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MEMORANDUM

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**FROM:** MICHAEL BRODO

**SUBJECT:** CHINA'S INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICA OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS

**DATE:** OCTOBER 10, 2019

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**Summary:**

Concurrent with China's rapid economic growth over the past two decades has been China's increasingly deep interest, investment, and relationship with the African continent. China has engaged in considerable trade with African countries and heavily financed development projects. China's expanding geopolitical influence through the media, military involvement, and diplomatic engagement has introduced ubiquitous new realities on the continent, which the United States should investigate and address more actively. As economic and political ties have deepened between China and Africa, some in the West have become skeptical of China's intentions and whether negative impacts will arise from Chinese engagement with Africa. On the contrary, many African governments and citizens openly welcome China's involvement, a major reason being China's ability to address the infrastructure gap. However, this situation is not purely dichotomous and thus a more nuanced approach is required to assess the potential outcomes for African countries and the United States.

**Major topics:**

**Africa: The Next Frontier of Globalization**

China's rise and engagement with Africa is occurring in the context of a rising and globalizing African continent. Africa is ready and eager to join the world's economic order due to its endowment of natural resources, rapidly growing population, and strong economic growth. Africa contains more than 30% of the world's hydrocarbon reserves and minerals, and possesses 22 of the 33 mineral commodities that the US deems critical to economy and defense.<sup>1</sup> The presence of a variety of natural resources on the continent aligns with China's growing need for imports to support a growing industrial sector (specifically energy imports), thus making Africa's natural resources a major target for Chinese interests. Additionally, Africa is experiencing the world's biggest population explosion, driving the potential for robust economies. The current population of 1.2 billion people has significant unfulfilled demand, which will only increase with population growth (projected 1.68 billion by 2030) and rising incomes/economic growth.<sup>2</sup> Young people are also especially relevant, given that 60% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is under 25 and 15-20 million young people will enter the workforce each year for the next decade.<sup>3</sup> The recent rapid economic growth on the continent (4.6% GDP growth 2000-2016) means that investment and engagement can lead to significant

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/africa/commentary/prosper-africa-promises-long-overdue-change-us-approach-continent>

<sup>2</sup> *Africa's Business Revolution: How to Succeed in the World's Next Big Growth Market*: Leke, Chironga, Desvaux

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-prepared-china-be-africas-main-business-partner>

benefits for all involved parties.<sup>4 5 6</sup> In essence, Africa is the region with the most unfilled potential, making it increasingly attractive to international actors, such as China.<sup>7</sup>

## China's Belt and Road Initiative

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious development project to connect China with Eurasia and Africa through land and maritime networks with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth.<sup>8</sup> According to Brookings fellow David Dollar, the goal of the initiative is to “more efficiently utilize excess savings and construction capacity, expand trade, consolidate economic and diplomatic relations with participating countries, and diversify China’s import of energy and other resources through economic corridors that circumvent routes that are controlled by the U.S. and its allies.”<sup>9</sup> While the Belt and Road Initiative is not solely focused on Africa, its impact on the region is arguably more significant than in Europe and Asia due to the aforementioned reasons that make Africa an increasingly relevant region in the global system. Many developed countries have criticized the initiative for lacking transparency, exporting China’s authoritarian governance model and expanding Chinese soft power, potentially creating debt crises in African countries, and displaying inadequate environmental and social safeguards (essentially arguing that China only seeks to benefit itself). As of September 2019, 39 out of 54 African states have signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative, and economic results have been heterogenous. Some countries have faced consequent debt sustainability problems, while others have successfully integrated loans into sound macroeconomic programs and policies.<sup>10</sup> A trillion-dollar plan that is said to make China a dominant economic player on the continent already has statistics to show for its engagement.<sup>11</sup> More than 3,000 Chinese infrastructure projects are currently underway and approximately 10,000 Chinese companies are doing business across the continent.<sup>1213</sup> However, nearly 75% of Chinese investments have gone to only 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, of which only one (South Africa) is classified as free, highlighting the political intentions and impacts of Chinese economic engagement.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Africa demonstrates an increasingly high level of engagement that extends beyond purely economic purposes. China is not just investing in trade and infrastructure, but rather investing in long-term relationships with African countries that require further attention and assessment.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/africa-china-united-states-foreign-policy-economic-development/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/trends/Population2030.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.odi.org/events/4592-africas-economic-growth-new-global-context>

<sup>7</sup> *Africa's Business Revolution: How to Succeed in the World's Next Big Growth Market*: Leke, Chironga, Desvaux

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/understanding-chinas-belt-and-road-infrastructure-projects-in-africa/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/understanding-chinas-belt-and-road-infrastructure-projects-in-africa/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/09/we-cant-afford-to-forget-africa/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/africa-china-united-states-foreign-policy-economic-development/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-12-21/trumps-africa-policy-destined-failure>

<sup>14</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-12-21/trumps-africa-policy-destined-failure>

## Economic Engagement

Over the past 20 years, China and Africa have forged close economic ties. This economic engagement occurs through two main channels: trade and finance (mostly lending).<sup>16</sup>

International trade between China and Africa has significantly increased (40-fold) over the past two decades.<sup>17</sup> In 2009, China overtook the United States as the largest trading partner with Africa.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Chinese trade with Africa has seen even further increases; trade figures went from \$300 billion in 2015 to \$500 billion by the end of 2018.<sup>19</sup> For the most part, African countries import large quantities of consumer and light-manufactured goods, machinery, and electronics, while China mostly buys minerals and metals since China cannot domestically procure enough natural resources to meet its expanding industrial needs. The relationship between African natural resources and China will be further explored in a later section.<sup>20</sup> In June 2019, the first China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo was held, resulting in a total of \$20.8 billion in new trade deals.<sup>21</sup>

Along with increased trade, Chinese financial engagement into Africa has dramatically increased over the same time period. Chinese intentions are not entirely clear, with some claiming that China is trying to benefit economically while mutually benefiting African countries, while others emphasize the Chinese goal of locking African countries into long-term political and diplomatic relationships to further their own interests. Whatever the intentions, China is benefitting both economically and politically, and thus financial engagement outcomes deserve sufficient attention.<sup>22</sup>

Chinese financial engagement can be divided into three major categories: loans, aid, and foreign direct investment (FDI), the latter of the three coming from Chinese firms instead of the state, although the reality of the Chinese governance structure demonstrates that Chinese firms are intrinsically connected to the state.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, loans have been considerably higher than the other two categories. For example, in 2017, Chinese loans to Africa totaled \$11 billion, aid totaled \$2.45 billion, and FDI flows totaled \$4.1 billion.<sup>24 25 26</sup> Due to the relatively low amounts of aid and FDI, this report will focus on lending.

The China-Africa Research initiative has presented three key findings regarding Chinese loans to Africa. From 2000 to 2017, the Chinese government, banks, and contractors (note: these entities are either directly owned or heavily influenced by the Chinese government) extended \$143 billion in loans to African governments and state-owned enterprises (FDI

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/foresight-africa-top-priorities-for-the-continent-in-2018/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/foresight-africa-top-priorities-for-the-continent-in-2018/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-12-21/trumps-africa-policy-destined-failure>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/africa-china-united-states-foreign-policy-economic-development/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/1605497/belt-and-road-africa-mineral-rich-nations-export-mostly-to-china/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://northafricapost.com/32287-first-china-africa-economic-trade-expo-closes-with-20-8-billion-deals.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/panosmourdukoutas/2019/09/21/why-is-china-building-africa/#5a50728c502c>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.sais-cari.org/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.sais-cari.org/data>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.sais-cari.org/chinese-investment-in-africa>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-foreign-aid-to-africa>

would go to private firms). Angola is the top recipient of Chinese loans with \$42.8 billion in the same 17-year time period, which will be relevant for the later discussion on extractive industries. Thirdly, even Chinese loan finance is varied. The majority of loans are not concessional in nature. Because of this and the relatively low amount of aid, China is not Africa's largest donor; the United States is.<sup>27</sup>

The majority of Chinese financial engagement consists of export credits and loans. Part of the attractiveness of these loans is that they are offered at subsidized and relatively low interest rates.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, these types of investments are fast, flexible, and largely without conditions, often making Chinese investments more popular for African countries than more traditional aid sources.<sup>29</sup> The “unconditional aid” means that there are no required changes in governance structure or requirements of sound economic policies (e.g. promoting efficiency or democratic institutions) that traditional donors (such as international institutions or OECD countries) attach to aid. Countries that struggle with reducing corruption and increasing accountability exemplify the attraction to this form of aid, which some argue may prevent the improvement of government quality in these countries. However, China does require some conditions in terms of pro-China rhetoric and foreign policy, which will be discussed later.<sup>30</sup>

A centerpiece of Chinese economic engagement in Africa is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). First held in 2000, this forum meets every three years and is a major event for all parties as it outlines the status and future initiatives of Chinese economic engagement on the continent.<sup>31</sup> The latest meeting in 2018 was the biggest to date in terms of attendance, with 51 African leaders attending in Beijing.<sup>32</sup> At the 2018 meeting, China committed \$60 billion in aid and loans, marking the first meeting that did not increase financial commitments from the previous one. Additionally, only a small portion of the \$60 billion qualifies as official development aid.<sup>33</sup>

Potential debt of African countries as a result of Chinese lending is a potential concern, though the situation is nuanced. Some in the West, including the Trump administration, have accused China of engaging in debt trap diplomacy: giving predatory loans aimed at trapping countries in debt in order to force dependence and coerce influence.<sup>34</sup> As of 2015, Chinese loans accounted for a third of new debt being taken on by African governments.<sup>35</sup> Though China is not entirely responsible for the recent increases in debt of African countries, the addition of Chinese loans makes the debt problems larger. Public debt on the continent is rising for a variety of reasons, such as exchange rate depreciation due to falling commodity

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.sais-cari.org/research-chinese-loans-to-africa>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/china-investment-africa-infrastructure-development.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/27/china-is-offering-no-strings-attached-aid-to-africa-heres-what-that-means/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/world/africa/china-loans-africa-usa.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

prices and the reduction in debt relief from international institutions.<sup>36</sup> Researchers at the China-Africa Research Initiative back this assessment, stating “we find that Chinese loans are not currently a major contributor to debt distress in Africa.”<sup>37</sup>

According to the China-Africa Research Initiative, the majority of Chinese loans go toward infrastructure projects.<sup>38</sup> Further, Deloitte states that China is the biggest single non-African financier of Africa’s infrastructure. China finances one in five infrastructure projects and constructs one in three on the continent, and to date has participated in over 200 African infrastructure projects. The majority of these infrastructure projects are related to transport/shipping/ports, and the majority of the funding comes from the state-owned China Exim Bank (67%) and China Development Bank (13%). China is likely investing in infrastructure because it is a priority in Africa; the infrastructure gap remains a constant obstacle to growth on the continent, and China is significantly contributing to reducing it. Infrastructure investment also allows for further investment; for example, it lowers transactions costs and facilitates trade in goods and services. In the end, Chinese infrastructure investment in Africa has the potential to be positive, and thus assessment of these investments must not discount this.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to infrastructure, a large amount of Chinese economic engagement involves the extractive industries (e.g. importing African natural resources). Some of the largest African exporters to China are resource rich nations. For example, Angola and South Sudan export crude petroleum (in 2017, South Sudan exported 95% of its crude petroleum to China), Eritrea exports zinc and copper ore, the DRC exports cobalt, and Sierra Leone exports iron and titanium.<sup>40</sup> While China imports natural resources through trade, natural resources are also inherently tied to Chinese loans and investments. Using what is dubbed the “Angola model of lending,” China also allows African countries to use natural resources as collateral for instances such as infrastructure development lending from the China Exim bank, making it a win-win situation for the Chinese. This combination of natural resource collateral and lending makes Chinese economic engagement competitive because it does not require more traditional financial guarantees from African countries. Additionally, Chinese loans can also be (and often are) repaid by shipping Africa’s oil and minerals to China in order to support its growing demand and industrial sector.<sup>41</sup>

Another major aspect of Chinese investment is the telecoms, internet, and television industry. One major player in Africa is the Chinese-owned company Huawei. Huawei has established 40 third-generation telecom networks in 30 African countries and built 70% of Africa’s 4G

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/04/26/figures-of-the-week-africas-changing-debt-structure/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5652847de4b033f56d2bdc29/t/5c467754898583fc9a99131f/1548121941093/Briefing+Paper+1+-+August+2018+-+Final.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5652847de4b033f56d2bdc29/t/5c467754898583fc9a99131f/1548121941093/Briefing+Paper+1+-+August+2018+-+Final.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/china-investment-africa-infrastructure-development.html>

<sup>40</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/1605497/belt-and-road-africa-mineral-rich-nations-export-mostly-to-china/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/china-investment-africa-infrastructure-development.html>

networks.<sup>42 43</sup> Huawei has been a major concern for the US and Western countries due to the belief that the Chinese government uses Huawei to spy on other governments and their citizens to improve Chinese intelligence gathering. However, recent reports have also demonstrated that Huawei technicians helped African governments spy on their own political opponents, threatening democratic development.<sup>44</sup> These concerns are largely overshadowed in Africa due to the greater need for telecom infrastructure and internet access. Additionally, many Africans think that the US may have a vested interest in peddling the anti-Huawei argument, leading many Africans to discount the claims and thus embrace their direct benefits from Huawei's involvement.<sup>45</sup> In addition to telecoms and internet infrastructure/services, Chinese firms manufacture a large portion of the cell phones sold in Africa, such as the company Tecno Mobile. These phones are attractive due to their wide availability and low costs.<sup>46</sup> Chinese firms have also increased their market share in television in terms of both content and infrastructure. For example, the China Global Television Network (which broadcasts Chinese state television programs) is offered nearly everywhere, and the China-based television provider StarTimes is becoming increasingly popular due to its affordability.<sup>47</sup> In terms of internet provisioning, the status of Chinese companies as the only viable providers of internet connectivity can give China leverage over African governments that strive to increase internet access for their citizens.<sup>48</sup>

Chinese investments and loans are not inherently positive or negative in terms of their impacts on African countries and their development. If loans are used properly, they could help the continent build necessary power and road infrastructure, and also spur economic growth.<sup>49</sup> For this reason, many African leaders welcome the competition between donors since in some ways the competition provides African countries with more agency through choosing the options best suited for their needs.<sup>50</sup> However, if African countries use Chinese financing as a patch for poor governance and irresponsible fiscal policies, they could incur serious problems, especially if China continues to offer loans even with the awareness of their potential negative impacts.<sup>51</sup> Further, the lack of good governance conditions means that the benefits of the loans can become more easily compromised.<sup>52</sup> Another negative consequence for African countries is the pro-China foreign policy conditions attached to the loans. China requires all African state beneficiaries to recognize a one-China policy and disavow Taiwan.<sup>53</sup> China is also using these loans to leverage favorable votes at the UN on issues such as ignoring its problematic human rights record (e.g. treatment of political

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<sup>42</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/in-africa-china-is-the-news/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/19/for-africa-chinese-built-internet-is-better-than-no-internet-at-all/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-technicians-helped-african-governments-spy-on-political-opponents-11565793017>

<sup>45</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/19/for-africa-chinese-built-internet-is-better-than-no-internet-at-all/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/in-africa-china-is-the-news/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/in-africa-china-is-the-news/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/19/for-africa-chinese-built-internet-is-better-than-no-internet-at-all/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/27/china-is-offering-no-strings-attached-aid-to-africa-heres-what-that-means/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/27/china-is-offering-no-strings-attached-aid-to-africa-heres-what-that-means/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>



prisoners and Uighur Muslims) and supporting its claim over the South China Sea.<sup>54</sup> These political conditions are just one example of China's expanding geopolitical influence on the continent, which impacts both African countries and the interests of the United States.

## Expanding Geopolitical Influence

China's expanding geopolitical influence on the continent is no accident. The aforementioned increase in economic engagement is no doubt partially (or perhaps entirely) driven by China's self-interest to establish its political dominance in a region that is becoming increasingly relevant in international relations. While the economic engagement may strive to help African countries develop, there is no doubt that China is spreading both soft and hard power as a result of increased involvement in Africa.

While Chinese penetration into African media was briefly addressed with regard to telecoms/internet/television infrastructure and service provision, the endeavor extends far beyond that realm. This penetration is not just a commercial endeavor, but a significant instrument of state policy designed to spread soft power, boost China's image, and manipulate African media sources to China's advantage. Thus, by dominating and controlling how media is delivered, China and Chinese companies are acting as the window to the world for millions of Africans, shaping their views into those supportive of and positive toward China.<sup>55</sup> In fact, the timing of this media penetration aligns with the other aforementioned forms of Chinese engagement on the continent. In 1999, China began investing millions of dollars into African media in order to combat negative perceptions of China portrayed in Western media, and to attempt to promote the country's image on the continent. This engagement steadily increased and involved bulking up Chinese state media presence, supporting privately owned Chinese media, purchasing stakes in private African media, and organizing sponsored trips to China for African newsrooms (which inevitably educated African media personnel through a pro-China and pro-authoritarian lens).

To date, private African companies have been the most effective in forwarding the interests of the Chinese state. China wields significant influence since financially struggling African newsrooms are dependent on Chinese investment. In addition to promoting China's image through this indirect form of coercion, Chinese media also covers up African corruption and fiscal recklessness, potentially to allow for more Chinese loans and perhaps dependency. Thus, many African leaders enjoy the benefits that stem from Chinese media portraying Africa more positively because African citizens are kept more ignorant of corruption and governance problems. In some cases, this pro-China and romanticized image of African countries is concocted more directly through media censorship. African media companies that are bankrolled by Chinese money often inherit strict and non-negotiable censorship policies to cover up news that would harm the positive and romanticized perception of China. One notable example of censorship is preventing commentary and reporting on the unethical treatment of Uighur Muslims in China. This practice also has more far reaching effects in that it promotes the authoritarian Chinese model of censorship that African governments may

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/panosmourdukoutas/2019/09/21/why-is-china-building-africa/#5a50728c502c>

<sup>55</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/in-africa-china-is-the-news/>

later use to their own benefit, reversing progress in accountability and democratic governance.

While China's projection of soft power on the continent has been progressing for two decades, projections of hard power have manifested themselves more recently with increasing military involvement. At first, China's involvement with military affairs on the continent was primarily economic. For example, in 2015 President Xi Jinping pledged to provide \$100 million of free military assistance to the African Union through 2020 to support the establishment of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis.<sup>56</sup> However, in 2017, China built its first military base on the continent. This naval base in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa is located in the African country with the largest US military presence and lies in close proximity to US naval base Camp Lemonnier. Camp Lemonnier is the only permanent US military base in Africa, and one that is crucial to counterterrorism operations. This Chinese base has badly crowded US operations in the area, and exemplifies the growing competition for military presence in Africa.<sup>57 58</sup> The creation of this Chinese base stems from Chinese influence driven by financial engagement; between 2017-2018, Djibouti borrowed \$1.4 billion from China (3/4 of Djibouti's total GDP) and thus China leveraged this money (by asking to be paid in cash) to build this base.<sup>59</sup> Aside from the base construction, China has also increased sales of Chinese weapons to African countries, increased their role in UN Peacekeeping missions on the continent, and expanded the size and role of the PLA Navy (including more port calls) in Africa.<sup>60 61</sup> In 2018, the first ever China-Africa Defense and Security Forum engaged top officials from 50 African countries who spent two weeks touring military facilities in China and discussing security partnerships with their Chinese counterparts.<sup>62</sup> This showcase of technical capabilities and promotion of interaction with Chinese military personnel demonstrates to visiting African leaders that China is a serious security partner.<sup>63</sup> China's military involvement and presence on the continent is likely to continue increasing; one potential increase would be providing training for policy and military units to interested African countries and the African Union.<sup>64</sup>

## Diplomatic Engagement

In order to facilitate its increased economic involvement and geopolitical influence, China has made significant progress in enhancing diplomatic engagement. These investments in people-to-people relations and sustained diplomatic outreach help China assert its position on the continent, partially in an effort to counter engagement and influence of the United States.

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/06/china-africa-military-ties-have-deepened-here-are-4-things-to-know/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/africa-china-united-states-foreign-policy-economic-development/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-12-21/trumps-africa-policy-destined-failure>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740016500020>

<sup>62</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/06/china-africa-military-ties-have-deepened-here-are-4-things-to-know/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/06/china-africa-military-ties-have-deepened-here-are-4-things-to-know/>



In the past decade, top Chinese leadership has made 80 trips to 43 African countries. In terms of African travel to China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sponsored thousands of cultural exchange visits (especially for students), short-term training (especially for media), and scholarships for civil servants and young entrepreneurs. Sponsoring trips of Africans to China is another way that China is able to leverage its investments (that do directly benefit Africans in some ways) in order to influence perceptions of African citizens. The emphasis on young people, especially considering the demographic boom on the continent, is logical. The enrollment of Africans in Chinese universities is increasing and there are now more Africans studying at universities in China than in the United States. On the continent, China has engaged and influenced young people by creating 50 Confucius Institutes which teach the Chinese language, the CCP's version of history, and Chinese culture.<sup>65</sup>

### **African Perceptions of Chinese Involvement**

Most of Africa has a pro-China view and rejects notions of neo-colonialist tendencies. Many Africans believe that China understands and respects African priorities.<sup>66</sup> These African perceptions are influenced by Chinese diplomatic discourse. China presents itself rather humbly and as an equal partner, promoting the idea of mutual benefit and respectful discourse.<sup>67</sup> For example, at the 2015 FOCAC, President Xi Jinping laid out the five pillars of the China-Africa relationship: political equality and mutual trust, promoting win-win economic cooperation, mutually enriching cultural exchanges, mutual assistance in security based on development and eradication of poverty, and solidarity and coordination in international affairs (especially in the context of the United Nations).<sup>68</sup> These perceptions are also somewhat biased due to the direct benefits that Africans receive from development projects, especially infrastructure. However, according to scholar Mehari Taddele Maru, African citizens are not completely ignorant of the potential issues with Chinese economic engagement (though he does not address awareness of the impacts of Chinese geopolitical influence). Maru claims that African citizens usually blame their own governments for being self-serving and weak on regulations and enforcement, highlighting an emphasis on the need for African agency. Maru furthers this argument by stating that many Africans realize that debt-traps are not inevitable outcomes of Chinese loans, and that the incurrence of debt depends on whether African governments use loans for productive capital investment.<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that Africans do not have any negative perceptions of Chinese economic involvement, with the lack of Chinese product quality in African markets being a notable example of negative perception.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, some African governments have pushed back against China on certain projects, such as the cancellation of a Chinese-funded airport project in Sierra Leone that the Sierra Leonean president characterized as a “sham.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/africa-loves-china-190103121552367.html>

<sup>67</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740016500020>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/africa-loves-china-190103121552367.html>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/16/african-countries-have-started-to-push-back-against-chinese-development-aid-heres-why/>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45809810>

## Potential Threats to US Interests

While China's exact intentions are unclear, its growing influence poses threats to not only US interests in the region, but also the US-dominated global system. Former National Security Advisor John Bolton stated that Chinese efforts to lock down strategic minerals and forge ties with weak governments "pose a significant threat to US national security interests."<sup>72</sup> However, Aubrey Hruby of the Atlantic Council stated that China's efforts to reshape African countries' media landscape may be the most strategic threat to the US.<sup>73</sup> Regardless of what factors constitute the largest threat to the United States (i.e. hard power or soft power), it is clear that China's increased engagement with the region poses significant challenges to US interests in the region. Interests such as development and governance objectives, diplomatic and soft power influence, and security operations are all potentially threatened by China's involvement in Africa. While Africa may become the latest battleground over US and Chinese influence, it is imperative that China's involvement not be treated as a zero-sum game since the potential impacts are nuanced and partially positive.<sup>74 75</sup> Therefore, reducing Africa policy to only focusing on countering China is completely misguided.

## Status of United States vis-à-vis China in Africa

While China has made Africa an economic and strategic priority over the past two decades, the US (along with the rest of the West) has been less involved in many facets.<sup>76</sup> However, the United States remains the largest donor to the region, supporting a variety of aid programs. The United States also remains Africa's largest supplier of military assistance.<sup>77</sup> In terms of diplomatic engagement, China is quickly catching up. China has recently raised the number of countries in which it has diplomatic relations to 53 (eSwatini still recognizes Taiwan and thus cannot have diplomatic relations with China). The United States maintains diplomatic relations with all 54 African countries, but the quality of these bilateral relationships are wide ranging, mainly due to Washington's policy of conditionality. China seems to have better relationships with African governments than the United States, but the United States enjoys a more favorable response from African civil society.<sup>78</sup> Given the fact that nearly all assistance provided by the United States to Africa is in the form of grants, Chinese lending to the continent outpaces that of the US.<sup>79</sup> In the private sector, Chinese businesses are now starting to overshadow American businesses, though in 2017 American businesses and investors made more direct investments on the continent than any other country.<sup>80 81</sup> Chinese trade with the continent (\$148 billion in 2017) dwarfs US trade (\$39

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/09/we-cant-afford-to-forget-africa/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/in-africa-china-is-the-news/>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/12/trump-national-security-adviser-unveils-new-africa-strategy/578140/>

<sup>75</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/31/chinese-aid-and-investment-are-good-for-africa/>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/africa-china-united-states-foreign-policy-economic-development/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/trumps-africa-policy-takes-form-with-focus-on-security-and-china>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740016500020>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740016500020>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/world/africa/china-loans-africa-usa.html>

<sup>81</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/1451768/us-still-leads-china-in-fdi-investments-in-africa/>

billion in 2017).<sup>82</sup> In terms of overall approach to the region, the US seeks to use its leverage to encourage improvements in human rights practices and promoting Western style liberal democracy. China has a policy of no political strings attached to its aid and thus maintains good relations with African governments, regardless of the type of political regime.<sup>83</sup> Although these approaches differ, possibilities exist for cooperation between the two countries (or simply allowing both countries to independently benefit African objectives). An underlying sense of zero-sum competition between China and Africa pervades today, and though the US ought to catch up to China in engaging the continent more broadly and approach some of its policies through a competitive lens, this overall perception is not beneficial. A purely competitive lens may end up hurting African development prospects and alienate African audiences by suggesting that they are just pawns in a Cold War-like rivalry.<sup>84 85</sup>

### **Current US Policies in the Region**

The Trump administration strategy focuses on security (particularly combating extremist groups) and countering China's influence, but more recently has included building more and better commercial ties. In 2018, President Trump approved the creation of the International Development Finance Corporation, a beneficial step to provide quality loans to African governments and companies, thus also countering Chinese financial engagement and promoting US commercial interests.<sup>86</sup> This year, the administration launched the Prosper Africa initiative in order to promote trade and investment between the US and Africa by reducing trade barriers and helping to create a more welcoming business climate.<sup>87</sup> This program empowers the US private sector and thus is mutually beneficial for African countries and the United States, providing a notable example of how US policies in the region should be structured.<sup>88</sup>

### **Broad US Policy Suggestions**

The United States must focus on playing a beneficial role to African countries by strengthening its relations with African governments and citizens, and continuing support for security/stability, economic freedom, development, sound macroeconomic policies, good governance/democratic strengthening, and human rights.<sup>89</sup> By differentiating itself from China by staying true to its ideals, the United States can compete with China through convincing Africans that the United States is a better partner and ally, while also not ignoring African agency and African development objectives at the expense of solely seeking what is directly beneficial to the United States and countering China.<sup>90</sup> In turn, this approach will benefit US interests, both economically and politically. Given the rise of China, future US

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<sup>82</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/09/the-us-china-trade-rivalry-is-underway-in-africa.html>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740016500020>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740016500020>

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-12-21/trumps-africa-policy-destined-failure>

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/trumps-africa-policy-takes-form-with-focus-on-security-and-china>

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/africa/commentary/prosper-africa-promises-long-overdue-change-us-approach-continent>

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/africa/commentary/prosper-africa-promises-long-overdue-change-us-approach-continent>

<sup>89</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/23/spite-wont-beat-china-in-africa/>

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-12-21/trumps-africa-policy-destined-failure>

strategy toward Africa needs to be more robust and ambitious in order to promote humanitarian/development and US interests in the region.

### **Current Legislation**

S.480 - Countering the Chinese Government and Communist Party's Political Influence Operations Act (Sponsor: Sen. Marco Rubio)

Relevant text: “to create strategies to ensure that countries in Africa, the Western Hemisphere, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere are aware of China’s “sharp power” and provide needed capacity to counter them effectively”<sup>91</sup>

### **Senator Marco Rubio Statements**

- Twitter—@marcorubio—“Hackers backed by [#China](#) targeted 20 people across Asia, Europe, Africa & the Middle East by infiltrating cell network of 10 global carriers. Imagine how much easier it will be for them to do this when carrier’s cell network built with [#Huawei](#) equipment.”—June 25, 2019<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/480/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22S.480%22%7D&r=2&s=1>

<sup>92</sup> <https://twitter.com/marcorubio/status/1143472482374103040?lang=en>