

China-Africa Relations in the 21st Century



Over the past decade, while the United States and other Western powers focused on counterterrorism and traditional aid programs in Africa, the People's Republic of China (PRC) developed a broad, unified strategy toward Africa. This policy spans government ministries and uses all four instruments of national power. "China's African Policy," announced in January 2006, is a bold step for the PRC as it demonstrates a fundamental foreign policy change for a government that once valued noninterference as its highest standard. Although the policy still espouses China's historic respect for the sovereignty of other countries, the scope of its activities reveals a clear intent to advance Beijing's involvement in Africa beyond historical levels and build strategic partnerships on the continent that will substantially increase China's economic, political, and military presence. With U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) now having full operational capability, it is important for officials to understand the extent of the PRC's engagement in Africa, where it is going in the future, and the implications for USAFRICOM.

By JENNIFER L. PARENTI

UN Photo (Eric Kanstein)



Chinese contingent of United Nations mission in Liberia holds ceremony, 2005

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History

China and Africa share a common history with respect to colonialism and their economic and political developments. China's 2006 African policy stems from the resulting decades of growing formal and informal Sino-African cooperation since World War II. The underlying principles behind this cooperation, documented at the first Asian-African conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, declared Beijing's respect for the sovereignty of other nations and pledged to avoid interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.

Yet despite the nature of these principles, China's recent actions demonstrate a more proactive involvement on the African continent. Over the past decade, a shift in domestic politics made it acceptable and necessary to engage in matters external to the PRC. Understanding the roots of this cultural shift is central to understanding the intent behind China's African policy and its interests on the continent.

China's New Outlook

More than anything, China's growing economy, especially over the past decade, forced a shift in foreign policy in order for the country to maintain its economic growth. The 9.5 percent rate of growth since 1996 necessitated the change by creating an increased demand for energy and raw materials to support Chinese industries. To compete with the United States and the European Union in the African oil market, the PRC had to get more involved in regional and local organizations and affairs, in contrast to its previous policies of noninterference.

China's newfound prosperity also enabled the change by bolstering its people's confidence in their nation's world position. On the African continent, the effects of this transformation are evident in two key areas: an ever-increasing presence of Chinese expatriated civilians and military forces, and increased economic and political investment. By engaging in this manner, China hopes to draw attention and business away from Africa's traditional aid and trading partners—the United States and the European Union.¹ Ultimately, this need to support a growing

economy and the desire to take a larger role in world affairs underpin nearly all of Beijing's activities in Africa.

PRC Policy in Action

China's African policy categorizes its interests in Africa into four "fields"—political; education, science, culture, health, and social; peace and security; and economic²—which are comparable to the diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments of U.S. national power. The following details many of China's activities over the past decade in these four areas while making predictions about where they might go in the future.

Diplomatic. Over the past decade, China set out to improve diplomatic relations with Africa on two primary fronts: first, institutionally through official forums; and second, bilaterally through political exchange programs and an expanded embassy and consular presence. In general, these efforts had three purposes: to help spread China's message of mutual benefit and equality to African leaders, to create opportunities for Chinese businesses abroad, and to encourage African nations to support the "One China Policy" with respect to Taiwan.³

the African Union (AU). Although Beijing has discussed a partnership with the AU, it has established no formal programs except a few legislative exchanges that promote cultural understanding but do not provide a forum for discussing specific initiatives. In addition to China's institutional efforts, it increased diplomatic engagement with the nations of Africa by establishing political exchange programs and expanding embassy and consulate representation both in Africa and in China. To this end, the PRC established national bilateral committees, political consultations between comparable foreign ministries (that is, defense-defense, energy-energy), and sister-city programs. These programs were designed to facilitate cooperation and learning among lower levels of government.⁷

Behind many of these diplomatic programs is the PRC desire to gain international support for its policy on Taiwan. To this end, China is trading economic and political support to African nations in exchange for their formal denouncement of Taiwan.⁸ It has applied this policy consistently over the past 10 years, reestablishing formal diplomatic ties with many African countries after they ended diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Under these

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China's premiere institutional venture in Africa is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The most recent FOCAC, held in Beijing in November 2006, had the participation of 48 African nations, including 43 heads of state.⁴ The resulting action plan laid out 73 bilateral agreements for the years 2007–2009.

In addition to the FOCAC, China provided substantial support to the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). That support helped NEPAD further its objectives to eradicate poverty, promote sustainable growth and development, integrate African countries into the global economy, and accelerate the empowerment of women.⁵ This formula of providing assistance to a preexisting aid organization proved successful and contributed to a 5 percent economic growth rate on the continent in the 3 years following China's partnership with NEPAD.⁶

Notably absent from these institutional endeavors is a formal Chinese delegation to

conditions, China resumed diplomatic relations with South Africa, the Central African Republic, and Guinea-Bissau in 1998; Liberia in 2003; Senegal in 2005; Chad in 2006; and, most recently, Malawi in December 2007.⁹ As a result, only four African nations formally recognize Taiwan today—Burkina Faso, Swaziland, The Gambia, and Sao Tome and Principe.

In general, China's diplomatic efforts in Africa over the past decade were considered favorable. However, there are indications that some of its activities constituted deliberate interference in African domestic politics, which has weakened its diplomatic standing in some areas. These activities provide strong evidence of China's shift away from its historical noninterference policy. Most notable among these actions are interference in Zimbabwean and Zambian presidential elections.

In Zimbabwe, China delivered propaganda bearing the insignia of Robert Mugabe's incumbent political party prior to

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the 2005 election.¹⁰ In addition, the Chinese are reported to have offered Mugabe jamming devices to use against pro-opposition radio stations.¹¹ During the 2006 Zambia elections, China's ambassador threatened to cut diplomatic relations with the country if voters elected the pro-Taiwanese opposition candidate. Given China's role as a leading investor in Zambian industries, especially copper, the loss would have been a huge blow to the Zambian economy. Despite strong anti-Chinese business sentiment in Zambia prior to the election and popular support for the opposition candidate, the incumbent president won.¹² These actions are clear evidence of China's willingness to get involved in foreign domestic politics.

Military. The past decade also saw widespread changes in China's foreign defense policy. The 2006 White Paper, *China's National Defense in 2006*, charges the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with "implementing the military strategy of active defense"¹³—a term that has grown to provide justification for use of military force outside the PRC's borders. For the first time, the paper outlines the PLA's responsibilities to:

- take the initiative to prevent and defuse crises and deter conflicts and wars
- take part in international security cooperation, strengthen strategic coordination and consultation with major powers and neighboring countries, and conduct bilateral or multilateral joint military exercises
- play an active part in maintaining global and regional peace and stability.

Bolstered by the change in policy, the PLA has regular military interaction with 41 African countries and pledges to increase current levels of involvement substantially before 2010. Overall, PLA activities in Africa can be grouped into three major categories: military exchanges, peacekeeping operations, and arms sales.¹⁴

Generally, there are three types of exchanges in place: formal military attachés, high-level exchanges, and functional exchanges. The PLA's attaché program has grown extensively in the past 20 years, and not only in Africa. Just in the past 10 years, Beijing has more than doubled its worldwide attaché representation at home and abroad. Currently, it has attaché representation in one-third of African nations, and, in return, 75 percent of these countries have attachés in

China. The PRC further intends to increase its attaché presence in Africa, according to the 2006 FOCAC Action Plan.

In addition, the PRC sponsors numerous exchanges between the PLA and foreign militaries. In the past 2 years, senior PLA officials have visited more than 60 countries, and high-ranking defense officials from more than 90 countries have visited China.¹⁵ At a lower level, the functional military exchanges are where real military cooperation occurs. These exchanges focus on core military capabilities, such as training, logistics, personnel, policy, and force structure. Many exchanges are unreported, but China has at least 34 active high-level and functional exchanges with African nations.

self-defense of the receiving country, not compromising regional and/or international security, and not interfering with a nation's internal affairs.

There is continued and valid debate regarding the sincerity of China's application of these guiding principles with respect to its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. Despite China's insistence that its weapons

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Chinese soldiers serving under United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur arrive in Sudan, 2008



In addition to military exchanges, China's participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations in Africa is on the rise. In 2006, it provided over 1,600 personnel to peacekeeping operations in Africa—about 70 percent of its global peacekeeping efforts.¹⁶ The PRC made pledges at both the 2006 FOCAC Summit and recent UN Security Council meetings to increase support to peacekeeping operations and provide additional training and equipment to African peacekeeping forces.

Similarly, Chinese arms sales to Africa are increasing. Between 1996 and 2003, China became the world's second largest exporter of weapons to Africa, accounting for over 10 percent of total imports.¹⁷ According to PRC policy, all arms sales should meet three key objectives: supporting the legitimate

are not fueling regional conflict or instability, there is evidence to the contrary. In fact, most Chinese FMS over the past 15 years are going to some of the least stable areas of Africa, including Zimbabwe, Congo, and Sudan. Clearly, FMS and Chinese military investment in Africa are on the rise and will continue as long as there is a market for these weapons and the resources to procure them. It is also clear that as China continues its bid to become a major world actor, it will need to exercise more judgment to avoid international scrutiny that could undermine its strategic objectives.

Future PLA operations in Africa are expected to include more security operations and increased maritime presence. PLA naval activity in the waters around Africa is on the rise, under the guise of joint exercises, antiterrorism activities, and general maritime

security. In addition, threats to Chinese businesses and personnel in Africa, including the kidnapping and murder of Chinese workers in both Ethiopia and Nigeria, highlight an emerging security threat for the PRC. The PLA is expected to engage in both of these areas more openly (directly and indirectly through training and equipping local forces) to ensure the safety of PRC personnel and business interests.

Economic. Since 2000, the PRC's economic investment in Africa increased substantially. Three major factors facilitated this growth: increased reliance on natural resources, especially oil; relaxed policies to promote Chinese business activities in Africa; and deliberate courting of high-level African

strings attached to most Western offers (for political reform, human rights accountability, or weapons restrictions).¹⁹ The formula proved successful for China in securing several long-term lucrative oil deals.

Typical of these transactions was China's dealings with Angola in 2005–2006. In 2005, China gave a US\$2 billion oil-backed loan to Angola to improve its weakened infrastructure. In 2006, it added US\$1 billion to that loan.²⁰ During this timeframe, it appears that Chinese companies secured exactly US\$3 billion of infrastructure contracts in Angola, with most of the required workforce coming from imported Chinese laborers.²¹ Two months after the signing of the second loan, Angola's state-run oil company relin-

quished 40 percent of an offshore oil block to a Chinese company for a \$1.4 billion investment.²² Angola is repaying the loans with 10,000 barrels of oil per day.

Information. China's increased presence in Africa brought with it concerns about the true intent of its activities. Many African leaders are still concerned that China will not deliver on promised initiatives from the 2006 FOCAC Summit. In addition, there is a perception among many leaders that Beijing is deliberately choosing the most corrupt governments (Angola, Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Nigeria) to do business with.²³

The most difficult perception China has to overcome, however, is that the money it is earning in Africa will be invested back home, with little long-term benefit to African nations. This perception stems primarily from use of imported Chinese laborers for the majority of its manpower requirements and concerns over the quality of its investments, particularly construction projects, which can vary substantially between companies and regions.²⁴ In addition, because Chinese companies are able to underbid African businesses (primarily due to subsidies from the PRC government), many African companies have been forced out of business by the new competition.²⁵ Realizing its perception problems and sticking to its message of gains for all involved, China has embarked on a multifaceted strategic information campaign to improve relations.

This campaign, which permeates nearly every level of African society, has two high-level objectives: to promote a positive image of China and to improve cultural understanding between China and African nations. To this end, the PRC has sponsored numerous initiatives in both Africa and China that encourage greater interaction between the peoples and cultures.

In the educational forum, Beijing's initiatives include setting up 100 rural schools; providing training for education officials and teachers at all levels; building Confucius Institutes to teach the Chinese language in Africa; establishing government programs to encourage teaching African languages in China; and creating a number of student



PLA engineers serve in United Nations mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2008

UN (Marie Frechon)

political and business leaders to protect Chinese business interests.

The primary driver behind the increase in Chinese economic activity is the need for oil and other natural resources. In 2003, China became the world's second largest consumer of oil, behind the United States. In anticipation of their growing requirements, Chinese petroleum companies started intensifying African oil investment in 1995. Today, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 28 percent of China's total oil imports.¹⁸

The PRC's general strategy for securing petroleum resources has been to pursue the cooperation of oil-rich countries with nonbinding economic aid, infrastructure projects, and debt relief. These programs are attractive to African countries because they provide benefit to the host nation without the

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As part of its focus on promoting investment in oil-rich African nations, Beijing is paving the way by courting political and business leaders. This effort is also part of a strate-

exchange programs.²⁶ On the medical side, China pledged to help construct 30 hospitals, build 30 centers for the prevention and treatment of malaria,²⁷ and donate US\$8 million to the World Health Organization to build African countries' ability to respond to public health emergencies.²⁸

In addition to these and other cultural programs, China recently granted Approved Destination Status (ADS) to 26 African nations. This designation indicates that a country is preapproved for Chinese tourists and expedites the visa process for Chinese citizens wanting to travel abroad. The PRC also promised to extend the special status to more African countries and enacted measures that will make it easier for Africans to vacation in China.²⁹

The effectiveness of the strategic information campaign is evident in Chinese credibility among the African leaders whom the PRC is trying to influence. In general, these moves are viewed positively, and many aspects of the message resonate well with African leaders, especially the perceived common heritage, the strong focus on the state, and principles of noninterference.³⁰ The participation in the 2006 FOCAC Summit demonstrated that the majority of African leaders are still encouraging Chinese investment in their countries to the greatest extent possible. It is too early to tell if Beijing's newest efforts in the strategic information campaign can counter the negative perceptions of its business practices on the continent; however, the next few years should provide ample evidence to determine if the information campaign will improve China's overall reputation.

Implications

The depth and breadth of China's activities in Africa have definite implications for U.S. policy and the mission of USAFRICOM. Some authors think the emergence of the command onto the African security landscape will only complicate an already tumultuous situation.³¹ Others believe that the United States and China are already on the path to conflict over African oil.³²

Yet many of these same authors also recognize that the United States and PRC are at a culminating point with respect to Africa—a point where their interests are converging and engagement is at its highest level since World War II. Given these conditions, USAFRICOM is in a unique position to engage the PRC to defuse tensions and explore areas of military

cooperation that are beneficial to both nations and their African partners.

A simple comparison of *China's National Defense in 2006* and the 2006 U.S. National Security Strategy reveals several common objectives. To recall, *China's National Defense in 2006* outlined the following objectives for the PLA:

- take the initiative to prevent and *defuse crises and deter conflicts* and wars
- take part in *international security cooperation*, strengthen strategic coordination and consultation *with major powers* and neighboring countries, and conduct bilateral or multilateral joint military exercises
- play an active part in *maintaining global and regional peace* and stability.

Comparing this to the following subset of tasks from the 2006 U.S. National Security Strategy, several commonalities are immediately apparent:³³

- strengthen alliances to *defeat global terrorism* and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends
- work with others to *defuse regional conflicts*
- develop agendas for *cooperative action with other main centers of global power*.

There are clear overlaps in the areas of defeating global terrorism, defusing regional conflicts, promoting international security cooperation, and developing cooperative agendas with other major powers. These common interests present multiple opportunities for cooperative engagement militarily, politically, and economically.

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Institutional Framework

China's recent experiences demonstrate that working through institutions is a formula for success in Africa. Its efforts through NEPAD, FOCAC, and the United Nations have had not only the most positive impact in Africa, but also the highest approval ratings among African nations. Currently, where its institutional approach is weakest is in a formal

partnership with the African Union. In contrast, USAFRICOM already has a formal delegate to the AU.³⁴

To build on the PRC's previous successes and take advantage of existing relationships, USAFRICOM should establish a formal organization for cooperative foreign security ventures in Africa. This organization could be established as part of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) and would provide a forum for foreign countries to coordinate, deconflict, and potentially consolidate disparate security efforts, including protecting assets and natural resources and training and equipping African peacekeeping and military personnel.

Working through this kind of forum could have many advantages. First, it ensures coordination and deconfliction among foreign powers. Second, it uses an existing institution as the backbone for discussions. Next, it promotes cooperation instead of competition among key investors. Finally, it consolidates efforts within a single forum.

This forum would not need to take ultimate decisionmaking authority out of the hands of its participants. While encouraging countries to pursue combined efforts where appropriate, the forum could still be effective without taking control over a participating country's bilateral security agreements with AU member nations or other security efforts on the continent. With the international community in wide agreement that promoting security and enabling regional peacekeeping and military capability are in the common good, this venture seems the natural first step in establishing any cooperative security agenda.

Security Cooperation

U.S. and Chinese investments in Africa will not be able to expand, even collectively, without adequate security measures to protect the personnel and resources involved. To this end, five of USAFRICOM's seven goals deal directly with promoting regional security.³⁵ At the same time, China is transforming the PLA into a global force and is looking for opportunities to use it. Both nations and the African Union can draw immediate gains from two areas of cooperation: maritime security and peacekeeper training.

Both the United States and China have a strategic interest in maritime security in African waters, especially in the protection of international commercial shipping lanes

and oil infrastructure off the Horn of Africa, in the Niger Delta, and in the Gulf of Guinea. Currently, both countries are engaged in separate efforts to protect these regions, but their common interests of protecting access to natural resources, combating piracy and global terrorism, and promoting regional stability make African maritime security a natural part of a U.S.-PRC cooperative agenda. By joining forces in maritime security, the United States and PRC will benefit from the additional assets and reduced redundancies inherent in a combined approach. Additionally, AU member states benefit from fewer economic losses and enhanced overall regional security. Finally, as the PLA Navy expands its presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the opportunity for cooperation on maritime security in Africa provides meaningful experience for future cooperative missions between the two navies.

Similarly, the United States and China would both gain from joining efforts on peacekeeping in Africa. Currently, the premiere peacekeeper-training program is the U.S. Department of State's African Contingency Operations and Training Assistance (ACOTA) program. Unfortunately, ACOTA does not have consistent funding and may not be able to attain its overall goals. Meanwhile, the PLA needs peacekeeper training and seeks an expanded role in African peacekeeping operations.

By inviting PLA forces to join in ACOTA efforts, the United States satisfies several objectives. First, it increases the pool of qualified peacekeepers to join in UN peacekeeping efforts. Second, it gains valuable experience dealing directly with the PLA, which will be beneficial in future operations inside and outside of Africa. Third, it secures an additional funding source for ACOTA efforts. At the same time, the PLA gains the training and experience it requires to expand its role in African peacekeeping operations and benefits from the experience of working with U.S. forces. Ultimately, the AU benefits from having more peacekeepers available to help secure its regions and from working in conjunction with U.S. and PLA forces.

Military Infrastructure Development

One of the biggest barriers to African nations' attempts to sustain their own military and peacekeeping forces is their dilapidated transportation infrastructure.

Both the African Standby Force (the military arm of the PSC designed to be a contingency response force for African crises and peacekeeping operations) and the military arm of the Economic Community of West African States suffer from severe problems because of the current infrastructure. These conditions prevent forces from deploying effectively, limit logistics support to deployed forces, curtail training opportunities, and make many missions too costly to undertake.³⁶

In his recent posture statement to Congress, USAFRICOM commander, General William Ward, acknowledged, "The U.S. must encourage the improvement of civilian transportation infrastructure and its security across the African continent, but the near term requires an increase in the quantity and capacity of military air and rapid sealift platforms made available to AFRICOM." At the same time, the PRC needs additional air and sea routes between Africa and China to encourage more trade and cooperation.

By jointly encouraging the development of dual-use transportation infrastructure components, the United States and China can meet key strategic objectives while simultaneously supporting a major goal of the African Union.³⁷ Specifically, the types of projects that

would further strategic objectives for all three players are:

- construction of secure, joint civil-military use airfields with associated support facilities (hangars, terminals, fuels storage, and so forth) capable of supporting heavy lift aircraft (for example, C-17s and Boeing 777s)

- modernization of strategic port facilities, especially in the central regions of Africa's east and west coasts. Projects should focus on increasing reliability and capacity of port operations.

- modernization and construction of roads and railways leading from port facilities to inland population centers. Efforts should focus not only on material improvement, but also on increasing security along inland highways and railways.

In choosing which infrastructure projects to support and how, it is important to consider the lessons learned from China's efforts. Specifically, the United States and China should make every effort to ensure that local companies, employing native Africans, conduct the majority of the effort, whether for design, construction, or security. Where foreign companies are used, African

U.S. and Chinese investments in Africa will not be able to expand without security measures to protect the personnel and resources involved

DOD (Cherie A. Thurlby)



Secretary Gates meets with Chinese Central Military Commission official in Beijing

companies should be trained to operate and maintain the facilities once construction is completed. Overall, the focus needs to be on enabling future growth for African countries.

Another area of potential military infrastructure growth is in space. Africa's vast equatorial regions are prime real estate for the world's burgeoning space requirements—equatorial ground locations are ideal for satellite tracking and control. In addition, Africa's east central coast is one of only a few places in the world where satellites can be launched directly into equatorial orbits. This is significant because these orbits provide the best coverage for most satellite uses and are the only way to achieve a geostationary satellite orbit, which provides 24-hour coverage over a single point on the Earth. Currently, most countries launch satellites into nonequatorial orbits and then perform costly orbital transfers to achieve these desired positions.

Unfortunately, Africa's equatorial regions are extremely unstable. An east coast equatorial launch site would be situated in war-torn southern Somalia, and the majority of the equatorial ground sites are located in the faction-controlled regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Still, with outside security assistance, this could be an area of strong potential economic and military growth for the nations of the AU and should remain in the sights of the United States and PRC for long-term security and assistance projects (at least 10–20 years out).

China's activities in Africa show that it has significant influence in many regions and that it is poised to increase this influence over the coming years. These activities should be a significant concern to the United States and U.S. Africa Command because of the potential for conflict and the need to protect U.S. interests. Yet despite the perception that the United States and People's Republic of China have polarized political and economic approaches, the two powers share many common interests in Africa.

A cooperative approach to stability and development, working with China and the African Union, offers significant benefit to all parties. First, a cooperative approach helps ensure Chinese efforts do not undermine U.S. and African short- and long-term interests. Second, it provides U.S. and Chinese activities the legitimacy and support of the African Union. Third, it leverages the combined efforts of two major world powers for more

benefit to the African nations. Finally, it gives U.S. officials the diplomatic, cultural, and military experience of working with both Chinese and African counterparts, which paves the way for future engagement, inside and outside of Africa.

These shared interests present multiple opportunities for cooperation between the United States and PRC in Africa. Potential areas for cooperation include maritime security, peacekeeper training, and development of a robust military transportation infrastructure for use by African forces. However, to reap the full benefit, the United States, through USAFRICOM, must take the lead in developing this cooperative approach by working through the African Union to engage China on the issues of security and development. **JFQ**

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