



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 8 · THURSDAY 23 JULY 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 8

WHO IS ADVISING THE CHINESE?

Six quarrels running at once, a cold war with everybody rather than with anyone, and the historical precedent he cannot overstress.

SESSION 8 · THURSDAY 23 JULY 2020

Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 8 — recorded the day after Washington ordered the Chinese consulate in Houston to close.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Who Is Advising The Chinese?

A scholar's bafflement rather than a strategist's alarm: not why is China quarrelling with the United States, but why is China quarrelling with everybody at once — and what happened to the country that promised it would never become a bully.

A solo broadcast recorded on 23 July 2020, in the week the American consulate order came down in Houston, the British intelligence committee published its long-delayed Russia report, and the United Arab Emirates put a probe on course for Mars. The moderator opens on China and the session never quite leaves the question of who gets to build the next world order. **The through-line is his oldest professional instinct: count the fronts. A country at odds with six parties at once has not been unlucky six times — it has made a choice, and someone advised it.**

An archive edition, recorded 23 July 2020, in the fifth month of the Covid-19 emergency. Offices, disputes and figures are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's recollected dates differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed.

01 · A COLD WAR WITH EVERYBODY, NOT WITH ANYBODY

The moderator opens with the consulate closures and asks where the tension is heading. The Professor reframes the question before answering it. For two months, he says, the indications have pointed to a cold war brewing between China on one hand and the rest of the world on the other — and the phrase that matters is the rest of the world. This is not a bilateral quarrel that has grown large.

What baffles him is put as a scholar's puzzle rather than a partisan complaint: who is advising the Chinese? He recalls China's entry onto the global stage in the seventies and into the mid-eighties and mid-nineties, and the promise that came with it — that Beijing would not repeat the American and Western error of becoming a bully, that it would work through soft diplomacy, that it would not make enemies for itself.

The distance between that promise and the position China occupies in July 2020 is the substance of the whole answer. He does not argue that China is wrong on any particular dispute. He argues that a country cannot be right about all of them simultaneously and still be doing diplomacy.

“Why are the Chinese pursuing a diplomacy that has made them enemies all over the world? It is not just against one country.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · SIX FRONTS, COUNTED OFF IN A SINGLE ANSWER

He lists them without pausing: Hong Kong; the border dispute with India; the Americans over Covid-19 and now over the alleged attempt to steal vaccine research; the British over hacking into strategic and sensitive systems; the South China Sea, where the boundary is contested and artificial islands have been built on it; and Africa, where the problem is two-pronged — the economic agreements drawn up with African countries, which he calls neo-colonial in character, and the treatment of Africans inside China itself.

The African complaint is worth pausing on, because it is the one Western coverage that summer largely ignored and the one his audience had lived. He treats it as equal in weight to the others, not as a footnote.

Then comes the professional judgement, and it is the oldest maxim in the trade. A good diplomat, like a good soldier, does not fight too many wars on different fronts at the same time. China, he says, seems to have forgotten the lesson of its own brightest and best diplomats — the ones it had when it first arrived on the global scene.

Six fronts, opened at the same time

The disputes he counts off in one answer — and none of them is with the same party

FRONT	THE QUARREL	WHAT IT COST BEIJING
● Hong Kong	The security law, and the exodus it triggered	A British route out for some three million
● India	A disputed border, fought over in the open	A neighbour turned adversary
● United States	Covid-19, then alleged theft of vaccine research	The Houston consulate ordered shut
● Britain	Alleged hacking of sensitive systems	Huawei stripped out, the relationship cools
● South China Sea	Where the boundary lies, and islands built on it	Every littoral state put on notice
● Africa	The economic agreements, and treatment in China	Fifty years of goodwill, spent

SESSION 8 · “A GOOD SOLDIER DOES NOT FIGHT ON EVERY FRONT AT ONCE”

As argued on this broadcast

The six disputes he counts off in one answer, and what each has cost.

03 · THE PRECEDENT HE CANNOT OVERSTRESS

Asked whether China simply no longer needs these relationships, he refuses the premise — no country stops needing relationships — but concedes the perception behind it. China may now see itself not as an ascending power but as an arrived one, confident that in any conflict it comes out on top.

This is where the register changes, and he says so himself: I cannot overstress this. The most dangerous moment for world peace is when an ascending power decides to challenge the status quo power and believes it can win. The two examples he gives are the same country twice — Germany in 1914 and Germany in 1939 — and the point of the repetition is the ending. By the time Germany understood it could not win, having genuinely built itself into a major power, millions of lives had been spent finding out.

The hope he expresses is deliberately modest. Not that the disputes will be resolved, but that nobody will make the mistake of letting this series of conflicts become militarised.

“The most dangerous time for world peace is when an ascending power decides to challenge the status quo power, and thinks it can take on the world and win.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • ELECTRONIC WARFARE IS NOT NEW, AND EVERYBODY DOES IT

The moderator suggests the war has already started in a different form — cyber rather than kinetic. The Professor accepts the perception and then flattens the novelty out of it in three moves.

First: this is not new. Diplomats have always tried to steal each other's secrets and use them to undermine one another; what used to be called propaganda — saying you did what you did not do, and said what you did not say — is now conducted by hacking rather than by taking papers out of a room. Second: everybody does it. Third, and this is the one aimed squarely at his audience, the developing world has been the victim of exactly this since independence. Their cables have been read and their diplomatic codes broken since the sixties. It has become newspaper material only now that the usual culprits have become victims of each other.

His verdict on WikiLeaks follows the same logic and is characteristically unsentimental. He will not call it beneficial — there was nothing developing countries could do with what they learned. But it did, for once, let scholars from those countries read the developed world's cables, and it confirmed what they had been saying for years about interference in their elections, sometimes open, sometimes subterranean, funding whichever party was being backed at the time.

He is also clear about the sequence that worries him. Conflicts start on economic, cultural and now electronic ground; then somebody loses patience and decides to end the irritation by military means.

“They have been reading our cables and breaking our diplomatic codes since the sixties. It is only now that they are the victims that it is on the front pages.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE BROADCAST THAT WAS FALSE, AND THE WAR THAT FOLLOWED

Asked whether fake news is getting worse, he answers with an illustration he deliberately strips of names. Sometime in the 1960s a radio station broadcast a false report that one ethnic group was being massacred in a particular area. There was retaliation. The retaliation became genocide, the genocide became a civil war, and by the end perhaps three million people had died. It was only after the war that the broadcast was found to have been fake.

He sets the modern examples against that scale. Some fake news is so obviously false you can laugh it off; other pieces are engineered to move elections — fake videos circulated during the last American election showing black rioting in white areas, some of the footage made in Russia and passed off as American streets. The damage he names is not to any candidate but to the concept:

once electoral behaviour has been conditioned by falsehood, the true will of the people becomes impossible to ascertain.

On African leaders and fake news he declines to say what he has not observed — no pattern has registered on his radar, though he undertakes to start paying attention. What politicians everywhere do, he says, is lie about the other side and promise what they cannot build. His illustration of that is the funniest line of the evening and the most weary.

The same session covers the British parliamentary report on Russian interference, published that week after roughly eighteen months. He is not surprised by either the delay or the redactions. The British, he says, have perfected the art of the royal commission: a body appointed to let feelings cool, reporting long after anyone still cares, at which point the finding reads as something we knew anyway. Governments will always reach for national security to hold material back.

On the report's observation that Western governments now name the countries responsible, where once they did not, his reading is deflationary. They name because they cannot block. The volume is beyond any country's capacity to interrupt, so the remaining strategy is to tell your own citizens they are a target and let them be careful.

Asked whether an African state might build a serious offensive cyber capability, he says the talent exists and the politics do not. Where a political system treats domestic rivals rather than foreign governments as the enemy, the capability gets pointed inward, and foreign powers get recruited as allies in domestic quarrels. Meanwhile the people who would build it are already building it in Washington, London and Paris, because nobody needed them at home.

“Politicians will tell you they have built a bridge where there is no river — and when you point it out, they tell you they will put a river under the bridge.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • MARS, BREAD, AND WHAT A LEGACY COSTS

The Emirates launched a probe towards Mars that week, and he uses it as a measuring stick rather than a marvel. The UAE became independent about fifty years ago; most African countries around sixty. What has been built in that time that anyone will remember?

The moderator puts the standard objection, and puts it well: Nigeria's problem is not getting to Mars, it is what people will eat, where they will live, what infrastructure they will have — and the money would be stolen anyway.

He splits that into two arguments and answers them differently. The first he rejects outright, and the rejection has teeth. Nobody raised the development objection when the country was importing champagne in the largest volumes in the world, or the newest lace, or imported tiles for mansions. The objection appears only when the proposal is a legacy rather than a consumption. Man does not live by bread alone does not mean man is not hungry; it means some of the resource has to go on what outlasts you. He points out that neither the United States nor Russia solved poverty before going to space.

The second argument — that the money would be stolen — he concedes without qualification, and it takes the section somewhere less comfortable.

“Nobody complained when we were importing the largest volume of champagne in the world. It is when we want to leave a legacy for the black race that I start hearing this

argument.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · CORRUPTION, AND THE PARTNER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF IT

The figures emerging from probes — whether from the World Bank, the IMF or a domestic parliament — are, he says, hard to credit as the output of any functioning system. Then he makes the distinction that separates his position from the familiar one.

Corruption in Western countries is not absent; it is punished. If you are caught you go to jail, which means a good many people benefit by not being caught. And on scale: Western corruption leaves enough behind for development to proceed, while African corruption is conducted at a level that leaves nothing meaningful for development at all. Between the two sits the observation the section turns on — that you cannot have a corrupt African leader, or a corrupt African politician, without a foreign partner. It works both ways, and most of the stolen money ends up abroad. He recalls an African president's reply to a British prime minister who raised the subject: return the money your banks are holding, and let us move on.

Two illustrations close the argument. A viewer notes a development agency whose only demonstrable technology after thirty-three years is a process for kilishi, the dried spiced beef. And he offers his own: an African country he declines to name set up a defence industry in the same year Brazil set up its own. Brazil now builds Embraer aircraft, tanks and fighter jets. The African industry began with household furniture — as though the country had no carpenters — and has arrived, eventually, at manufacturing AK-47s.

His diagnosis is not primarily about theft. It is that nobody decided what the industry was for.

“You cannot have a corrupt African leader without a foreign partner. You cannot have a corrupt African politician without a foreign partner. It works both ways.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 · WHAT THE WORD BLACK IS MADE TO CARRY

A viewer asks about the habit of attaching black to whatever is undesirable. He agrees that it is upsetting and that the questioner is right, and then does something more interesting than agreeing: he searches for a counter-example and finds only one. A bank balance in credit is in the black; in deficit it is not white but red. That is the single exception he can locate.

Blackmail, Black Friday, Black Monday, a black day when your team loses — the point he makes about these is that almost nobody using them is aware of what they are doing. His proposal is legislative, on the model of hate speech law and of the platforms now taking down falsehood, and he is unembarrassed about it: a deliberate policy, taken down term by term.

On what people should be called instead, he traces the American sequence — Negro, objected to; black, objected to because the others were simply called Americans rather than whites; African American, now objected to for hyphenating one group while Europeans are called Americans without qualification. He does not know where it ends, expects seminars and conferences, and expects Britain to travel the same road with its own acronym.

The deepest answer comes last, when he is asked whether the language has been used to suppress the black mind. He thinks the original intention probably was not conditioning: black and white were descriptive terms coined by people who found each other startlingly different, and inaccurate ones at that. White people are not white — hold a white shirt against a white man's skin and the shirt does not disappear. Black and white became non-white and non-black; the terms have since been

manipulated into offensiveness, and finding neutral replacements may take generations rather than months.

A viewer's research puts the first recorded use of African American at 1782, far earlier than the 1830s date long assumed, and asks whether it matters if those described are not offended. His reply reaches back further than the terminology. Before Europeans arrived, did we call ourselves Africans? Did we call ourselves black — or was it they who called us black?

“White people are not white. Put a white shirt on a white man and it does not melt into his skin. The same is true of us.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 · MEDIUM POWERS, AND THE MACHINERY A COUNTRY NEEDS

A viewer asks whether the concept of medium powers — his own, from his time as foreign minister — should be revisited. He says the question is a good one and that he had not thought of it himself, which is the sort of admission that dates an episode usefully.

His reasoning is about what the post-Covid order will actually be. It will not be assembled from blocs already laid down. The American Secretary of State is touring Europe building an alliance against China and Russia; some countries will decline to be either anti-Chinese or pro-Chinese; and those countries will need a form. A mediatory group, he argues, is what keeps the superpowers off each other's throats and keeps everyone else out of a world organised around antagonism. The qualification is hard-headed: superpowers listen only to states with the capability to influence events in their own region or beyond. That capability is what earns the hearing.

Two structural questions close the evening. On a separate foreign service commission for Nigeria, he notes he first advocated exactly that in 1975 at the Institute — an autonomous foreign service, distinct from the home service as it is in Britain and in the American arrangement of a Department of State standing apart from the domestic departments. In Nigeria the two remain merged, and attempts to separate them have been fiercely resisted by the home service. Whoever asked, he says, is on the right track; one day it will happen.

And on how China used national development planning to transform itself while Nigeria did not, he points to the loss of the five-year plan. A five-year programme forces you to have a vision of where you intend to be. A budget that lasts twelve months does not allow you to think big — and that, in his telling, is where it was lost.

“We cannot build a new world order on antagonistic alliances. There has to be a mediatory group that keeps the superpowers from each other's throats.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He asks who is advising the Chinese, but the alternative explanation is that the advice is being followed exactly — that six simultaneous fronts are the strategy rather than the failure. Which reading does the evidence of the last five years favour?
- If electronic warfare is old propaganda with better tools, and everybody does it, what exactly is the West asking to be protected from — the practice, or the parity?

- He wants legislation against the abusive use of black. Where does that sit against his own argument that the terms were descriptive before they were manipulated — and who would draft the list?
- The corruption argument cuts both ways: if there is no corrupt African leader without a foreign partner, the anti-corruption effort belongs as much in London and Geneva as in Abuja. Why has it not moved there?
- Medium powers require capability to be heard. Does that make the concept a route out of the great-power order, or a smaller version of the same hierarchy?

Watch Session 8 in full on the Syncturface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. Several parties the Professor deliberately declines to name are left unnamed here too: the radio station behind the 1960s broadcast, the African country whose defence industry he compares with Brazil's, the African president who asked for the money back, and the agency with the kilishi patent. Two recollected dates differ from the record and are given as his: the Emirates probe launched three to four days before this broadcast rather than two, and Nigeria's fixed five-year development plans were not abolished in 1975 — the Third Plan covered 1975 to 1980 and a Fourth followed for 1981 to 1985, with rolling plans replacing fixed ones from 1990.

thruMYeyes with Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi · Produced by Syncturface Media