Dragon with a Heart of Darkness?

Countering Chinese Influence in Africa

By **PHILIPPE D. ROGERS**

Navy hospital corpsman checks the blood pressure of a Kenyan woman during medical civil assistance project

U.S. Navy (Jeremy L. Grisham)

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While the United States has been preoccupied with global challenges to its security since 2001, China has used what it calls an *independent foreign policy* (a term Beijing uses to denote independence from American power) to achieve diplomatic, military, and economic influence in African nations in exchange for unconditional foreign aid, regardless of the benefiting country's human rights record or political practices.[1] This foreign policy undermines U.S. objectives intended to promote good governance, market reform, and regional security and stability, while concomitantly diminishing U.S. influence. China's relationships with Angola, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, for instance, have enabled these countries to ignore international pressure and frustrated efforts to isolate, coerce, or reform them. Left unchecked, China's growing influence will likely facilitate similar behavior from other African countries, stymieing U.S. efforts and leading to friction, if not outright conflict, between Beijing and Washington.

The United States, therefore, needs a coherent and overarching strategy that coordinates its diplomatic, military, and economic instruments of power to counter China's growing influence in Africa.

China-Africa Seminar on Human Rights, October 2004

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE **2007**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Dragon with a Heart of Darkness? Countering Chinese Influence in Africa**	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER 5b. GRANT NUMBER 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER 5e. TASK NUMBER 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National Defense University,Institute for National Strategic Studies,260 Fifth Ave SW (BG 64) Fort Lesley J McNair,Washington,DC,20319**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**6**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

China Rising

Current U.S. power and influence are historically unique in their all-encompassing, dominant nature; only hindsight will tell if various strategic gambles furthered this power and influence or precipitated their decline. In this vein, while American foreign policy remains predominantly focused on the war on terror, the United States must anticipate future security challenges from emerging threats and competitors.

China, no longer able "to hide its ambitions and disguise its claws,"[2] has matched its meteoric growth with an expansive global policy that strongly resembles what John Mearsheimer calls "offensive realism."[3] As the term suggests, China's yearning for power is manifest not only in its invigorated external focus and more aggressive international policies, but also in "its opportunistic creation of strategic counterbalances designed to increase its influence and limit that of the United States."[4] This increasing Chinese influence is nowhere more evident than in Africa.

The Importance of Africa

Africa's emergence as a continent of strategic importance is not surprising considering its vast resources and potential. China's national objectives (economic expansion, increased international prestige, a unified China and Taiwan, and domestic stability) directly or indirectly fuel its keen interest in Africa.[5] The United States, on the other hand, has no coherent, overarching strategy for Africa, although the 2006 National Security Strategy does describe it as a continent of geostrategic importance and of high priority to the administration.[6]

China's explosive economic expansion is driving its "go global policy."[7] Its voracious appetite for resources forces it to look externally, driving it to lock up future energy sources for anticipated needs. Currently, 25 percent of its oil comes from Africa.[8] China's economic expansion also requires other natural resources, fueling a continuous search for new markets.

Diplomatically, China seeks international support and prestige by creating close ties with developing nations. Likewise, it uses its position as the sole "developing" United Nations Security Council (UNSC) permanent member to great advantage by championing smaller countries and their causes.[9] China also goes to great lengths to build international diplomatic inertia to counter recognized statehood for Taiwan.[10] With 54 countries, Africa represents a rich source of future international support for Chinese endeavors.[11]

If successfully realized, the above objectives will support Chinese domestic stability and security (internal unrest historically being its greatest destabilizer) by reinforcing the legitimacy of Communist Party control.

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Chinese President Hu Jintao and Paul Biya, President of the Republic of Cameroon, review PLA honor guard, September 2003

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All photos: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

(Clockwise from top left) Chinese President Jiang Zemin greets Sam Nujoma, President of Namibia, in Beijing, November 2000; Chinese teacher instructs students in Ethiopia; Chairman Mao Zedong with Asian, African, and Latin American friends, 1959; Deng Xiaoping meets with El Hadj Omar Bongo, President of the Gabonese Republic, February 1987

Although the United States lacks a coherent, overarching strategy for Africa, the 2006 National Security Strategy does offer the following vague U.S. policy guidance: "to promote economic development and the expansion of effective, democratic governance so that African states can take the lead in addressing African challenges" and that "through improved governance, reduced corruption, and market reforms, African nations can lift themselves toward a better future."[12] Furthermore, the National Security Strategy's explicit objective for Africa is a continent "that knows liberty, peace, stability, and increasing prosperity."[13] Understood as subtext, and linked to U.S. national interests, is the importance of Africa vis-à-vis the war on terror and energy resources. Currently, U.S. military units are involved in counterterrorism efforts throughout the continent, and the United States imports 15 percent of its oil from Africa, an amount projected to increase to 25 percent in 10 years.[14]

Growing Influence

China's growing influence in Africa is surprising in its intensity, pervasiveness, and commitment across the breadth of traditional instruments of power. While Washington is strategically focused elsewhere, Beijing deftly uses a combination of tools, enticements, and devices to achieve this influence. Not tethered by pressing security concerns that threaten its existence and blessed with an explosive economy, China leverages its instruments of power in the pursuit of overseas objectives.

The primary instrument in securing these objectives is China's "independent foreign policy." Succinctly, it offers financial aid with no political strings attached. To developing African nations, wary of former colonial masters and superpowers who offer stipulation-based aid, China's willingness to assist without conditions is a welcome respite. Although recipients of this largesse understand that it undercuts international attempts to induce reform, the attraction of immediate, lucrative, and needed investment is too tempting to ignore. In return, China asks for preferential consideration for economic opportunities.

Equally enticing to African nations is China's support from an international perspective. China only recently became comfortable in its "liberal internationalist skin," but it has since learned how to adroitly wield its weight. It leverages close ties cultivated with developing African nations, and its UNSC status is appealing to less fortunate countries who welcome the apparently equal partnership being offered.

China is also successful as a "full on supplier" of "package deals."[15] It not only seeks new markets and preferred trade, but offers a full range of aid to include military advisors and sales, infrastructure development, medical support and programs, debt relief, low or no interest loans, free trade agreements, education and technical assistance, industrial hardware and software, cultural exchanges, and preferred tourism. It offers these through a combination of private and public (state sponsored) ventures, with its state and provincial representatives armed to low bid contracts, even if at a loss.

Diplomatically, China has formal relations with 47 African countries. During the last 6 years, President Hu Jintao and other high level emissaries made repeated trips to Africa while over 40 African country delegations traveled to China. Beijing is also heavily engaged in African regional organizations, and its diplomatic delegations often outnumber combined European and American representatives. In 2006, China hosted an economic forum of 48 African ministerial delegations.[16] It has also built and paid for African embassies in Beijing to ensure their countries' representation.

Economically, China has trade relations with 49 African countries and bilateral trade agreements with the majority of them. The Chinese-African Economic Forum, created in 2000, is an economic windfall for China and its partners. Gross Africa-China trade totaled $10.6 billion in 2000, $40 billion in 2005, and is forecast to surpass $100 billion in 2010.[17] China instituted 7 Trade and Investment Promotion Centers throughout Africa to serve as regional economic engagement focal points, and 700 Chinese companies operate in 49 African countries. Besides heavily investing in extractive industries, China is building infrastructure capacity throughout Africa to include dams, railways, port improvements, highways, stadiums, and pipelines. It has lucrative oil contracts with Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, and Sudan, and there are Chinese trading and manufacturing enclaves throughout Africa specializing in textiles, fishing, and other commerce.


Chinese-made K–8 is exported to Africa

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Militarily, China made significant arms sales to Burundi, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, and developed a burgeoning small arms manufacturing capability in Sudan.[18] China is also a significant contributor to African UN peacekeeping missions, and as of May 2007, it had 1,315 military personnel deployed to 7 peacekeeping operations.[19]

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Tents, tarps, and mosquito netting delivered by U.S. Air Force C–130 to Dadaab, Kenya

U.S. Air Force (Steve Staedler)

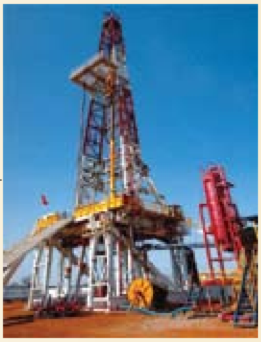

Chinese doctor treats Burundian children

Ramifications

Chinese and American influence in Africa is not a zero-sum game in the near term; however, the long-term stakes are high with respect to strategic objectives. U.S. strategic aims in Africa are intended to promote good governance, market reform, and stability and security, which in turn help limit the spread of the war on terror and maintain U.S. access to the continent. China's influence, gained through its independent foreign policy, ostensibly undermines U.S. attempts to effect positive change and achieve its strategic objectives in Africa. If that influence grows without a counterbalancing increase in U.S. influence, the United States risks losing strategic flexibility and freedom of action on the continent.

The conflicts in Sudan and Zimbabwe demonstrate China's willingness to circumvent, if not completely ignore, international pressure and underscore the potential injuriousness of its actions and the ramifications to U.S. policy in Africa.

Sudan's internal conflict has been roiling for decades. A seemingly intractable domestic conflict with age-old roots has become a full-scale genocide, and the international community, collectively sworn not to allow another Rwanda-type massacre, is



Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

Drilling platform for Chinese petroleum project in Sudan

finding a solution to be elusive. Worsening the situation is China's refusal to yield to international pressure and condemn Sudanese actions, citing Sudan's right to govern its internal affairs irrespective of the ongoing genocide. The disturbing reality is that China is heavily invested in Sudan, whence 20 percent of its African oil comes, and its oil firms are deeply entrenched.[20] Over 10,000 Chinese workers and 4,000 soldiers live in Sudan.[21] Instead of using its considerable influence to call for a solution, China has cast a blind eye on Sudanese inaction and complicity, all but endorsing its actions. Chinese refusal to address the situation in Sudan more directly is a contributing reason for ineffective UN resolutions.

The injurious effects of China's implicit support to Sudan are many, manifest not only in Khartoum's ability to ignore the international outcry and its perceived imperviousness to sanction, but also in the resultant destabilizing effects the genocide is having on neighboring states. Both Chad and the Central African Republic, two fragile countries that can ill afford destructive influences, are being affected by Sudan's internal unrest.[22]

In the case of Zimbabwe, currently subject to U.S. and European Union sanctions, China openly backs President Robert Mugabe despite his human rights record, corrupt regime, and internal unrest, which are affecting regional stability. China sold Zimbabwe over $200 million in arms, signed lucrative contracts for resources, and provided it with much-needed financial and international support.[23] As Mugabe exclaimed, "As long as China walks with Zimbabwe, it will never walk alone."[24]

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There are many other examples of Chinese actions enabling African nations to flout international pressure, to include countries in which the United States has considerable interest, such as Angola and Kenya.

These are not isolated instances for China, but instead demonstrate a determined pattern of enabling behavior through its foreign policy. As Beijing continues to expand operations in Africa, the likelihood of Chinese and American policies clashing will increase, possibly forcing underlying tensions into open conflict.

Countering Chinese Influence

A strategy designed to counter Chinese influence in Africa will need to incorporate all U.S. instruments of power in order to overcome the allure of Chinese packaging and power appeal. This would include increasing diplomatic presence; accentuating and reinvigorating currently successful political, military, and economic incentive programs; and directly engaging China in Africa through cooperation, inclusiveness, and challenging it to abide by international norms of behavior.

Current U.S. engagement in Africa is a patchwork of generally successful but unsynchronized initiatives and policies that cross intragovernmental boundaries. Washington needs to consolidate these by appointing an "Africa czar" with the responsibility and authority to integrate and coordinate U.S. initiatives and policies. Coupled with the apparently imminent establishment of a U.S. Africa Command, the United States would be better positioned and organized to focus on the African continent and expand U.S. influence with a concomitant bounding of Chinese influence.

In addition to the Africa czar, the United States needs to increase its diplomatic profile in Africa. One of the most successful aspects of Chinese engagement has been the willingness of its leadership to travel extensively in Africa and to effusively host African leaders at home. Although President George W. Bush has traveled to Africa more than any U.S. leader in recent history, this high-level engagement should increase and become routine. The Africa czar and other U.S. Government leaders should accompany these high-level Presidential visits as well as conduct visits of their own. In conjunction with an increased leadership visitation program, diplomatic representation in African regional organizations should be expanded. The first U.S. Ambassador to the African Union was appointed in 2006; U.S. Ambassadors or diplomatic representatives should likewise be appointed to important African subregional organizations such as the South African Development Community. A holistic appreciation of regional dynamics gained by these diplomats provides a key to understanding and countering Chinese regional influence. Washington should match Beijing's diplomatic presence where politically feasible and strive to preemptively develop diplomatic presence and influence in places where China is absent. The State Department's transformational diplomacy initiative, aligning the diplomatic weight of effort with current global realities, supports this proposed increased representation.[25]

Economically, U.S. investment in Africa represents 1 percent of its total foreign trade, although this amount still outpaces Sino-African trade.[26] But China's proclivity to appear as a benign capitalist—freely investing yet with the knowledge it will operate at a net loss—is difficult for American investors to match. To maintain any long-term economic advantage, the United States needs to aggressively expand, improve, and incentivize existing initiatives to encourage economic and political reform. It also needs to focus on economic areas important to Africans that the Chinese are not developing; seek new and creative economic opportunities that outperform Chinese models; and counter China's locking up of African resources by leveraging superior American extractive technology.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) is a rewarding initiative for those countries seeking U.S. market access. This program, and the breadth of countries eligible

U.S. Navy (Anthony Dallas)

U.S. petty officer explains ship-boarding tactics to Angolan sailors aboard USS *Kauffman*

Marine hands out school supplies in Douda, Djibouti

U.S. Marine Corps (Eric A. Clement)

the United States may counter Chinese state-sponsored economic packaging by using its own creative means

for it, should expand. Those in compliance with the principles of AGOA should be highly rewarded and recognized, and countries compliant with good economic reform should be awarded favorable bilateral trade, free market agreements, and preferential access to U.S. State Partnership Programs.[27]

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and private involvement and investment in African agricultural endeavors must increase (USAID African agricultural projects have dropped by 90 percent since 1970).[28] Agriculture represents 24 percent of Africa's collective gross domestic product and 40 percent of its foreign exchange, while employing over 70 percent of its population.[29] To date, China has not been demonstrably involved with African agriculture, primarily because it faces its own agricultural challenges. This is a key opportunity for the United States to influence an area that China is not currently capable of addressing, while engendering better practices, good will, and employment. Agricultural subsidies that inhibit African access to U.S. markets should be selectively dropped to entice specific nations and encourage further economic growth and reform.

The United States may counter Chinese state-sponsored economic packaging by using its own creative means. Combined U.S. efforts using the Export-Import Bank, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, U.S. State Partnership Programs, U.S. Trade and Development Agency, and USAID can compete with Chinese bids or seek opportunities in China-free markets, thereby opening the way for private American industry investment. These ventures could also be backed by U.S. Government tax incentives to emphasize their importance and encourage further investment opportunities.

An overarching energy security strategy for Africa, under the auspices of the Africa czar, would align energy policies. This would in turn lead to a coherent vision of how to counter Chinese efforts to secure African energy sources. For instance, a weak link in China's energy industry is its lack of offshore extractive capabilities, a technology that it currently outsources. Although China is buying African future energy reserves and building pipelines and improving ports to export them, the United States is buying oil from most of the same countries, yet remains poised to maintain the offshore extractive edge. This is an important advantage over land-locked reserves, particularly when proven offshore oil reserves are larger (especially in West Africa) and do not as readily suffer from the illicit vagaries associated with onshore reserves.

With respect to security and military cooperation, U.S. efforts in Africa significantly overshadow those of the Chinese. Initiatives such as the Trans-Sahel Counter-Terrorism Initiative, Gulf of Guinea Guard, and others are integral to regional stability and to the prosecution of the war on terror. Similar initiatives that emphasize U.S. military cooperation with African counterparts need to be expanded and made inclusive in order to maintain U.S. influence. International Military Education and Training (IMET) should be expanded or increased preferentially to those countries complying with AGOA and other reform initiatives, or simply as another enticement to counter expanding Chinese influence. The positive influence IMET engenders is incalculable. Premier U.S. peacekeeping initiatives that train Africans (such as the African Contingency Operations Training Assistance program) are instrumental to African security and should expand to include more eligible nations. African nations compliant with governmental and economic reform should be high priorities for U.S. military aid, including Excess Defense Articles, military grants, and third country sales.

In international forums, the United States must encourage China to change

DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

Director of Joint Staff and Principal Under Secretary of Defense for Policy brief press on establishment of U.S. Africa Command policies detrimental to international and U.S. reform efforts in Africa. Inviting China to observe or participate in Group of Eight, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, United Kingdom Commission for Africa, and other forums where Africa is concerned (perhaps including the Millennium Development Account) would encourage it to act as a responsible international stakeholder and avoid policies that inhibit African reform.[30] Additionally, international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, should seek opportunities to work with China. Such cooperation may lend more transparency and international rigidity to Chinese actions. In conjunction with this pressure from financial institutions, China should abide by recognized economic practices that lead to legitimacy and transparency in Africa.

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Finally, Washington should seek to work with Beijing on common ground beneficial to Africans (for example, humanitarian aid efforts, malaria and HIV/AIDS initiatives, and peacekeeping operations), not only for humanitarian reasons, but also to further encourage responsible international behavior.

Benefits of a U.S. Strategy

This strategy for countering Chinese influence in Africa will serve several purposes. First, a coherent strategy will increase U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic influence throughout Africa, allowing Washington to maintain political support, open access to markets and energy sources, and freedom of action in the war on terror. This increased influence will also facilitate a continued push for political and economic reform and regional security and stability across the breadth of Africa while maintaining the ability to pressure and isolate regimes with poor human rights records and political practices.

Second, should China experience an economic market correction that forces it to disengage from Africa, or an economic backlash by Africans, already fomenting in certain areas due to "unfair" Chinese economic and hiring practices, the United States would be well postured to fill the void.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, should future Chinese-American relations be cooperative rather than competitive, both countries could use their significant influence to coordinate actions in Africa to achieve their strategic objectives while simultaneously improving the continent.

Although the focus of this article has been limited to countering Chinese influence in Africa based on one interpretation of China's possible designs, there clearly are other imaginable alternatives. The 2006 National Security Strategy states that "the United States will welcome the emergence of a China that is peaceful and prosperous and that cooperates with us to address common challenges and mutual interests."[31] The combined efforts of a strong U.S.-China cooperative relationship would be beneficial not only to both countries, but also to African states and the state of African affairs as well. **JFQ**

NOTES

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6 George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2006), 37.

7 Lindsey Hilsum, "The Chinese are coming," *New Statesman* (July 4, 2005), 1, available at <www.newstatesman.com/200507040007>.

8 Estimates of the percentage of Chinese oil that comes from Africa range from 23 percent to 31 percent. The author has settled on 25 percent as a median estimate.

9 Anthony Lake and Christine Todd Whitman, *More Than Humanitarianism: A Strategic U.S. Approach Toward Africa*, Independent Task Force Report No. 56 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006), 41; and Eisenman and Kurlantzick, 6.

10 Peter Brookes and Ji Hye Shin, "China's Influence in Africa: Implications for the United States," February 2006, 7, accessed at <www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/bg1926.cfm>.

11 See <www.aneki.com/africa.html>. The author uses 54 countries as the base number for Africa since that is the number he most often came across in research; however, different sources cite different numbers of countries making up the African continent.

12 Bush, 37–38.

13 Ibid.

14 Brookes and Ji, 10.

15 Esther Pan, "China, Africa, and Oil," January 2006, 4, available at <www.cfr.org/publication/9557/china_africa_and_oil.html>.

16 Michael Elliot, "The Chinese Century," *Time*, January 22, 2007, 40.

17 Craig Timberg, "From Competitor to Trading Partners: Africans Adjust as Business Ties with China Grow," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2006, A23.

18 See Brookes and Ji, 5; and Pan, 5.

19 United Nations Peacekeeping, "Facts and Figures," accessed at <www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/factsandfigures/>.

20 David Zweig and Bi Jianhai, "China's Global Hunt for Energy," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005), 28. Sources on the percentage of oil China imports from Sudan vary between 15 and 25 percent.

21 Lake and Whitman, 43; Zweig and Bi, 32.

22 Lydia Polgreen, "On the Run as the War Crosses Another Line in Africa," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2006, A1.

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24 Ibid.

25 Condoleezza Rice, "Transformational Diplomacy," January 18, 2006, available at <www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm>.

26 Brookes and Ji, 9.

27 Ibid.

28 Lake and Whitman, 51.

29 Ibid.

30 Elizabeth C. Economy, "The Perils of Beijing's Africa Strategy," *International Herald Tribune*, November 2, 2006, available at <www.cfr.org/publication/11886/perils_of_beijings_africa_strategy.html>.

31 Bush, 46.