

**U.S.-CHINA ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA:  
RISK-INFORMED U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA IN AFRICA BETTER  
SUPPORTS U.S. LONG-TERM INTERESTS AND POLICY EFFORTS**

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*“...the pre-eminent relationship for the region [Africa] is likely to be between China and the US, particularly as trading partners. However, there will certainly remain several issues that could give rise to tensions between the two countries.”<sup>i</sup>*

The U.S. and China are engaged in sizable development efforts in Africa. The continent has significant essential natural resources, namely petroleum, and minerals. It forms three major sea lane choke points—the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Gibraltar. It also has the world’s fastest growing population, rapidly expanding urban centers, and expanding youth numbers.<sup>ii</sup> Coupling these demographics with extreme poverty, environmental fragility, and poor governance, Africa is a geopolitical engine of instability regionally and globally. The U.S. and China have taken differing approaches to engagement on the African continent. Over the last two decades, U.S. policy and efforts in Africa often focused on improving partner nations' security abilities as part of America's global counter-terrorism efforts. China's interest in Africa, however, is on economic development. The differences, like their activities, have prevented them from interfering with each other's efforts. Analyzing the convergence and divergence of each nation's efforts, three general options that could affect U.S. policy in Africa for the next twenty to thirty years appear to be adopting a more pragmatic approach (engagement), supporting the status quo (disengagement), or open competition (confrontation). Those risk-informed U.S. meetings with China better support U.S. long-term interests on the African continent while reducing the potential risk of escalating tensions or even an inadvertent incident.

### **U.S. Policy and Interests in Africa**

Although Africa is mentioned directly in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) as a “rising” region—implying Africa’s importance to U.S. national interests—Washington

continues to focus its foreign policies on the Pacific rim and Europe due to those regions' relative wealth and critical security ties and concerns.<sup>iii</sup> As a result, Africa has become an "economy of effort" area for U.S. policy. Despite ongoing aid for combat operations involving U.S. forces in Africa, the U.S. government continues to focus its primary counter-terrorism efforts in the Middle East.<sup>iv</sup>

### **China's Policies and Interests in Africa**

China's policies and activities in Africa focus on economic benefits, though they are evolving as China's role in the world changes. Chinese economic interests center on natural resource extraction, investments, and trade.<sup>v</sup> Since the 1950s, China's stated foreign policy has been non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit.<sup>vi</sup> As China emerges as a global power, it has increasingly sought military access and political influence. The expansion of China's influence in Africa follows four trends they have used elsewhere—buying power, increased maritime presence, enlarged military footprint, and arms sales. That is not to say that China has not supported development and poverty reduction projects, but their activities do little to help most Africans.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Areas of Convergence and Divergence**

The interests of China and the U.S. intersect across security efforts while diverging in sectors such as their approaches to trade and governance. China and the U.S. benefit from reducing instability, insecurity, piracy, and illicit activities in Africa. These security areas offer the opportunity for U.S. and Chinese engagement and cooperation through exercises, senior leader events, and even operations. However, there is little interaction beyond the basic safety of navigation de-confliction within the Gulf of Aden despite the U.S. military's stated policy to engage in a "sustained and substantive dialogue with the

People's Liberation Army."<sup>viii</sup>

Both countries benefit from freedom of movement in the global commons. The U.S. looks to increase the naval capabilities of its African partners to police their water to achieve maritime access. For China, this means building an ever-expanding network of marine facilities next to significant chokepoints. The first part of this system is constructing the dual-use port at Gwadar, Pakistan, to protect oil trade in/out of the Straits of Hormuz. Expanding its network, China acquired the rights to build a new naval base in Djibouti to support its counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden and defend Chinese trade through the strategic choke point of the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb.<sup>ix</sup> Additionally, China could use its “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Egypt to establish a permanent base near the Suez Canal.<sup>x</sup> China is also building a close relationship with Algeria through arms sales, which could give them additional access to the Straits of Gibraltar. China positioned its network of potential bases to protect its trillion-dollar investment in efforts to create a “One Belt, One Road” connecting China with Europe, Asia, and Africa.<sup>xi</sup>

Similarly, China’s economic efforts in Africa benefits from increased stability. To that end, China has become the eighth largest contributor to U.N. peacekeeping operations on the African continent and the biggest provider of peacekeeping forces of the five permanent U.N. Security Council member nations.<sup>xii</sup> In 2016, China had 3,044 soldiers deployed across Africa, including peacekeeping operations in South Sudan and medical training in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>xiii</sup> Coincidentally, Chinese companies are highly active in extracting oil in South Sudan and minerals from the DRC, implying that the Chinese military personnel was also deployed to these countries to support China’s interests.

The two superpowers also diverge in the ways they pursue their economic interests. The U.S. looks to intensify growth and improve the well-being of ordinary Africans through commercial programs such as Africa Power and the African Growth and Opportunity Act, as it has done in the rest of the developing world. Conversely, China uses its economic power to garner influence, increase its bilateral cooperation to secure resources, and exploit its fiscal impact to legitimize its political interests in Africa as it has done in other parts of the world. For example, China provided Sri Lanka with a significant development loan, but when the island nation could not pay its debt, China extracted basing rights for its submarines.<sup>xiv</sup> China leveraged its “loans for oil” program with Venezuela to ensure Venezuela’s vote against U.S.-led anti-China United Nations (U.N.) proposals at the 55<sup>th</sup>-57<sup>th</sup> Congress of the UN Human Rights Committee.<sup>xv</sup> With the Philippines, China is attempting to use a loan model to diplomatically gain control over disputed territories in the South China Sea.<sup>xvi</sup>

Another substantial divergence of interests exists between the U.S. and China in approaches to trade and governance. For instance, U.S. companies try to minimize the number of American employees needed on the continent. Chinese practice tends to go the opposite direction, as Chinese citizens are sent to do jobs that Africans could do, and the Chinese workers ultimately remain on the continent.<sup>xvii</sup> To date, over one million Chinese immigrants live permanently in Africa, where only a tiny number have started their small businesses—typically in retail or light manufacturing—while the majority is comprised of independent and typically unskilled migrants crowding out the potential African labor pool.<sup>xviii</sup> Conversely, the U.S. expends considerable effort to promote democracy, institution building, and human rights to achieve a sustainable path for

stability, security, and prosperity for most African people. China takes a less idealistic approach, extracting wealth and resources from the continent by working with whoever may be in power in each African nation.

Additionally, the U.S. and China differ in their aims for arms sales in Africa. U.S. arms sales to African countries focused on increasing security and combatting violent extremism by vetting recipient nations to ensure they do not violate international norms and resolutions. On the other hand, China is not so strict with its arms exports, as demonstrated by the case of weapons sales to Eritrea in 1998 and Sudan in 2004, despite the embargo imposed by the United Nations.<sup>xix</sup> China has become the third largest arms dealer to Africa, behind only Russia and France, comprising 11.6% of all arms imports in 2015.<sup>xx</sup> For China, arms sales may be the best means of achieving its military goals in Africa. The weapons are higher cost finished goods that create a constant demand for replacement parts and ammunition supplied by Chinese manufacturers. The incompatibility of complex systems with other weapons systems, not to mention the amount of money involved in these deals, provides almost instant influence with the buying nations. Advising militaries on how to employ these systems also allows for ongoing access and relationship-building with African militaries. Egypt, Algeria, and Sudan were the top three importers of Chinese arms from 1990 to 2006, but Nigeria became the primary recipient of weapons from China (35% of all exports) from 2006 to 2010.<sup>xxi</sup>

## **Options**

Three options stand out for the U.S. in dealing with burgeoning Chinese involvement in Africa: engagement, disengagement, or confrontation, and each choice

comes with its risks. An engagement strategy with China is not without risk because not all our interests intersect, particularly the U.S. interests focusing on developing free markets, African opportunities, and democratic institutions. For instance, the U.S. could begin its engagement with China by inviting it to observe the annual U.S.-led exercise Cutlass Express that focuses on improving eastern African abilities to enforce maritime law and regional stability.<sup>xxii</sup> The U.S. could also leverage China's recent commitment to peacekeeping operations by involving these Chinese forces in U.S.-sponsored peacekeeping exercises. Another potential U.S.-China engagement is participating in the African Union-led African Standby Forces military exercise to assist with developing peacekeeping capabilities.<sup>xxiii</sup> On the other hand, by cooperating with China, the U.S. may lend legitimacy to China's efforts to monopolize resource extraction, curry influence, and work with "crony capitalists." Similarly, cooperating with the Chinese may negatively affect our "brand" in Africa. Globally, America's messaging is that we are supportive of opportunities to help the average African, which allows them to view us as an honest broker. There is also a mutual risk that the Chinese will use engagement as a means for collecting information on U.S. forces and methods to use against them in a future conflict.

If the U.S. chooses not to engage with China in Africa, there are other options to guide the interactions with China—like disengagement. The U.S. could be indifferent to China's presence and activities in Africa. The benefit of this course is that both China and the U.S. are supplying resources, which may result in more support to Africans. With China being Africa's largest trading partner since 2009, ignoring their efforts may lead to the erosion of U.S. influence and access on the African continent and potentially with other regions.

A different course would be to confront Chinese efforts in Africa. This effort is likely to draw the U.S. and China into a bipolar competition for access and influence on the continent of Africa. Such a contest would be a zero-sum game with different nations pulled into the opposing spheres. As with any "race," the U.S. would have to dedicate more resources to achieve its goals in Africa, thereby violating its "economy of effort" strategy, or give up its leadership role in Africa. If the U.S. does not dedicate the necessary resources to support this course of action, it must cede leadership to China on African affairs. The result would contradict the U.S.'s national security strategy to advance U.S. leadership through the rules-based international order.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Among the three options listed above, a risk-informed engagement by the U.S. with China in Africa has the best probability of achieving long-term American aims. Due to the convergence of the U.S. and China's interests in Africa, the U.S. should try to engage with China to maximize gains and reduce the potential risk of escalating tensions or even an inadvertent incident. This pragmatic engagement in select domains and understanding of the risks allows the U.S. to collaborate with other willing global partners to make Africa a better place for Africans.

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