

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 12-05-2023			2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) N/A	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Addressing the United States' China Problem...in Africa					5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
					5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
					5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Stacie R. Hankins					5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
					5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
					5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207					8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A					10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
					11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.						
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.						
14. ABSTRACT The United States' colonial legacy (often supporting Western colonizers against African independence movements) and its limited engagement in large infrastructure projects overseas put it at a disadvantage in Africa. But that does not mean that the United States should cede the continent to China. The United States can become African countries' partner of choice by leveraging its diplomatic strengths to demonstrate its long-term commitment to the continent. The first step is the realignment of geographic regions across the U.S. government to eliminate duplication among agencies and acknowledge the cultural linkages among African countries. Next, the United States must approach African nations as equals - not as clients to a powerful Western "big friend" - to build lasting and mutually beneficial relationships. Finally, the United States must commit more diplomatic and development resources to Africa. This can only be accomplished by investing more human and financial capital in the region. Doing so will enable the United States to tip the balance of power and influence in its favor.						
15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words) International affairs, Africa, competition below conflict, China						
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT N/A	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, Writing Center	
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-6499	

Addressing the United States' China Problem...in Africa



Word Count: 3,251

DISTRIBUTION A. Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the rise of Communist China in the early- and mid-20th century, China has sought to overcome its Century of Humiliation and reclaim what it believes to be its rightful status not as a regional leader, but as a global power. With its insistence on ownership of all territory within the nine-dash line and aggressive construction of “islands” in the South China Sea, China claims sovereignty over the Western Pacific to reinforce its legitimacy as a rising global power. The United States views China – with its nuclear capabilities and the largest military force in the world – as a growing threat to the established international rules-based order to which democratic nations adhere.

For decades, the Chinese government has been developing allies and partners around the world and Africa is no exception. Its relationships with and investments in Africa have been key to its efforts to attain great power status. In 1955, China convened an Asian-African conference in Bandung, Indonesia, which catalyzed its relationship with sub-Saharan Africa and establish a framework for African engagement. Forty-five years later, China launched the Forum on Africa-China Cooperation (FOCAC) to further develop and increase its political and economic cooperation with African nations. FOCAC’s Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence mimic the guiding policies established at Bandung:

- “Mutual respect for territory and sovereignty;
- Mutual non-aggression;
- Mutual non-interference in internal affairs;
- Equality and mutual benefit; and

- Peaceful co-existence”¹

These principles set the tone for the China-Africa relationship – an equal partnership rather than a patron-client relationship, which is how African nations view their interactions with the West. Unlike the United States and other Western nations, China does not predicate its friendships on African leaders’ behaviors or scold them for policies with which it disapproves. The Chinese government’s “hands off” approach resonated with African countries that had only recently thrown off the yoke of their Western colonial masters; its much-needed capital infusions and infrastructure improvements demonstrated a commitment to developing equal partnerships with African countries. FOCAC – held every three years at locations that alternate between Beijing and an African city – is the mechanism through which China pledges economic assistance and development support. These investments are paying political dividends for China in multilateral fora. In June 2020 at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, for example, 25 African countries backed China in discussions about the controversial Hong Kong security law.² African nations – including some with Muslim populations – comprised nearly half of the 37 signatories to an open letter defending China’s actions against its minority Uighur population.³

In 2018, Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis officially announced that the U.S. Pacific Command would be renamed the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in recognition of the growing importance of the region between the Indian and Pacific oceans. This was an important step that signaled to the world the United States’ commitment to Asia – a region that China continues to try to dominate.

¹ "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation," accessed January 29, 2023, <http://www.focac.org/eng/>.

² U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *China Regional Snapshot: Sub-Saharan Africa*, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/china-regional-snapshot-sub-saharan-africa/>

³ U.S. Congress, House, Committee, *China Regional Snapshot*.

But what about Africa, where China has made significant economic and political inroads? Africa – comprised of 54 nations and more than one billion people – is the world’s youngest and fastest-growing continent.⁴ By 2050, Africans will total 25 percent of the global population. The continent offers a dynamic emerging market, projected to reach \$5.6 trillion by 2025.⁵ The Chinese government recognizes Africa’s potential and has the advantage of long partnerships with African countries without the stain of colonialism. Most Africans – government officials and civilians – have a generally positive view of China.⁶ Many Africans view China’s motives as altruistic since it, too, is a developing country and they note that Chinese infrastructure investments result in tangible improvements to the African landscape. The United States’ colonial legacy (often supporting Western colonizers against African independence movements) and its limited engagement in large infrastructure projects overseas put it at a disadvantage in Africa. But that does not mean that the United States should cede the continent to China. The United States can become African countries’ partner of choice by leveraging its diplomatic strengths to demonstrate its long-term commitment to the continent. The first step is the realignment of geographic regions across the U.S. government to eliminate duplication among agencies and acknowledge the cultural linkages among African countries. Next, the United States must approach African nations as equals – not as clients to a powerful Western “big friend” – to build lasting and mutually beneficial relationships. Finally, the United States must commit more diplomatic and development resources to Africa. This can only be accomplished by investing

⁴ Charles Dambach, Melvin Poole, “Don’t Retreat: Expand U.S. Engagement in Africa,” *AllAfrica.com* (February 10, 2020): 1.

⁵ Dambach and Poole, “Don’t Retreat,” 2.

⁶ Larry Hanauer, Lyle J. Morris, “China in Africa: Implications of a Deepening Relationship,” *RAND Corporation Brief* (January 2014): 3.

more human and financial capital in the region. Doing so will enable the United States to tip the balance of power and influence in its favor.

Sync the Geographic Regions and Commands

To advance U.S. priorities worldwide, the U.S. government must speak with one voice. U.S. government agencies operating in Africa are no exception. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) is one of six geographical combatant commands in the U.S. Department of Defense. Established in 2007 in recognition of the continent's growing strategic importance to the United States, AFRICOM is responsible for all U.S. military activities in every country in Africa except for Egypt. Through AFRICOM, the Department of Defense aimed to "harmonize its efforts in Africa with those of the U.S. Department of State as well as other U.S. governmental agencies..."⁷

In 1949, the Department of State underwent a restructuring to better manage the global tasks of the United States. The Bureau of Near East and African Affairs was established, along with the Bureaus of European Affairs, Far Eastern Affairs, and Inter-American Affairs. A separate geographic bureau for African affairs was created in 1958, just before the independence movements of the 1960s spread like wildfire across the continent. However, despite the establishment of the Bureau of African Affairs (AF), the five African countries north of the Sahara (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) remained within the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) and continue to do so today.

While these differences in areas of responsibility seem minor, they unnecessarily complicate interagency coordination. For example, Phoenix Express 2021 (PE21) – a joint military exercise to enhance security cooperation – included Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania,

⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S. Africa Command: The First Ten Years* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2018), 3.

Morocco, and Tunisia. Another joint exercise, African Lion, includes militaries from Morocco, Tunisia, and Senegal. For both exercises, interagency coordination was made more complex because it required AFRICOM to liaise with two different geographic bureaus within State and, in the case of PE21, with U.S. Central Command, which includes Egypt in its area of responsibility.

Africans see no distinction between North and sub-Saharan Africa. The two regions are connected by innumerable cultural, religious, economic, and political bonds that cannot be overcome or erased by their former colonizers' arbitrary borders or the United States' bureaucratic geographic divisions. Placing all 54 countries on the African continent together in one geographic bureau (State) and one combatant command (Defense) would simplify logistics for military exercises, ease interagency coordination, and – most importantly – signal that the United States recognizes and respects the societal ties among Africans. In the U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa, released August 2022, the Biden Administration pledged to “address the artificial bureaucratic division between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa”⁸ but to date, no changes have been implemented.

Africa as a Partner, Not a Problem to Solve

China is a long-established political and economic investor in Africa. It has been Africa's largest trading partner for decades, with Sino-African trade topping \$200 billion per year.⁹ Between 2000 and 2020, Chinese financiers signed loan commitments worth \$160 billion with African governments¹⁰ and the Chinese government has launched billion-dollar

⁸ U.S. President, *U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2022), 12.

⁹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee, *China Regional Snapshot*.

¹⁰ Boston University Global Development Policy Center, *Chinese Loans to Africa Database*.

infrastructure projects across the continent. These investments have built a transactional Sino-African partnership: China is seeking natural resources and export markets while African countries are hoping for economic development.¹¹ But it is important to note that the United States has never *not* been present in Africa and remains the continent's largest aid donor.

Through humanitarian assistance programs like the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the United States has prevented millions of HIV infections and saved millions of lives across Africa. More recently, the United States provided more than \$500 million in humanitarian assistance and deployed more than 3,000 U.S. military personnel to West African countries affected by the Ebola outbreaks. Now, in addition to humanitarian aid, the United States engages Africa through its programs to counter violent extremism and provide security assistance. While these U.S. investments in health have obviously been beneficial, it is clear that in many ways, the United States has treated Africa "less as a strategic partner and more as a problem to be solved."¹² This must change.

The United States cannot compete with China's level of economic and infrastructure investments, but it can counter Chinese influence if it engages African countries as equal partners. There is an opportunity to engage strategically, offering a middle ground between the Chinese government's non-interference transactional approach to investing in Africa and the United States' problem-solving model. Treating African countries as equal partners means acknowledging the realities in some African countries: corruption functions as a substitute for weak legal institutions and sometimes has a positive net effect.¹³ The U.S. government routinely

¹¹ Larry Hanauer, Lyle J. Morris, "China in Africa: Implications of a Deepening Relationship," *RAND Corporation Brief*, (January 2014), 3.

¹² Abdi Latif Dahir, interview with Michael Barbaro, New York Times The Daily, podcast audio, April 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/podcasts/the-daily/kamala-harris-us-africa-china.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹³ Douglas A. Houston, "Can Corruption Ever Improve an Economy," *Cato Journal* Vol. 27, no. No. 3 (Fall, 2007), 334.

ties anti-corruption conditions to its assistance packages for Africa. Rather than engaging in these types of absolutes, recognizing the difference between minor corruption as a temporary antidote to weak governance and endemic corruption that stifles economic development could result in stronger U.S.-African partnerships. Most African leaders abhor corruption and want to develop their countries' economies. By refusing to acknowledge that minor corruption is a legitimate part of some African economies – one that will dissipate as governance strengthens – the United States undermines its efforts to be Africa's partner of choice.

The Biden Administration proposed a new 21st century U.S.-African partnership – one in which the United States will listen to diverse local voices, continue to invest in the largest African states, and deepen its relations with small- and medium-sized African countries.¹⁴ The Biden Administration must back up this pledge with action. Chinese officials demonstrate Africa's strategic value by visiting the continent frequently: Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the continent 10 times between 2014 and 2020.¹⁵ The last U.S. President to visit Africa was Barack Obama in 2015 and there are 13 years between former Vice President Joe Biden's visit to the continent (2010) and Vice President Kamala Harris' (2023). However, the Biden Administration is starting to understand – and demonstrate – Africa's national security, economic, and political importance: four high-level U.S. government officials (Secretary of State Antony Blinken, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellin) visited Africa in early 2023 prior to the Vice President's March 2023 visit, pledging additional U.S. funds for humanitarian assistance, women's economic empowerment programs, and clean energy projects. Notably, the Biden

¹⁴ U.S. President, *U.S. Strategy*, 12.

¹⁵ Paul Nantulya, "China's Deepening Ties with Africa in Xi Jinping's Third Term," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, (November 29, 2022), 2.

Administration highlighted that a significant portion of these funds are U.S. private sector investments and initiatives, not U.S. government largesse, which may signal that the American private sector recognizes Africa as a significant – and mutually beneficial – economic opportunity.

The Biden Administration’s strategy for the continent notes that China views Africa as “an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order, advance its own narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, undermine transparency and openness, and weaken U.S. relations with African peoples and governments.”¹⁶ The United States government, in contrast, is committed to “ensuring the region remains open and accessible to all, and that *governments and publics are able to make their own political choices...*[emphasis added]”¹⁷ Polling indicates that the majority of Africans welcome both Chinese and American engagement. “In fact, those who feel positively about Chinese influence in their country are more likely to also feel positively about U.S. influence.”¹⁸ Yet, although they view the U.S.-China competition as a “win-win” for Africa, Africans do not like “paternalistic” development assistance.¹⁹ African countries want to be the partners, not the clients, of a more powerful patron state. If the Biden Administration truly wants to strengthen its relationships with Africa, it will have to tread carefully. Rather than engaging in a zero-sum competition with China or forcing African countries to choose between the two powers, the United States must acknowledge Africa’s perspective on Chinese presence and offer a more attractive alternative.

¹⁶ U.S. President, *U.S. Strategy*, 5.

¹⁷ U.S. President, *U.S. Strategy*, 6.

¹⁸ Dr. Joseph Asunka, “U.S.-China ‘Competition’ is a Win-Win in the Eyes of Ordinary Africans,” *Africa Year in Review 2021*, Wilson Center Africa Program (January 18, 2022): 9.

¹⁹ Dr. Joseph Asunka, “‘Competition’ is a Win-Win,”⁹.

Since it cannot compete at the government-to-government level with China's economic investments, the United States must do more to build partnerships between American private corporations and African countries. American companies have been slow to invest in Africa, believing that the continent is unstable, its infrastructure is poor, and the U.S. government offers little support.²⁰ This reluctance has put U.S. companies behind the curve. For example, western music streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music are still testing the African market while Chinese streaming service Boomplay has more than 75 million African users.²¹ Given that more than 60 percent of Africa's population is under the age of 25, U.S. tech firms are missing out.²² For African leaders, the choice is not Chinese or American technology; it's Chinese tech or nothing. If U.S. tech firms are too risk-averse to get on the playing field, the game is already lost.

U.S. investors (public and private) can also spotlight and nurture Africa's young creative entrepreneurs – a demographic on which China has not focused. Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry – eclipsed in size only by Hollywood (United States) and Bollywood (India) – employs 300,000 people directly and one million indirectly; it contributes \$7 billion to the country's GDP.²³ Millions of young Africans search for jobs daily; the potential for employment and income generation in the creative sector is not insignificant. Only one percent of start-up funding in Africa went to the creative sector in 2019.²⁴ The United States government could expand

²⁰ Thomas P. Sheehy, "10 Things to Know About the U.S.-China Rivalry in Africa," U.S. Institute of Peace, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/10-things-know-about-us-china-rivalry-africa>.

²¹ Cobus van Staden, "How the U.S. Can Eclipse China in the Battle over Africa," Politico China Watcher, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2021/04/22/how-biden-can-win-over-africa-in-battle-with-china-492553>.

²² Hicham El Habti, "Why Africa's Youth Hold the Key to Its Development Potential," World Economic Forum, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/09/why-africa-youth-key-development-potential/#:~:text=Today%2C%20more%20than%2060%25%20of,constitute%2042%25%20of%20global%20youth>.

²³ K. Riva Levinson, "The Next 'Gold' for Africa is the Cultural and Creative Economy," *Africa Year in Review 2021*, Wilson Center Africa Program (January 18, 2022), 39.

²⁴ K. Riva Levinson, "The Next 'Gold' for Africa," 39.

existing grants programs – like the Mandela Washington Fellowship – to support the development of young African creatives. It appears that the Biden Administration is beginning to understand the untapped potential of young Africans: speaking to Ghanaian youth on March 28, 2023, at Black Star Gate in Ghana, Vice President Harris stated, “I am optimistic about the future of the world because of you...the young innovators who will solve problems that we haven’t yet identified with solutions we can’t even yet imagine...You have a role to play...So, then, let us dream with ambition and lead with conviction.”²⁵ If the Biden Administration continues on this path, it can secure strong, enduring, and mutually beneficial partnerships with Africa.

Diplomacy and Development: Resources Required

The U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa identifies four objectives to advance U.S. priorities over the next five years:

- “Foster openness and open societies;
- Deliver democratic and security dividends;
- Advance pandemic recovery and economic opportunity;
- Support conservation, climate adaptation, and a just energy transition.”²⁶

It pledges to leverage the U.S. government’s “diplomatic, development, and defense capabilities” to achieve them.²⁷ As the President’s advisor on foreign policy issues, the U.S. Department of State is tasked with advancing the United States’ priorities through its 276 embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions in 193 countries in the world – often in coordination with the U.S.

²⁵ U.S. Vice President, “Remarks by Vice President Harris to Ghanaian Youth,” transcript of remarks delivered at Black Star Gate, Ghana, March 28, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/03/28/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-to-ghanaian-youth-at-black-star-gate/>

²⁶ U.S. President, *U.S. Strategy*, 4.

²⁷ U.S. President, *U.S. Strategy*, 4.

Agency for International Development (USAID), which leads the U.S. government's international development and disaster assistance efforts. To advance the President's priorities, diplomats at U.S. embassies in Africa implement dozens of programs under five broad umbrellas: economic cooperation and development; youth engagement; health cooperation; security, peace, and stability; and environmental issues. Unfortunately, chronic staffing shortages across the continent negatively impact U.S. diplomats' ability to do so effectively. In 2022, 44 percent of diplomatic positions at the U.S. Embassy in Niger were vacant; in Burkina Faso, 50 percent were unfilled; and the U.S. Embassy in Mali reported that one-third of its diplomatic positions were vacant.²⁸ While it is true that these figures are a snapshot in time since diplomats transfer in and out of embassy assignments throughout the year, the numbers are concerning. The Sahel region, which includes these three countries, has seen a rise in extremist violence. How can the United States effectively deliver democratic and security dividends – as stated in the Strategy – when its diplomatic corps is chronically short-staffed? These challenges are not confined to West Africa: countries across the continent are facing military coups or political interference as they struggle to transition to democracy. In April, U.S. diplomats were evacuated from Sudan as a result of the armed battles that two rival military commanders are waging across the country. China and Russia continue to expand their influence in Africa. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited 12 African countries in just over six months. These visits are paying dividends for Russian President Vladimir Putin: in the March 2022 United Nations vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 17 African countries – including Mali, Sudan, and South Africa – abstained. Although the non-binding resolution passed, the African countries' abstention is an indication of Russia's growing influence in Africa. In a July 2022

²⁸ Robbie Gramer, Amy Mackinnon, "U.S. Embassies in Africa are Chronically Short-Staffed," *Foreign Policy*, July 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/22/africa-embassies-short-staffed-us-sahel-china-russia/>.

interview, U.S. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Molly Phee acknowledged that the United States “would be more influential, more impactful, more effective if we had more staffing resources” but believed a U.S. partnership remains more attractive to African leaders than one with China or Russia.²⁹ While American diplomats no doubt appreciate her confidence in their ability to execute policy in the face of staffing shortages, they would welcome additional human and financial resources more. If the United States cannot project power and democratic influence because its diplomats are too overworked to implement its policy priorities, it will cede ground to China and Russia.

Instead of relying on U.S. diplomats in Africa to muddle through, the U.S. Congress must increase its annual appropriations to the State Department. The Biden Administration’s proposed budget for FY 2022 was \$1.5 trillion. Of that, \$52 billion – three percent – was allocated to international affairs, while a whopping \$765 billion – 50 percent of the budget – was allocated to the U.S. military.³⁰ With a larger share of the discretionary budget, the State Department could hire more foreign service officers and fill staffing gaps in Africa without having to poach staff from other bureaus – which only transfers the staffing problem to another region of the world.

Conclusion: Combatting Chinese Influence in All Arenas

China continues to make clear its determination to control the western Pacific. It repeatedly challenges freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and is a significant threat to the sovereignty of Taiwan. Therefore, some may argue, it is vital that the United States focus its

²⁹ Robbie Gramer, “U.S. Embassies.”

³⁰ President’s Proposed Discretionary Budget FY 2022, National Priorities Project, <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/analysis/2021/president-bidens-fy-2022-budget-request/>

efforts on the Indo-Pacific, challenging China on its own territory. This reasoning is shortsighted. If the United States believes that China is a global threat to the international rules-based order established after World War II, then it must confront China across the globe and it must leverage all the tools at its disposal. The U.S. government is capable of and can succeed at multi-tasking *if* it does so smartly. Realigning the geographic commands and bureaus across the interagency – particularly at the Departments of Defense and State – is a relatively minor adjustment that will pay significant dividends in terms of time and resources spent on coordination and de-confliction efforts. Treating African countries as true partners, not client states, means allowing African governments to make their own choices and respecting those choices; recognizing the diversity of the African continent instead of treating it as a monolith; and listening to African leaders and their communities to understand their needs. Finally, the U.S. government must demonstrate that Africa is a national security priority by staffing its embassies on the continent and funding them appropriately to ensure that its goals for the continent can be achieved. Together, these changes offer an effective and attractive counterbalance to China’s influence, one that will persuade African leaders to select the United States as their partner of choice.

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