



China's African Strategy and Its Implications for U.S. Interests

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Introduction

With the foreign policy focus of United States policymakers and media trained primarily on events in the Greater Middle East, especially those directly connected to America's "global war on terror," short shift tends to be made of Africa, the continent getting even less attention than it usually receives despite its growing strategic significance.¹ Consequently, the increasing economic and political engagement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) across the continent has gone largely unnoticed. Yet apart from the Central Eurasian region on its own northwestern frontier,² perhaps no other foreign region rivals Africa as the object of sustained Chinese strategic interest in recent years, culminating in the publication earlier this year, in coincidence with Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing's tour to six African countries, of the first official government paper elaborating the PRC's policy toward Africa.³

Those analysts who have followed these developments have largely ascribed them to China's need to secure access to energy resources.⁴ Although demand for oil is certainly an important factor driving the PRC's relations with some African states, it would be remarkably shortsighted to view all of China's interests on the continent through this singular optic. Before assessing the implications of China's growing presence in Africa on the interests of the United States in the region, it is necessary

first to understand the contours of Sino–African relations as well as the complex dynamics driving the parties to forge the ties being developed.

Historical Background

Although the fact is hardly known in the West, China's contacts with and interest in Africa date back almost two millennia. The acclaimed British historian of Africa, Basil Davidson, avers that Chinese goods were reaching the continent "by the sea routes as early as the beginning of the Christian era" and mentions the discovery in Meroe, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kush (situated largely in present-day Sudan), of bronze pots of "undoubtedly Chinese shape."⁵ Chinese porcelain and stoneware as well as coinage dating to the Tang dynasty (618–907) have been found at archaeological excavations in Egypt, Kenya, and Zanzibar.⁶ The most important period of Sino–African relations in historical times came during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) when the voyages of the famed eunuch Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) took the mariner on at least three occasions as far as the Horn of Africa and the coast of East Africa where he obtained and took back with him exotic animals, including a giraffe, to the delight of the Yongle Emperor (1403–1424).⁷ Although the Ming officials who sailed with Zheng had as their mandate the enforced acknowledgment by those they encountered of the suzerainty of the

Dragon Throne, modern China's involvement in Africa began with a distinctly anti-imperialist tone with Mao Zedong's ambition that the PRC should strive for the leadership of the third world. The basis of the PRC's foreign policy is found in the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence) that were enshrined by China in joint declarations with India and Burma issued one day apart in June 1954.⁸

In April 1955, representatives of 29 African and Asian countries—including the PRC's Zhou Enlai, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Indonesia's Sukarno, and Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh—met in the Indonesian city of Bandung in the first Asian–African Conference. The final communiqué of the summit, which has been seen as the PRC's "first major diplomatic victory,"⁹ adopted the "Five Principles" as the foundation for relations among the emergent nations of the developing world—the emphasis on sovereignty and noninterference finding particular resonance with leaders whose legitimacy was largely founded on their successful resistance to both historical Western colonialism as well as new Soviet pressures. The conference participants also called for economic and cultural cooperation among their largely newly independent countries as well as a program of active support for the self-determination of dependent people against colonial regimes.¹⁰

Following the Bandung Conference, the PRC developed relationships with both independent African states—Nasser's Egypt being the first African country to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1956—and aspiring liberation movements like the Algerian FLN, whose provisional government received Beijing's recognition in 1958. Premier Zhou Enlai visited Africa three times in the 1960s, and the decade constituted the high point of

China's material assistance to both governments and revolutionary groups (nearly every liberation movement received arms, funds, and training from the PRC at one point or another) on the continent. Additional impetus was given to the policy of engagement by the growing Sino–Soviet split in which Africa, already a theater of cold-war competition between the Soviet Union and the West, became the setting for the ideologically driven conflict between the two communist powers. The Sino–Soviet split even spilled over into anticolonial struggles, in some cases like Rhodesia where Beijing backed Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), while Moscow supported Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). In 1967 the Gambian poet Lenrie Peters succinctly summarized the rivalry between the two communist superpowers in verse.

The Chinese then stepped in . . .
We're Communist brothers
To help you build Black Socialism.
Only you must kick out the
Russians.¹¹

Despite its enormous cost, by the mid-1960s, the PRC's well-orchestrated foray had begun to pay dividends on all fronts as 17 of the then 38 independent African states recognized Beijing (compared with 14 that continued relations with Taipei) and Moscow was growing increasingly defensive that in some African countries "pictures of Soviet-bloc leaders had been displaced or overshadowed by huge portraits of Mao."¹² The momentum, however, was lost with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and the recall of experienced envoys, many of whom, if they did not meet worse fates, ended up being paraded about in dunce caps by the Red Guards. This left Sino–African relations in the hands of frightened subalterns whose principal preoccupation was not statecraft but survival. A particularly amusing anecdote from the period comes

from Mali, which was ruled until his fall in 1968 by Modibo Keita, the most openly pro-Chinese leader in Africa. The *chargé d'affaires* at the Chinese embassy in Bamako was so desperate to demonstrate his "success" in promoting "Mao Zedong thought" that he persuaded Keita to allow the importation and distribution of more than four million copies of the *Little Red Book*—more than one per capita, irrespective of the recipient's literacy or lack thereof.

Mao's death and the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping led to a shift of Chinese policy priorities on both foreign and domestic fronts. Although the "Five Principles" were continually reiterated as the basis for international relations—they were subsequently incorporated in the agreements establishing diplomatic relations between the PRC and more than 160 countries—Beijing was more concerned about its own economic development and thus interpreted the principles as conferring privilege on ties with nations in a position to further that goal irrespective of their internal political, social, or ideological systems. As a result, Sino-African ties were moved to the back burner in the late 1970s and remained there through the 1980s, as China focused on forging ties with economic powers like the United States, Japan, and South Korea as well as joining international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Furthermore, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing no longer felt keen pressure to compete for the revolutionary allegiance of Africans against its old rival, and so it scaled back or terminated support for a whole series of projects.

By the 1990s, however, two changes on the world stage redirected the PRC's gaze back to Africa. First, as a result of the success of its economic modernization program, China quickly found itself the third-largest economy in the world (after the United States and Japan, respectively) and since 2003 the world's second-largest consumer of petroleum products. If Beijing's long-term pursuit of a "peaceful

rise" (*heping jueqi*) was to be sustained, China had to find a source to overcome its own scarcity of natural resources. Second, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the wholesale decline of Russia as a major power by almost any index except for its inherited nuclear arsenal left China as the sole power with the potential for challenging America's "unipolar" hegemony. From its newly prominent place on the world stage, Beijing increasingly emphasized a preference for "democracy in international relations" (*guoji guanxi minzhuhua*)—that is, a multipolar political and economic order that protected national prerogatives and institutionalized multilateral approaches to global concerns—and needed supportive partners to pursue that agenda.

Consequently, throughout the 1990s, the PRC reenergized its bilateral relations with African countries, especially those in a position to advance its new-found geostrategic goals. Chinese President Yang Shangkun visited the continent in 1992; his successor as president, Jiang Zemin, visited three times, in 1995, 1996, and 2000. In October 1999 Jiang wrote to the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) proposing the creation of a Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The proposal signaled a new phase in Sino-African relations, with the PRC evincing a willingness to engage the continent as a whole rather than through a series of individual bilateral ties. The following year the first meeting of the FOCAC ministerial conference was held in Beijing. Forty-four African states were represented. In his opening address, Jiang noted that

China is the largest developing country in the world and Africa is the continent with the largest number of developing countries. At the turn of the millennium and century, China and Africa are faced with both historical opportunities for greater development and unprecedented challenges.

At this important historical juncture, an in-depth discussion between us on how to strengthen cooperation and promote common development will undoubtedly exert a far-reaching important impact on the cross-century development of Sino–African relations, closer South-South cooperation and the establishment of an equitable and just new international political and economic order.¹³

The Chinese leader then went on to exhort his African guests to join in an ambitious new project.

Look forward into the future and establish a new long-term stable partnership of equality and mutual benefit. The establishment of stronger friendly ties and closer cooperation between China and Africa serves the interests of their peoples and conforms to the trend toward world peace and development. We will deepen our mutual understanding and trust through various forms of exchanges, especially direct contacts between top leaders of both China and African countries. We will take various measures to tap the potential and explore new ways and areas of our economic cooperation and trade so that a new pattern of China–Africa economic relations and cooperation based on mutual benefit and aimed at common development will gradually take shape. We will also give play to the initiative of all quarters and promote an all-round friendship between us. We will make special efforts to educate our younger generations so that the traditional friendship between China and Africa will be passed on from generation to generation.¹⁴

The first FOCAC ministerial meeting was followed by a second, which met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in December 2003 and agreed to the establishment of more permanent follow-up mechanisms in anticipation of a third conference to be held in three years' time. It was in the context of intensifying Sino–African ties that, on January 12, 2006, Beijing published its policy paper on Africa, spelling out “the objectives of China’s policy toward Africa and the measures to achieve them and its proposals for cooperation in various fields in the coming years, with a view of promoting the steady growth of China-Africa relations in the long term and bringing the mutually beneficial cooperation to a new stage.”¹⁵ Although the document diplomatically (and somewhat ambiguously) listed the general principles of Chinese strategy toward Africa as “sincerity, friendship, and equality,” “mutual benefit, reciprocity, and common prosperity,” “mutual support and close coordination,” and “learning from each other and seeking common development,” more concretely those objectives can be translated as quests for resources, business opportunities, diplomatic initiatives, and building strategic partnerships.

The Quest for Resources

The dynamic economy unleashed by its post-Mao reforms—the average of 9 percent growth per annum over the last two decades has nearly tripled China’s GDP—has also resulted in an almost insatiable thirst for oil as well as a need for other natural resources to sustain it.¹⁶ The PRC has been a net importer of petroleum since 1993 and has increasingly relied on African countries as suppliers. As of last year, China was importing approximately 2.6 million barrels per day (bbl/d), which accounts for about half of its consumption; more than 765,000 bbl/d—roughly a third of its imports—came from African sources, especially Sudan, Angola, and Congo (Brazzaville).

To get some perspective on these numbers, consider that one respected energy analyst has calculated that although China's share of the world oil market is about 8 percent, its share of total growth in demand for oil since 2000 has been 30 percent.¹⁷

Although the January 2006 purchase for \$2.27 billion of a 45 percent stake in an offshore Nigerian oilfield by the state-controlled China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC)—the same firm whose bid to acquire Unocal was thwarted last year—set off alarms in a number of Western financial publications, it was not news to longtime observers who have followed Chinese forays into the continent's petroleum reserves for over a decade. In 1993, the year in which it transitioned from being a net exporter to a net importer of energy resources, the PRC used its long-standing ties with Algeria's ruling Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) to facilitate the purchase of several oil refineries in the North African country for \$350 million. Three years later, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) purchased a 40-percent share in Sudan's Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, half of whose production now goes to China and represents approximately 5 percent of the PRC's oil consumption. Altogether Beijing has signed more than 40 oil agreements with various African countries.

An interesting characteristic of those acquisitions is that the business model adopted is different from that of Western companies that have traditionally invested in futures, that is, in rights to exploration and development. Instead, the three largest Chinese national oil companies—CNPC, China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec), and CNOOC, respectively—have preferred to acquire stakes in established operations. The result not only successfully leverages the smaller pool of capital available to the PRC's state-owned firms, but it also permits them to minimize risk while achieving a vertical integration of reserves, extraction, transport, and refinement that

provides Chinese consumers with what is ultimately fuel at prices below those of other consumers in the world market.

China's competitive edge extends beyond mere market efficiencies. Recently, in an incident widely commented on in the global petroleum industry, a proposal by Shell Exploration & Production Angola to sell a 50-percent equity share in an oil block to an Indian company, ONGC Videsh, was blocked by the government-owned monopoly Sociedade Nacional de Combustíveis de Angola (Sonangol), which ensured that the stake was sold to a Chinese company. Its denials notwithstanding, many observers surmised that Sonangol's intervention had more than a little to do with the concessionary two-billion-dollar line of credit that the Chinese Export-Import Bank extended to the African country that currently exports one-quarter of its production to China.

In addition to its appetite for petroleum and other hydrocarbon products, China's growing economy has also provided a rich market for a number of natural resources available in relative abundance in African countries, including titanium, iron ore, and timber. In 1997, for example, the Beijing General Research Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (BGRIMM) invested \$150 million and acquired a 70-percent stake in the Chambezi mine in Zambia's Copperbelt province. When it opened in 2000, the operation had an annual production of 2.15 million tons of ore and copper concentrate yielding 50,000 tons of copper. More recently Chinese buyers have taken advantage of the near-universal shunning of the Zimbabwean regime to increase their access to that country's titanium deposits.

The PRC's quest for natural resources in Africa also includes a dimension related to its relatively understudied but nonetheless burgeoning challenge of food security that has been an unintended consequence of China's economic modernization. As long as a decade ago it was concluded that "Rapid industrialization is already taking a toll, as [the] grain area has dropped from 90.8 million hectares in 1990 to

an estimated 85.7 millions hectares in 1994. This annual drop of 1.4 percent is likely to endure as long as rapid economic growth continues.”¹⁸ The loss of agricultural land to industrialization and urbanization, coupled with increasing consumption by an ever more prosperous and still growing population, means that China will have to rely more and more on imports of grain and other foodstuffs (the country’s current agricultural yield per hectare is already high by global standards and unlikely to be subject to a sufficiently dramatic increase even if it were to adopt genetically modified crops). Consequently, it is not surprising that the recent government policy paper acknowledged that

China intends to further promote its agricultural cooperation and exchanges with African nations at various levels, through multiple channels and in various forms. Focus will be laid on the cooperation in land development, agricultural plantation, breeding technologies, food security, agricultural machinery, and the processing of agricultural and side-line products.¹⁹

Chinese public and private investors have already leased vast tracks of agricultural land in several African countries, including Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The China National Hybrid Rice Research and Development Center has conducted extensive trials of systems of rice intensification (SRI) with hybrid varieties in Guinea. Joint fish-processing ventures have been inaugurated in Gabon and Namibia—another one is being negotiated in Cape Verde—to process the catch from Chinese industrial trawlers operating in the Gulf of Guinea, one of the richest fisheries in the world.

Business Opportunities

The PRC policy paper forthrightly declares that “The Chinese government encourages

and supports Chinese enterprises’ investment and business in Africa and will continue to provide preferential loans and buyer credits to this end.”²⁰ As a result, more than 700 Chinese state companies are doing business in Africa, carving out a significant market share not only in the highly competitive scramble for natural resources but also in sectors that Western corporations have either neglected or even abandoned altogether as being less profitable. China’s foreign direct investment in Africa represented \$900 million of the continent’s \$15 billion total in 2004.²¹

Propelled by a Sino–African trade that has grown a prodigious 700 percent in the last decade, the PRC is now the continent’s third most important trading partner, behind the United States and France and ahead of Britain. Although much of this trade is in low-cost consumer goods produced by state-owned enterprises—China has virtually cornered the African market for T-shirts, for example—a not inconsiderable volume is specifically targeted at evading quotas that the United States and the European Union have placed on clothing, textiles, and other goods imported from China. Under the provisions of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) signed by President Bill Clinton in 2000 and the amendments, collectively known as AGOA II and AGOA III, to expand and then extend the preferential access for imports from certain Sub-Saharan African states signed by President George W. Bush in 2002 and 2004, respectively, beneficiary countries have virtually unlimited access to American markets. Similar provisions with respect to European markets are contained in the European Union’s 2000 Cotonou Agreement with 49 African countries. Chinese firms established textile and agricultural products operations in a number of African states in order to avail themselves of highly favorable trading terms with the West. For example, the municipal government of Qingdao (more commonly known in the West as Tsingtao, home of the eponymous beer)

created the Mulungushi Industrial Park in Kabwe Town, Zambia, wherein several Chinese companies relocated. The press release put out on the occasion explicitly stated that the firms “pledged to make full use of [the] Africa Growth and Opportunity Act [to] improve the quality of garments being produced in Zambia, both for local consumption and export.”²² Subsequently, in an echo of the vertical integration that has been successfully employed in the hydrocarbon sector, Qingdao also invested in fertilizer and pesticide factories in Zambia as well as a cotton ginnery.

Chinese construction firms have aggressively sought large-scale public works and road construction projects in Africa, thanks in large part to what *China's Africa Policy* described as a pledge by the government “to vigorously encourage Chinese enterprises to participate in the building of infrastructure in African countries [and] scale up their contracts.”²³ The state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation alone has some 500 projects on the continent; the presence of its expatriate workers is so ubiquitous in some parts that, for example, Kenya's A109 highway, which leads from the capital of Nairobi to the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa, has been dubbed by locals as “China Road.” In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation, the sole operator in the country, has contracted with the private Shenzhen-based Huawei Technologies to construct its Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) wireless network (Huawei previously won contracts for its CDMA2000 WLL system in several other African countries, including Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda).

Not all of the public works projects undertaken by the government of the PRC and Chinese corporate enterprises have been begun for pecuniary gain. Recognizing far more astutely than most Western nations the importance of large prestige projects to regime legitimacy, Chinese support has been lent to a range of rather nonremunerative building contracts like foreign ministry buildings in Djibouti and

Uganda; houses of parliament in Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Mozambique; and soccer stadiums in the Central African Republic, Djibouti, and Mali.

Diplomatic Initiatives

Alongside—and, some might suggest, behind—the economic and commercial ventures has been a series of intensive diplomatic initiatives aimed first at isolating Taiwan and at achieving an increasingly broad range of global objectives. *China's Africa Policy* notes that

The founding of the People's Republic of China and the independence of African countries ushered in a new era in China-Africa relations. For over half a century, the two sides have enjoyed close political ties... The one-China principle is the political foundation for the establishment and development of China's relations with African countries and regional organizations. The Chinese Government appreciates that the overwhelming majority of African countries abide by the one-China principle, refuse to have official relations with Taiwan and support China's great cause of unification. China stands ready to establish and develop state-to-state relations with countries that have not yet established diplomatic ties with China on the basis of the one-China principle.

Currently the PRC has diplomatic relations with 48 of Africa's states, the most recent being Senegal, which resumed ties in October 2005 after a decade-long hiatus during which the West African nation had dealings with Taiwan. Two years earlier, in December 2003, China deployed a contingent of 600 peacekeepers to the United Nations Mission in Liberia

(UNMIL), the first instance of PRC participation in a UN military operation (since then Chinese soldiers have also joined the peace-keeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo). Not so coincidentally, the move took place as the transitional Liberian government switched its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Increasingly the PRC's adroit diplomacy has forced Taiwan's leaders to concentrate even greater resources to retain the paltry handful of small African states that continue to recognize it (Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Malawi, São Tomé, and Príncipe).²⁴

In exchange for their diplomatic support, China has provided a limited but still not inconsiderable amount of development assistance to African countries. Here, as in many other areas, Beijing's policies are focused on long-term dividends rather than short-term gains. Since Bandung, some 6,000 African students have studied in Chinese universities on PRC government scholarships administered by the African Human Resources Development Fund, and Beijing recently promised to more than double that number over the next few years. Typically students spend two years learning Chinese before pursuing training in engineering and other technical disciplines. Not only does this program enhance the PRC's image in many countries, but its alumni help build up the country's support among the elites whose ranks they join on returning home from their studies. More directly China has recently inaugurated a three-month, all-expenses-paid course for African diplomats at the Foreign Affairs University in Beijing.²⁵

Chinese medical, agricultural, and engineering teams have been working in China for decades. Currently about one thousand physicians are working throughout the continent, the successors of the more than 15,000 who have worked in some 47 African countries since 1963. In the 1980s China began to provide nuclear technology to Algeria, including a 15-megawatt reactor at El Salem that became fully operational in 1993. One veteran analyst

has noted: "Beijing prefers technical support over financial aid to African countries for obvious reasons. Financial aid stretches resources and diverts capital from significant needs at home, therefore investments in trade and projects that have a chance at providing returns are more popular than direct aid and loan programs."²⁶

This preference does not preclude the PRC's use of direct financial assistance as a tool to advance its larger foreign policy interests. In fact, it often uses the same money twice, so to speak. The no- or low-interest credit that it makes available to African countries not only encourages economic ties but also builds considerable goodwill and political support. Beijing has been effective at leveraging those same loans a second time, for example, by announcing at the 2003 FOCAC meeting that it was forgiving some \$1.27 billion in debt owed by 31 African nations. Debt forgiveness earns China significant political capital among African countries, ensuring their support at the United Nations and other international organizations by acknowledging an issue of great importance to many African leaders. Even though the amount being written off is dwarfed by comparison with the loans held by multilateral institutions and Western nations, the cancellation puts China in a diplomatically and symbolically more favorable position vis-à-vis the West that is perceived as not having moved as dramatically.

Building Strategic Partnerships

Although China's Africa policy has always sought immediate returns—the recent government paper acknowledges that "China has provided assistance to the best of its ability to African countries, while African countries have also rendered strong support to China on many occasions"²⁷—its true objectives are also

far-sighted. Perhaps the overriding preoccupation of China's foreign policy on a grand strategic level is America's status as the postcold-war world's leading political, economic, and military power. Even before the advent of the George W. Bush administration, which came into office voicing concern about the challenge that the PRC posed to America in the new century and whose latest iteration of the *National Security Strategy* pronounced China's transition "incomplete"²⁸ and criticized its "old ways of thinking and acting,"²⁹ in the postcold-war period Washington has taken or threatened to take action on a host of issues ranging from human rights to trade access to the status of Taiwan that at least by its lights adversely affected Beijing. Thus the PRC has increasingly predicated its pursuit of a "peaceful rise" on a vision of "democracy in international relations" for which it requires allies with whom to make common cause in international organizations and other multilateral settings.

In this context, the PRC's focus on Sino-African relations makes strategic sense. African countries potentially make up the largest single bloc in any international organization in which they participate. Furthermore, both the geographic distance and the development gap between them prevent China's geopolitical and economic interests from clashing with those of African states in the way that, Beijing's best efforts notwithstanding, they are bound to collide at some point with those of its Eurasian neighbors. In his speech at the opening of the second FOCAC ministerial meeting in Addis Ababa in December 2003, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao essentially—and explicitly—offered his African counterparts a deal.

China and Africa share the same goal and interests in promoting democratization of international relations. We support Africa's position on multilateralism. The international community should intensify consultation, work to maintain a diversified world,

and facilitate mutual exchanges and emulation among different civilizations and modes of development. We stand for the observance of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and the safeguarding of the authority of the UN and its leading role in handling major international issues. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China will always stand side by side with developing countries in Africa and other parts of the world and support their legitimate requests and reasonable propositions.³⁰

Even before Wen made his partnership offer to the Africans, their votes, procured relatively inexpensively, had proved their worth to China. Not only have the votes cast by African states routinely killed resolutions at the UN Commission on Human Rights that would have been embarrassing or at least inconvenient for the PRC, but Africa's delegates to the International Olympic Committee put Beijing's bid for the 2008 summer games over the top after it had narrowly lost the 2000 games to Sydney. Over the long term, positioning itself at the head of a bloc of African and other developing countries will be a "force multiplier" of the heft the PRC already wields from its permanent seat on the Security Council.

The burgeoning Sino-African strategic partnership is reinforced by increasing military cooperation—which also has the added benefit of helping ensure the security of China's investments in the continent's natural resources and infrastructure. As early as 2001, a study published in the *Armed Forces Journal* found that "from the varied evidence of Chinese arms transfers, oil concessions, and military delegations in Africa, it is apparent that China has dramatically increased its military business dealings in Africa."³¹ Since then alone China has sold Sudan 12 F-7 Shenyang fighters (the Chinese version of the Russian MiG-21) and

Zimbabwe 12 FC-1 multipurpose fighters as well as lighter arms to at least a dozen other African countries. Recently Nigeria, tired of the slow pace of assistance from the United States to protect its oil-rich Niger Delta from a growing insurgency, placed an order with China for dozens of patrol boats. Some countries that cannot afford to make purchases, such as Sierra Leone, which received a naval patrol vessel for its rich fisheries, have even received donations. Western countries still account for the majority of arms transfers to Africa, and according to a RAND Corporation report,³² Chinese exports are more strongly subject to control by the state that uses them as a foreign policy tool, which has gained China important African allies for its overall political goals.

What's in It for Africa?

The PRC's courtship of Africa has not gone unrequited. Africa's interests, both state and private, have found themselves complementary to those of China. Premier Wen assured the 2003 China–Africa Cooperation summiters in Addis Ababa that Chinese assistance comes “with the deepest sincerity and without any political conditionalities,”³³ a pledge reiterated by President Hu Jintao the following year when, during his state visit to Gabon, the Chinese head of state declared that the PRC's relations with the continent would be “free of political conditionality and serving the interest of Africa and China.”³⁴ It was not surprising that such words found particular resonance with the likes of Hu's host, Gabon's El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, who enjoys the dubious distinction of being Africa's longest serving head of state, having spent almost four decades in power during which time he made more state visits to China (nine) than any other world leader.³⁵

Perhaps the most well-known beneficiary of Beijing's “don't ask, don't tell” position has been

Sudan. With its ownership of 13 of the 15 largest companies and purchase of more than 50 percent of the crude oil, China is both the largest foreign direct investor in and the largest customer of the country's emergent petroleum production. As French journalist Jean-Christophe Servant observed: “The cynicism of the government in Beijing became apparent in September 2004, when the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1564, announcing an embargo on arms sales to Sudan. China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, used the massacres in Darfur as a pretext for threatening to veto the resolution, before finally abstaining. The United States-proposed resolution had already been significantly watered down.”³⁶ To be sure, it is not just governments that have found China's policies in Africa convenient. Allegations have been made from groups as disparate as the humanitarian agency Catholic Relief Services and the neoconservative Institute for the Analysis of Global Security about corrupt business practices by Chinese companies working in some African countries.³⁷

On the other hand, African nations have benefited in a number of ways from their links with China. On the economic plane alone, China's growth has sustained a global boom in the prices of the natural resources that are Africa's primary export. Hard currency earnings on a range of commodities have risen significantly because Chinese demand has exercised upward pressure on prices. Although Chinese investment in Africa has focused primarily on the PRC's own national priorities, in a part of the world that is starved for capital, almost anyone willing to invest is welcome. Furthermore, although Western media have focused on the competition—primarily for natural resources—among American and European firms and their Chinese counterparts, the fact is that a considerable amount of the activity of Chinese firms is found in labor-intensive undertakings like road construction and agriculture that, although vital for Africa's

future, attract little interest from either Western agencies or investors. Consequently, Chinese investments in these neglected sectors result in a “win-win” scenario: The firms themselves profit while the infrastructure improvements redound to benefit the overall development of the African countries themselves.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that there are many Africans who sincerely view China as a model for emulation. They draw parallels not only between China's humiliation at the hands of Western powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their own experience of colonialism but also Maoist China's economic catastrophes and their disastrous postindependence pursuit of “African socialism.” Consequently, irrespective of whether many—or even any—of the particulars of its economic expansion can or should be replicated elsewhere, China's current rise to great power status, powered by its economic expansion, stands out as an example to many African leaders, as does the Chinese Communist party's ability to adapt to changing global conditions without sacrificing regime stability.

Implications for U.S. Interests

The 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States* declares that “Africa holds growing geo-strategic importance and is a high priority of this Administration”³⁸—as it should be for a region that supplies America with 16 percent of its petroleum needs and which, according to a report prepared for the National Intelligence Council, will be providing more than one-quarter of its oil imports by 2015, thus surpassing the total volume of oil imports from the Middle East within a decade, to cite just one reason.³⁹ Consequently, the growing influence of any major actor on the continent bears careful watching by both policymakers and

other observers: Although China's increasing engagement in Africa does not necessarily represent a direct threat to America's national interests, it does alter the strategic calculus in at least four significant ways.

First, China and many Chinese firms enjoy a competitive edge over their Western homologues. Because most of the Chinese companies investing in Africa are at least partially state owned, their managers often make decisions with an eye on less tangible long-term objectives rather than more measurable financial profits—and, even then, the long-term objectives may be those of the Chinese nation rather than those of a particular business entity. Although a business model that sacrifices short-term gains for long-term advantage is certainly economically comprehensible to Western companies, it is often not practicable to their directors who are subject to shareholder pressures to produce returns on investments. In addition, although donor governments may offer incentives for recipient states in Africa to do business with national firms, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—to which the PRC does not belong—discourages the direct linkage of foreign aid with private or semipublic commercial ventures.

Second, Beijing's willingness to divorce political conditionality from economic engagements throws a lifeline to odious regimes that might have otherwise collapsed under Western pressure. Zimbabwe is a case in point. If it were not bad enough that its takeover of the extensive agricultural plots owned largely by white commercial farmers has reduced southern Africa's breadbasket to its basket case in less than half a decade, the Mugabe regime has also ruthlessly ridden roughshod over the country's civil liberties and, more recently, undertook Operation Murambatsvina (“clear the filth”) that displaced hundreds of thousands of people.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Chinese investments have continued to flow into the country, including a joint coal venture, a glass factory,

a ferrochrome smelting plant, a telephone assembly facility, and beef production in vast tracts, some of which were, until their owners were driven out by Mugabe's "war veterans" earlier this decade, under grain cultivation. The aging Zimbabwean despot, a recipient of Beijing's largesse for nearly 40 years, no doubt counts on his Chinese patrons to exercise their Security Council veto against any meaningful UN action against him. In any event, the West no longer enjoys the exclusive franchise and unfettered freedom of action in Africa that some former colonial powers took for granted.⁴¹

Third, even where it does not directly abet odious regimes, the PRC's emergence as a major player in Africa has occasionally stymied the efforts of other international actors to promote transparency and good governance on the continent. "Business is business," Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong bluntly told a *New York Times* interviewer. "We try to separate politics from business. . . . You have tried to impose a market economy and multiparty democracy on these countries, which are not ready for it. We are also against embargos, which you have tried to use against us."⁴² The ultimate consequence of this *laissez-faire* approach is that the leverage of those seeking to promote reforms in Africa has been considerably weakened: too much pressure and they now run the risk that the objects of their attention, especially if they are well endowed with natural resources, will simply turn to an alternative partner.

Fourth, China's ramped up engagement has altered the balance of military forces on the continent. The PRC now has approximately 1,500 military personnel serving with UN peacekeeping forces in Africa. There are also an estimated 4,000–5,000 Chinese troops who, under cover of being "contractors," guard hydrocarbon facilities in southern Sudan. China's partners have also increased their military capacities. For example, it is estimated that Sudan currently plows 80 percent of its \$500 million annual oil revenues into weapons

purchases. With Beijing's assistance, Khartoum has also built three weapons factories of its own—useful things to have when one falls under a UN weapons embargo. Furthermore, several Chinese firms, purportedly acting without government authorization, have been implicated in trafficking rocket propelled grenade launchers and other arms to rebels and mercenaries involved in low-intensity conflicts in places like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire.

Although it would be a mistake—to say nothing of a needless and dangerous escalation of tensions—to interpret these challenges to mean that the PRC must be considered America's adversary, the United States must recognize that China's economic prosperity requires it to seek both natural resources and markets and, in turn, to secure them through increased diplomatic action in places like Africa that offer prospects of both. These quests have changed and will continue to affect the economic, political, and strategic dynamics of the Africa continent where America will necessarily find itself increasingly engaged in the twenty-first century.

The answer, however, is not resentment and hostility but creative engagement in both Africa and China—a visit to Beijing in November 2005 by United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer marked a significant first step toward the latter. Although an unfounded irenic worldview would ill serve America's national interests, an uncritical hermeneutic of suspicion would do so likewise. It should be noted, for example, that for all of its investments—to say nothing of its political reservations about precedents that could be invoked against it—the PRC has been careful to abstain rather than veto UN Security Council actions against the Sudanese government, including the referral of the human rights violations in Darfur to the International Criminal Court. In short, there are at least some indications that Beijing can be sufficiently flexible if Washington is willing to reciprocate.

With respect to African states, the United States needs to continue to develop a comprehensive, proactive strategy in place of what heretofore has been its *ad hoc*, reactive approach. Committed and consistent engagement even of what former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen has termed “nonvital interests”⁴³ will do more to promote American interests and advance its influence than ill-counseled attempts to contain Chinese commercial and diplomatic forays. Washington, which is officially committed to diversifying its energy supplies, can also do more to encourage American firms, with their extraordinary access to capital and technology, to invest in developing Africa’s hydrocarbon as well as other natural resources.

Conclusion

For the international community in general but especially for the United States, the PRC’s Africa strategy represents both a challenge and an opportunity. There are plenty of possible conflicts. America may come to view China as a rival in a zero-sum competition for material resources and political spheres of influence in Africa, whereas Beijing—always wary of outside involvement in the internal affairs of other countries—may interpret Washington’s promotion of democracy and good governance on the continent as a play for hegemony that will cut off access to the resources and markets it needs to continue its “peaceful rise” to great power status. On the other hand, there are also common interests that could potentially outweigh conflicts. As the PRC grows more confident of its place on the world stage, it is doubtful that it will want to be viewed as the bailer of choice for Africa’s tyrants. For its part, with its forces stretched to unprecedented limits by its multiple commitments and its citizenry increasingly wary of entanglements in foreign conflicts, the United States will need partners who can exercise leverage with some of these regimes.

Furthermore, there may be ways, as yet unexplored, in which the economic and diplomatic investments of both countries in Africa would prove to be complementary to each other as well as beneficial to Africans. In either case, as they increasingly view Africa—and each other—strategically, scholars, opinion leaders, and policymakers in both Washington and Beijing would do well to exercise prudence as well as initiative, heeding the wisdom of an ancient Chinese proverb: “If you want to know your future, look into your present actions.”

About the Author

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Notes

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2. See J. Peter Pham, “Beijing’s Great Game: Understanding Chinese Strategy in Central Eurasia,” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 28, no. 1 (February 2006): 53–67.

3. See *China’s African Policy* (Beijing, 2006). The text of the document is available in English translation on the Web site of the International Department of the Central Committee

of the Communist party of China, available at <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/>.

4. See, *inter alia*, Chris Melville and Olly Owen, *China and Africa: A New Era of "South-South Cooperation"* (London, 2005), available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-G8/south_2658.jsp (last accessed March 1, 2006); and Esther Pan, *China, Africa, and Oil* (New York, 2006), available at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9557/> (last accessed March 1, 2006).

5. Basil Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered* (London, 1959), 158.

6. See Gao Jinyuan, "China and Africa: The Development of Relations Over Many Centuries," *African Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 331 (April 1984): 241–250.

7. See Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1402–1433* (New York, 1994).

8. The principles were first floated in an interview given by Premier Zhou Enlai to a visiting Indian delegate. See *Dao Nian Zhou Enlai* (Beijing, 1986): 493.

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10. See Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956; Jackson, Miss., 1994).

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12. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York, 2005): 274.

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14. *Ibid.*

15. *China's African Policy*, op. cit.

16. See Erica Downs, "The Chinese Energy Security Debate," *China Quarterly*, no. 177 (March 2004): 21–41.

17. See Daniel Yergin, "Ensuring Energy Security," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 69–82.

18. Lester R. Brown, "Who Will Feed China?" in *China: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. James D. Torr (San Diego, 2001): 24.

19. *China's African Policy*, op. cit.

20. *Ibid.*

21. See Jean-Christophe Servant, "La Chine à l'assaut du marché africain," *Le monde diplomatique* (May 2005): 6–7.

22. "Zambia, China Sign Four Deals," *Daily Mail* (September 24, 2003), available at http://www.zamtel.zm/mainnews13_11_2003.html (last accessed March 1, 2006).

23. *China's African Policy*, op. cit.

24. See Ian Taylor, "Taiwan's Foreign Policy and Africa: The Limitations of Dollar Diplomacy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 11, no. 30 (2002): 125–140.

25. See Howard W. French, "China Wages Classroom Struggle to Win Friends in Africa," *The New York Times* (November 20, 2005): A4.

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27. *China's African Policy*, op. cit.

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30. Wen Jiabao, "Speech at Opening Ceremony of China-Africa Cooperation Forum" (December 16, 2003), available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/82534.htm> (last accessed March 1, 2006).

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32. See Daniel L. Byman and Roger Cliff, *China's Arms Sales: Motivations and Implications* (Santa Monica, 1999).

33. Wen Jiabao, op. cit.

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36. Jean-Christophe Servant, *op. cit.*

37. See, *inter alia*, Ian Gary and Terry Lynn Karl, *Bottom of the Barrel: Africa's Oil Boom and the Poor* (Baltimore, 2003).

38. *National Security Strategy*, *op. cit.*, 37.

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with Nongovernmental Experts (Washington, 2000): 73.

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