152)	0.826*** (0.0150)
Constant	0.108*** (0.0185)	0.117*** (0.0174)	0.0938*** (0.0276)	0.121*** (0.0221)
Observations	1,222	1,222	1,222	1,222
R-squared	0.781	0.773	0.741	0.736
Number of countries	54	54	54	54
Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$ , ** $p < 0.05$ , * $p < 0.1$ NOTE: Country fixed effect model				

<b>Table 4: Downturn model</b>				
VARIABLES	(1) Civ. lib. index	(2) Priv. civ. lib.	(3) Phys. civ. lib.	(4) Pol. civ. lib.
% of total trade with China ( $t-1$ )	0.00755 (0.0193)	0.0198 (0.0164)	0.0310 (0.0289)	0.00102 (0.0240)
Natural log of GDP/capita ( $t-1$ )	0.00183 (0.00241)	0.00159 (0.00202)	0.00347 (0.00362)	0.000682 (0.00299)
Oil rents as % of GDP ( $t-1$ )	-0.000118 (0.000188)	6.69e-05 (0.000159)	-0.000299 (0.000282)	-8.82e-05 (0.000234)
Score on index ( $t-1$ )	-0.134*** (0.0114)	-0.145*** (0.0108)	-0.129*** (0.0124)	-0.147*** (0.0130)
Constant	0.0796*** (0.0154)	0.0906*** (0.0136)	0.0589*** (0.0226)	0.100*** (0.0192)
Observations	1,222	1,222	1,222	1,222
R-squared	0.111	0.136	0.086	0.104
Number of countries	54	54	54	54
Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$ , ** $p < 0.05$ , * $p < 0.1$ NOTE: Country fixed effect model				

The downturn model, which tests my second hypothesis, returns positive but null results for the trade variable as expected. This also serves as further evidence for my first hypothesis: if Chinese trade was incentivizing downturn in civil liberties, there would likely be an overall negative effect on civil liberties. The prior year's index score variables has a significant and negative coefficient, but this may be due to bounds on the index: if a score is as high as possible, it cannot increase and must fall if it changes at all.

<b>Table 5: Upturn model</b>				
VARIABLES	(1) Civ. lib. index	(2) Priv. civ. lib.	(3) Phys. civ. lib.	(4) Pol. civ. lib.
% of total trade with China ( $t-1$ )	-0.0239** (0.0117)	-0.0372*** (0.0118)	-0.0342* (0.0191)	-0.0212* (0.0127)
Natural log of GDP/capita ( $t-1$ )	-0.00249* (0.00146)	-0.00333** (0.00146)	-0.00294 (0.00239)	-0.00116 (0.00158)
Oil rents as % of GDP ( $t-1$ )	5.46e-05 (0.000114)	3.92e-05 (0.000115)	0.000138 (0.000187)	-4.47e-05 (0.000124)
Score on index ( $t-1$ )	-0.0260*** (0.00694)	-0.0117 (0.00783)	-0.0401*** (0.00822)	-0.0267*** (0.0069)
Constant	0.0280*** (0.00937)	0.0267*** (0.00985)	0.0349** (0.0149)	0.0204** (0.0102)
Observations	1,222	1,222	1,222	1,222
R-squared	0.038	0.041	0.042	0.025
Number of countries	54	54	54	54
Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 NOTE: Country fixed effect model				

The upturn model returns consistently significant results that support my second hypothesis. The significant results on the trade variable confirm my hypothesis that trade dampens the size of any increase in civil liberties and decreases the likelihood that an increase will occur at all. The prior year coefficients are significant except in the case of private civil liberties; this may represent a statistical anomaly or suggest that private civil liberties are for some reason more volatile than physical or political liberties. GDP per capita shows a negative and significant coefficient in two of these models, which suggests that wealthier citizens may not demand as much in terms of individual freedoms and that support for authoritarian regimes depends on ability to provide public goods like a functioning economic system.

## Conclusion

The rise of China is certainly an important story in global politics but is often reported in Western media as primarily a power struggle between East and West. What is often missed in these accounts is the amount of agency that African leaders possess in directing this competition: it is African leaders who decide which external power (or powers) to draw closer to. In some sense, this decision is about international accountability. If a leader chooses to align his or her country with the West, there will be increased scrutiny put on his or her regime. China presents an alternative to this, proposing what it describes as a no strings attached partnership.

The decisions that leaders make are deeply influential to their respective countries. As my results show, countries that trade more with China are less likely to see improvement in their performance on civil liberties indices because the availability of unconditional Chinese funds undermines the incentive for civil liberties improvement that Western funds sometimes present. However, there is no incentive for African leaders to accept Chinese funds and then tighten civil liberties policy; null results in the downturn model support this hypothesis. Civil liberties indices are interesting variables because African governments' behavior on civil liberties does not clearly interact with Chinese market or resource access, which are its main goals in its diplomacy with Africa.

This article contributes to both scholarly and popular debates surrounding the role of China in African politics. As other scholars (e.g. von Soest 2015) have written, China is not directly promoting its model or seeking to counter democratization as Western policymakers sometimes allege; rather, it is seeking to create stability in cooperative regimes. It is important to note that although China is not actively encouraging autocracy, support for an incumbent regime that is authoritarian is not necessarily different in effect. This is especially true when China's promises of non-interference and unconditional trade and aid present an unaccountable alternative to the (frequently imperfect) system of democratic conditionality offered by the West.

Further research on this topic should discern whether leaders emulate Chinese repression tactics and identify when leaders decide to pursue Chinese or Western funds. Leaders may emulate Chinese repression tactics through products they import or simply through learning from China's practices. The case of Uganda is illustrative; there, Huawei technology is used to engage in surveillance of opposition figures. In China, Huawei, among other companies, is part of China's extensive security state (Buckley and Mozur 2019). Based on their perception of Beijing's effective surveillance apparatus, African states could adopt Chinese security tactics as well as equipment. In

this paper, I take the first step towards this research by disaggregating the V-DEM civil liberties index. Convergence between an African state's score and China's score would indicate institutional learning may be taking place. The second topic involves the incentives that leaders face to prioritize Chinese or Western funds. If the only consideration was constraints on executive power, then leaders would hypothetically choose China every time. But clearly this is not the case, as some African states have more expansive relations with former colonizers or the US than they do with China. These questions are of great import for understanding authoritarian and hybrid regime decision-making and for material conditions that African citizens experience in interactions with their respective governments.

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