

China in Africa

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China's Strategy in Africa

China's strategy for Africa has economic, political, and strategic components. It is also based on a history of China's support for African liberation movements and strong African backing in China's successful effort to replace Taiwan at the United Nations in 1971. While it is imperative not to overstate the importance of Africa in China's foreign policy, it is a fact that Africa, especially Sub-Sahara Africa, occupies a higher priority in Beijing than it does in Washington. Having said that, Africa holds a much lower priority in Beijing than the countries on China's periphery, the European Union, and the United States. In some respects, South Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America are approaching, if not surpassing, Africa in China's foreign policy considerations.

But what does China want from Africa? First, it wants access to Africa's natural resources. About 83 percent of all African exports to China are oil and minerals. When you add timber to the exports, the number jumps to 96 percent. In 2018, China imported 71 percent of its oil and 46 percent of its natural gas requirements. Those percentages are projected to increase. In 2018, China imported 18 percent of its oil from Africa, which is down from more than 30 percent of its oil imports from Africa just ten years ago. Today, China relies more on oil from neighboring countries and the Middle East. On the other hand, exports to China of African natural gas, which are now small, are likely to increase as a result of new discoveries in several African countries. More importantly, minerals found in Africa, several of which are heavily concentrated in the continent, are critical to China's industrial economy and defense industry. African countries account for more than 75 percent of global tantalum production, about 67 percent of cobalt production, 60 percent of platinum group production, and 50 percent of manganese production. China is a major importer from Africa of these minerals. In 2017, for example, 72 percent of China's imported chrome ore came from South Africa alone. Africa is also an important supplier of bauxite and copper for China.

Second, China sees Africa as a growing market for its exports and the earning of foreign exchange. Africa has well over a billion people and has the fastest growing population in the world. Most important, Africa has an increasing number of consumers with discretionary income, at least pre-coronavirus. In recent years, China has become a significant service provider by winning contracts for infrastructure projects, many of them financed by China, and building Africa's infrastructure with Chinese companies. It is necessary, however, to keep China-Africa trade in perspective. While China is Africa's largest trading partner, it accounts for less than 5 percent of China's global trade, although it constitutes about 15 percent of Africa's global trade. The trade is also heavily concentrated in Africa's oil and mineral rich countries.

Third, China seeks the political support of as many African countries as possible in organizations ranging from the UN General Assembly to the World Trade Organization to the UN Human Rights Council. Africa's fifty-four countries constitute more than one-quarter of UN members. Although they do not vote as a block, they tend to be more supportive of China's position than the United States' position on issues at the UN and in other fora. This is especially true for China's core domestic concerns such as the treatment of Muslim minorities, Tibet, South China Sea, Hong Kong, and human rights generally. In return, China often uses its position on the UN Security Council to support issues important to African countries, especially when they are being criticized by Western leaders. An important corollary of this interest is unreserved African support for the "One China" principle. Today, only one African country—Eswatini—recognizes Taiwan.

Fourth, as China's interests and the number of its nationals increase in Africa, China is subject to greater threats that it wants to minimize or avoid entirely. Pre-coronavirus, on any given day it is estimated there are about one million Chinese working, living, and visiting in Africa. There are probably at least 10,000 Chinese companies, most of them small private operations, in Africa. These individuals, companies, and interests increasingly experience the same kinds of attacks that other foreigners face on the continent. The threats include ordinary crime, kidnapping, being caught in civil conflict, terrorist attacks, piracy, and pandemic disease. The government of China and the Communist Party of China (CPC) are confronting, especially since the evacuation in 2011 of almost 36,000 Chinese from Libya, more domestic pressure to protect Chinese nationals and interests in Africa. This has resulted in a series of preventative and proactive measures by companies and the government of China ranging from greater risk aversion to employing private security companies.

Fifth, Africa is part of a broader strategy based on implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand China's economic, political, and military power. The establishment in 2017 in Djibouti of China's first military base outside China is the most visible manifestation in Africa of this goal. While the current focus is the consolidation of China's economic ties along the BRI, political and security relations are closely interwoven in this initiative. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has expanded its reach in the Indian Ocean and the waters around Africa by increasing the number of port calls. China is also continuing its engagement in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and its participation in the anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden and strengthening its military cooperation with African governments. These steps strongly suggest that China intends to become a global power. Again, coronavirus may slow down or even disrupt this effort and the BRI.

China's Africa Policy Pronouncements

China's most recent, comprehensive policy paper on Africa released in December 2015 generally reflects current policy. It includes Xi Jinping's key themes of the "community of shared future" and the "Chinese Dream." Curiously, however, it makes no reference to the BRI, which Xi Jinping announced in September 2013. The 2015 BRI Action Plan did mention Africa

five times but only in the context of generic statements referring to “Asia, Europe and Africa.” This underscores that Africa is a BRI afterthought, although China is now trying to engage the African countries more vigorously. The guidance on security and military policy is generic, focuses on what China is prepared to do for Africa, but offered no hint of its desire to establish a military base in Africa.

Like policy papers prepared by other governments, China’s documents put the most positive spin on the relationship with Africa and make no mention of several negative issues. For example, the Africa policy paper discusses new loans but does not mention growing debt concerns, including several highly indebted African countries where China provided a significant amount of the financing. The debt problem has worsened since publication of the 2015 paper and is destined to get much worse in the aftermath of coronavirus. Nor does the policy paper discuss the large trade surpluses that China has with most African countries and the fact that China imports raw materials from Africa, but exports almost exclusively finished goods to Africa. These African concerns are publicly raised in South Africa and Kenya and privately discussed more broadly. On the other hand, the paper does promise to strengthen quality control over Chinese goods exported to Africa and enhance cooperation to protect the environment, two areas where African civil society has been critical of China’s policy for years.

“China’s Military Strategy” white paper of 2015 only refers to Africa in passing and says the PLAN will continue escort missions in the Gulf of Aden. The section on international military cooperation also applies to Africa. China’s 2019 white paper on national defense contains few references to Africa but announces principles that apply to the continent. It emphasizes humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, participating in UN peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations, playing a constructive role in resolving political disputes, jointly maintaining the security of international sea passage, and responding to global threats of terrorism, cyber security, and natural disasters.

African Countries of Special Interest to China

China has identified countries in Africa that are of special interest. In fact, China classifies countries globally by category of partnership. In Africa, the top category is “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Comprehensive means the cooperation is all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered. Strategic means the cooperation is long-term, stable, and transcends differences in ideology and social systems. So far, China has identified as comprehensive strategic partners the African Union and nine countries: South Africa, Algeria, Egypt, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Namibia.

These countries are interesting because they are not all obvious choices. South Africa, Algeria, Zimbabwe, and Namibia have significant energy and/or minerals, but the other five do not. The People’s Republic of China has important and long-standing ties, usually dating back to support for liberation movements, with Algeria, Egypt, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, but its earlier links with South Africa, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, and Kenya were tentative at best. The African countries represent a wide variety of political systems, although most of them seem to

have close ruling political party ties with the CPC. Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Algeria are outliers in this connection. China is an important trading partner with all nine countries, but it is the largest partner only with South Africa, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia. It is especially hard to explain why Sierra Leone is a comprehensive strategic partner.

China has a lower level “strategic partnership” or “comprehensive cooperative partnership” with a wider range of countries. They include Nigeria (oil), Angola (oil), Sudan (had substantial oil until the independence of South Sudan), Gabon (oil), Republic of Congo (oil), Morocco (potash), Guinea (bauxite), Senegal, Tanzania, and Djibouti. All these countries have significant quantities of natural resources of interest to China except Senegal, Tanzania, and Djibouti. Senegal is an inherently important country in West Africa. Tanzania has a long historical relationship and important military ties. Djibouti permits China to operate a military base on its territory. Surprising omissions from this list are the Democratic Republic of the Congo (minerals and an important country in Central Africa), Ghana (oil and an important country in West Africa), and Zambia (minerals and long-standing close ties).

China’s Alignment with U.S. Competitors in Africa

China does not seek allies in the manner the United States does. It develops “partnerships” by offering political support and financial incentives. Arguably, the BRI is an effort by China to align itself with America’s economic competitors, especially European countries, so that all participants in the BRI compete more effectively against the United States globally. While Africa is not the primary target, it is an arena of U.S.-Europe and U.S.-China commercial competition. A case in point is Huawei’s highly successful campaign to capture most of the 4G and 5G market in Africa and to make inroads in Europe. The BRI has aided Huawei’s effort in Central Asia, South Asia, Europe, and Africa. Nevertheless, commercial competition is normal and takes place among allies.

The more important concerns for the United States are political, ideological, and security competition. Here, the Western countries generally remain aligned in Africa. There does not appear to be any evidence that China is working with countries such as North Korea, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela to undermine American influence in Africa. For that matter, these countries are not particularly active in Africa. Although Cuba has a significant legacy in Africa, it lost its financial backing for operations in Africa after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Venezuela has never been active in Africa and, in any event, is preoccupied with internal problems. Iran once had strong ties with several African countries but has more recently been undercut by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It also faces serious internal challenges. North Korea has slowly been increasing its influence in Africa and is a country to watch, including the possibility of collaboration with China.

The most important player in this context is Russia. But China and Russia are commercial competitors in Africa, although China holds an overwhelming advantage. Russia’s trade, aid, and investment pale in comparison to that from China. The one area where Russia leads by a small margin is arms sales, mostly in North Africa. In any given year, China is usually the more

important supplier of arms in Sub-Sahara Africa. Some of Russia's engagement in Africa, especially that conducted by the private Wagner Group, which has close ties to the government, may give China pause. Wagner group activities in countries such as the Central African Republic and Sudan may even be counter to Chinese interests.

Since 2016, China and Russia have usually voted the same way on African issues that have come before the UN Security Council. Out of eleven votes on resolutions dealing with Africa, China abstained on all of them while Russia abstained on nine and voted yes on two, both early in 2016. The United States voted yes on all eleven. There appears to be close consultation between China and Russia on African issues that come before the Security Council.

China's 2019 white paper on defense states that "the military relationship between China and Russia continues to develop at a high level, enriching the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era and playing a significant role in maintaining global strategic stability." The document goes on to highlight increased China-Russia security cooperation and coordination. While none of this makes any reference to Africa, there are a few straws in the wind that suggest growing China-Russia naval cooperation in Africa and the wider Indian Ocean region. In November 2019, the South African navy hosted the Multinational Maritime Exercise with vessels from the PLAN and Russian navy. The following month, Iranian, Russian, and PLAN warships held joint maneuvers in the Indian Ocean. China has apparently also allowed Russian warships to use the pier at its military base in Djibouti. So far, this seems to be the extent of China-Russia military cooperation in Africa, but it is an issue that merits close attention.

Organizations China Uses to Implement Its Africa Strategy

China works through a variety of organizations at the international, continental, and sub-regional level to implement its Africa strategy. The most inclusive groups are the United Nations and its specialized agencies, but more on that in the next section below. Some of the other organizations were inspired by China such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum. African and Arab countries created another set of organizations: African Union, League of Arab States, Southern African Development Community, Economic Community of West African States, Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. A final category includes member states from several continents, especially the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Although the degree to which China uses these organizations to implement its Africa strategy varies widely, they all play a role.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is the premier coordinating mechanism for China's engagement with Africa. All African countries except Eswatini are members. It meets every three years at the ministerial or summit level, alternating between Beijing and an African venue. The seventh and most recent session took place in Beijing in 2018. Each meeting is followed by a comprehensive three-year action plan and China's pledge for new loans, grants, and export credits. Trade, investment, infrastructure, and development assistance are constant

FOCAC themes, but the priorities have changed over time. The action plan highlighted climate change, poverty reduction, and think tank exchanges in 2009. The 2012 FOCAC underscored the importance of peace and security cooperation, which has continued as a high priority. China's assistance for African industrialization was a central theme in 2015 while 2018 witnessed a return to more support for agricultural development and a focus on the BRI. In 2018, China pledged \$60 billion in loans, export credits, grants, and new direct investment over the next three years.

African response to the FOCAC has generally been positive, although there are concerns that it is too China-driven. With the passage of time, African countries have had a more significant impact on the agenda. To some extent, this is a structural challenge. It is much easier for a single country—China—to implement its goals than for fifty-three African states to do so collectively. Many of the smaller African countries are also poorly equipped to follow up with China on action items. In the final analysis, individual African countries have concluded that their bilateral relationship with China is more important than working through the FOCAC.

The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) has twenty-two member countries, the same membership as the League of Arab States. Ten of the members are African and all of them are also members of FOCAC. Because the focus of CASCF is the Arab world and has limited African membership, it is much less important than FOCAC. Foreign ministers from member states meet every two years in China or one of the other member states. As of 2019, there had been eight ministerial-level meetings and sixteen senior official meetings. CASCF hosts some ten additional sub-groups such as the China-Arab Relations and China-Arab Civilization Dialogue that generally meet every two years.

The 8th and most recent CASCF ministerial conference took place in Beijing in 2018 when the theme was the BRI. China pledged \$20 billion in loans for economic development and \$3 billion in loans for the financial sector. The action plan for 2018-2021 covers political, economic, energy, environmental, agricultural, tourism, human resources, intellectual property, cultural, educational, scientific, health, media, and people-to-people cooperation. In 2019, CASCF senior officials met for the 16th time and the Strategic Political Dialogue for the 5th time. China expressed appreciation for Arab support on Xinjiang-related issues and said it is ready to enhance coordination with Arab states in countering terrorism and extremism.

The African Union (AU) represents fifty-five countries, including the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), territory which Morocco controls. China does not recognize the Western Sahara. The AU graduated from observer status to become a full member of FOCAC in 2011. But even before this development, China attached considerable importance to its relations with the AU. China established a strategic dialogue mechanism with the AU in 2008; at the second session the following year, AU Secretary General Jean Ping said the organization would “continue to stand by China on major issues concerning China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.” This is music to China's ears. In 2015, China established a permanent mission to the AU in Addis Ababa and subsequently invited it to open an office in Beijing, following the establishment by the United States of a permanent mission to the AU. Although

the European Union and United States provide much more funding to the AU, China built its new \$200 million headquarters free of charge, a daily reminder of China's benevolence. China periodically makes significant contributions to the African Union's peace and security budget.

Like the CASCF, the League of Arab States has ten African members although there is rarely a unified Arab position on controversial issues. Nevertheless, China has cultivated the Arab League since the early 1990s. President Hu Jintao's 2004 meeting with Arab League members resulted in the creation of the CASCF. Xi Jinping made a major speech on China-Arab relations at the Arab League headquarters in 2016. The Arab League's secretary general, during a visit by China's foreign minister in 2020, said the organization understands China's position on Xinjiang and opposes any interference in its internal affairs. China's early, frequent, and high-level interaction with the Arab League has served it well.

The sixteen members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) focus primarily on development, peace and security, economic growth, and the alleviation of poverty. China has a long relationship with SADC, mostly in the development area, and provides an annual \$100,000 grant to the secretariat to support its operational needs. SADC provides another venue to raise economic, political, and security issues of concern to both sides. China accredits its ambassador in Botswana to SADC.

The fifteen members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) originally dealt mostly with African development and regional integration. Increasingly, security issues have become part of the agenda. China's engagement with ECOWAS has been mainly in the trade and investment area. It has also provided modest funding for its peacekeeping activities. China cooperates with ECOWAS to end piracy and theft in the Gulf of Guinea, a problem that has impacted Chinese shipping. China accredits its ambassador in Nigeria to ECOWAS. In 2018, ECOWAS approved a \$31.6 million grant from China to build its new headquarters with construction scheduled to begin in 2020.

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) has twenty-one members. Its primary goal is to promote regional integration through trade and development of natural resources. China is COMESA's largest bilateral trading partner. Its ambassador to Zambia serves concurrently as China's special representative to the organization. While China provides minimal financial support to COMESA, its secretary-general praised Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in member countries and their frequent political exchanges. In 2018, he said it is "disingenuous for those who only yesterday and for centuries were involved in the enslavement of Africans and exploitation of natural resources to turn around and proclaim that they have clean hands and that China's partnership is based on the model of exploitation that they know."

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has seven members in the Horn of Africa. It promotes regional cooperation and integration through peace, security, and prosperity. China is not a significant funding source and does not have observer status. Western countries provide most of the funding; China provides small periodic grants to IGAD's

secretariat. China has taken, however, an active interest in IGAD's efforts to mediate the civil war in South Sudan where a Chinese state-owned oil company has extensive investments. In 2018, China provided \$500,000 to the IGAD forum supporting the South Sudan peace process.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has fifty-seven members, including twenty-seven African countries. Major OIC issues include peace and security, counterterrorism, food security, human rights, and good governance. China says it has attached importance to the OIC since Premier Zhou Enlai sent a congratulatory message in 1974 during its second summit. The Islamic Association of China serves as an important communication link with the OIC. China's most senior officials make regular visits to OIC headquarters. Consequently, the OIC has pursued a policy on Xinjiang region that has pleased China.

The little-known Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has twenty-two members, including nine from Africa. IORA is the only ministerial forum that covers the Indian Ocean and includes dialogue partners, which provide technical cooperation, help on environmental issues, and promote trade and investment. India tends to set the IORA agenda. China is a dialogue partner and regularly attends IORA council of minister meetings. The BRI is driving China's efforts to deepen relations with the organization. The IORA provides a forum where China can attempt to burnish its image as a responsible global power and reduce the fear of some countries, especially India, about its naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

African Support for China in International Fora

China prefers to seek African support for its broader national goals from those international organizations where there is relatively less Western influence. Consequently, China relies less on African support in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), traditionally Western-led institutions where China wields less influence. However, even at the World Bank and IMF, China has become a larger contributor and is trying to gain leverage. Although invited to join, China has also shown little interest in the Western-dominated Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. African support for China in the World Trade Organization, which has forty-four African members, offers greater potential and deserves close attention.

The United Nations General Assembly, where all fifty-four African countries are present, and the UN Security Council, where three of the ten rotating members are African, offer more effective forums to solicit African support. In recent years, the voting pattern of the three rotating African countries on the UN Security Council has aligned more closely with that of China than that of the United States. China often uses its permanent position on the Security Council to support the policies of African governments, especially on resolutions dealing with sanctions. African alignment with China has been even closer in the General Assembly. In a ranking of 192 countries that compared their votes with China's votes from 1992 to 2017, nine African countries appeared in the top twenty with voting agreement of 81 percent or more. No African country fell among the twenty countries in least agreement with China.

China also seeks African support in the UN's fifteen specialized agencies where Chinese nationals now head four of them: Food and Agriculture Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Telecommunication Union, and UN Industrial Development Organization. The UN Human Rights Council is an especially important organization where China seeks support from the thirteen African members. Many African countries are equally challenged on human rights issues. There is a tendency for African countries to support China and vice versa but this support is less than commonly believed. A 2016 study concluded that China had begun to demonstrate some influence with the African group but had "not won major support." This may change following the U.S. departure in 2018 from the Human Rights Council.

Recommendations for Congressional Action

I begin with the belief that the current zero-sum U.S. policy of competing head-to-head with China in Africa is NOT the most effective U.S.-Africa policy. To the extent possible, the United States should compete in the areas of trade, investment, and winning of contracts. In the political and security arenas, a more nuanced policy is needed. No African official with whom I have met has any interest in choosing between the United States and China. Equally important, the United States government is not prepared to provide the financial resources to compete head-to-head with China in Africa and the private sector has not yet demonstrated the willingness or ability to fill the U.S. government's gap. The United States is better advised to lead by example in areas where it excels and has the financial resources. It should also provide additional resources to support private sector engagement in Africa. While the United States could do a better job of messaging, the Africans can conclude on their own what is positive and what is not about American and Chinese policies, programs, and activities concerning Africa. I have the following specific recommendations for Congressional action:

- Encourage more CODELS and STAFFDELS to visit Africa to learn about the continent and demonstrate Congressional interest in it.
- Increase funding for the U.S. Export Import Bank and urge it to use more of its funding in Africa.
- Ask the new U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to earmark a significant percent of its funding for Africa.
- Maintain funding for security sector reform and military training in those countries that follow reasonable human rights practices.
- Provide additional, urgent funding for combatting COVID-19 in Africa.
- Conduct a hearing on the international response to COVID-19 in Africa that will underscore the significant U.S. contribution.
- Conduct a hearing on the growing African debt problem, which will demonstrate how little the United States has contributed to the problem and provide a more factual understanding of China's role.