

CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS: AN
EARLY, UNCERTAIN DEBATE
IN THE UNITED STATES

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China, in its quest for a closer strategic partnership with Africa, has increasingly dynamic economic, political, and diplomatic activities on that continent. Following the high-profile summit of the third Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in November 2006, senior Chinese officials, including President Hu Jintao and the then Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, visited a total of fifteen different African countries within the first quarter of 2007. The Chinese push forward in Africa raises the promise of achieving future gains to benefit African in significant, constructive ways, and hence hopes that China will seriously turn its attention to long-neglected areas such as infrastructure development and that its strategic approach will raise Africa's status globally, intensify political and market competition, create new choices in external partnerships, strengthen African capacities to combat malaria and HIV/AIDS, and propel the continent's economic growth, enabling African countries to better integrate with the global economy.

China's expansive engagement in Africa inherently carries significant implications for US interests in Africa and around the world, as well as for US-China relations. Like China, the United States is in the midst of an expansive phase of ever-greater engagement in Africa, and it is now widely acknowledged that US national interests in Africa have burgeoned to include substantial global energy stakes, regional security and counterterrorism concerns, public health, and intensifying competition with China, India, South Korea, and other Asian countries that have significantly enlarged their engagement in Africa.¹

In light of these rapid developments, there seems to be an early, growing sense of discomfort and uncertainty in Washington over Chinese engagement in Africa. This uncertainty stems from four main sources. First, there is limited understanding of the evolving African opinion forming around China's expansive engagement in the continent. Ultimately, sentiment within Africa will be a pivotal driver in shaping China's future relationships with African partners.² Second, while China's more ambitious and complex Africa policy of today may in due course bring financial and political payoffs, alter the playing field in Africa, and create pressures for changes in US policy approaches, multiple risks also attend China's strategy. Given these realities, it remains difficult to predict the relative success or failure of China's approach in the near to medium term. Third, the Bush Administration's approach to Africa, while featuring such signature initiatives as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, is nonetheless consumed with Sudan, and outside Africa the Bush Administration faces distractions from other widening challenges. It remains uncertain how the next administration will carry forth US policy toward Africa and

- 1 For literature on the growing importance of Africa to US strategic interests, see Princeton Lyman and J. Stephen Morrison, *More than Humanitarianism: A Strategic U.S. Approach Toward Africa* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006).
- 2 The African Union has convened a task force examining the implications of China's, India's and Brazil's partnerships with Africa. The latest AU assessment (September 2006) on China's role calls for African countries to become more proactive in driving the agenda in future political and economic discussions and agreements with the Chinese.

whether China's engagement in Africa will be a priority consideration. Fourth, US-China relations overall—of which US-China engagement in Africa is but one second-tier concern—are themselves uncertain and are vulnerable to simplistic, zero-sum calculation in both Beijing and Washington. This situation will impede the near-term formulation of an integrated, coherent US strategy that might leverage areas of common interest while mitigating those areas where US national interests and values are in conflict with Chinese approaches. Hence the time is ripe to generate new and longer-range thinking about US policies to engage China productively in Africa.

China's expansive engagement in Africa

China's emergence as a rising global power is directing increasing attention to the activities and intentions of its expansive foreign policy worldwide. While much of this attention focuses on China's growing clout in Asia, China's increasing economic, political, and diplomatic activities in Africa and other parts of the world are also coming under greater scrutiny.

China's expanding engagement in Africa did not begin from scratch. Beijing supported many liberation movements and other insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa and was quick to establish diplomatic ties and supportive economic relations with newly independent states as they emerged from the colonial era. Indeed, for more than half a century, the Chinese systematically cultivated solidarity and working relations with a range of African states. It was a profitable diplomatic investment which persisted into the post-Cold War era when Western powers were more inclined, in the 1990s, to scale back their presence.³

Today, China's Africa policy is carried out on a higher plane and is more complex, multidimensional, ambitious and ultimately higher risk. Its rising economic engagement is tied to conspicuously strategic goals, centred on access to energy and other scarce high-value commodities. On the diplomatic front, Beijing has shown a new determination to complete the process of eliminating bilateral ties

³ George T. Yu, 'Africa in Chinese Foreign Policy', *Asian Survey* 28, 8 (1988), pp. 849-62.

between Taiwan and a dwindling number of African capitals, and to use its accelerating entry to Africa to consolidate global allegiances and Beijing's putative leadership of the developing world. Beijing has also taken on a more active role in the security sphere: China's contributions of soldiers and police to UN peace operations, concentrated in Africa, have increased tenfold since 2001.⁴

China's policy in many instances is also tied to ambitious commitments to revitalize depleted critical infrastructures and invest on a substantial scale in strengthening human skills. It is not only official China that provides direct economic and diplomatic support. Chinese companies have become far more active as both importers of African energy and raw material resources and exporters of Chinese goods and services. China has deepened its commitments in non-traditional areas, such as helping African nations tackle public health problems. The China-Africa summit in Beijing in November 2006 featured 43 African heads of state in an effusive exchange with China's top leadership.⁵ It also featured new economic and financial agreements, as well as significant debt relief and trade commitments.

The payoffs to China financially and politically may ultimately be very significant and alter our understanding of what kinds of intervention can achieve durable results. But multiple risks also attend China's expansive engagement in Africa. Business calculations on major investments are murky, and many will likely turn out badly. The bet that China can transform Africa's infrastructures where others have failed awaits proof of success, and challenges are surfacing for Beijing in translating its vision of a strategic partnership with Africa into a sustainable reality.⁶

4 As of February 2007, China had provided over 1,800 troops, military observers, and civilian police toward current UN peacekeeping operations. Three-fourths of Chinese peacekeeping forces are supporting UN missions in Africa (primarily Liberia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

5 For greater details and content of the various official statements, documents, and declarations, see 'Beijing Summit and Third Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China and Africa,' November 2006, <<http://english.focacsummit.org/documents.htm>>.

6 Bates Gill, Chin-hao Huang and J. Stephen Morrison, *China's Expanding Role in Africa: Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2007).

The expectation that China can have significant sway politically and displace the influence of others must take into account Africa's sensitivity to anything that smacks of neo-colonialism, and how callous and indifferent 'petropowers' in Africa have become as global energy markets tighten. In selecting energy-rich Angola and Nigeria as preferred partners, and choosing close support for Zimbabwe, China selected three of the most corrupt and difficult environments. In Sudan, Beijing finds a partner embedded in enormous political and moral controversies of its own making. In South Africa, it has entered a place of acutely high sovereign sensitivities.⁷ Beijing is beginning to encounter serious challenges: criticism by a Zambian presidential candidate during the 2006 elections that China engages in unfair mine labour practices; South African trade union opposition to the flooding of South African markets by Chinese textiles. Some adjustments in approach, such as voluntary textile export quotas for South Africa, have now been set in place.

*The unformed (and under-informed) US debate
on China-Africa-US relations*

China's dramatic moves on Africa have triggered an important debate in the United States over how to characterize Chinese intentions, policies, and practices in Africa. However, the American debate is still at an early and uncertain stage, and remains by and large unformed—and often under-informed.

Like China, the United States is in the midst of an expansive phase of ever greater engagement in Africa. US foreign assistance levels to Africa have more than tripled during the Bush administration. Signature White House initiatives have been launched that have had a predominant focus on Africa: the five-year, \$15 billion

7 South Africa's President Mbeki delivered a stern warning to China in a public speech in January 2007, describing its approach to Africa as the threat of a new colonialism that would lock African in underdevelopment. That did not go unnoticed in Beijing, and during President Hu's speech in Pretoria in February 2007, he went out of his way to assure his audience that China would create new balances in trade relations as one demonstration of its sensitivity to African interests and opinion.

President's Emergency AIDS Relief Plan; the US Malaria Initiative; and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which seeks to reward states that are well governed and performing well economically with substantial new aid compacts that will accelerate economic growth. Private sector engagement is steadily rising, concentrated in the energy field, and annual two-way trade reached \$60.6 billion in 2005, up 36.7 per cent from 2004.

Since September 11, 2001, US military engagement has been enlarged substantially: through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative; a Gulf of Guinea maritime initiative now in development; and an ambitious Horn of Africa counterterror programme. The Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, based in Djibouti, is projected to be in place over the next 15 years. Following the Ethiopian military's intervention in Somalia in late December 2006, which routed the Islamic Courts government, the United States engaged directly in early January 2007 by attacking fleeing convoys suspected of transporting 'hard target' terrorists tied to the August 1998 al Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the subsequent attacks on Israeli tourists in Mombasa, Kenya in November 2002. In addition, it was announced in February 2007 that the United States would establish a dedicated, new military command—the Africa Command—in order to more effectively oversee US military-related activities on the continent. Such activities had previously been divided among three commands, the Europe Command, the Central Command and the Pacific Command.

This shift has called into question whether the United States has adequate personnel, resources and internal coordinating mechanisms to manage its rising interests. It has also called into question whether these relatively 'harder' interests will conflict with existing, long-standing commitments to the promotion of democracy and human rights, poverty alleviation, and conflict resolution. In the Bush years, a significant, sustained, high-level commitment has been made to ending Sudan's North-South war and, more recently, to ending the genocide in Sudan's western region of Darfur. The events leading up to the toppling of the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia and the post-conflict reconstruction since then have also demanded high-level US foreign policy attention.

At the same time that these developments have advanced, the clock on the Bush Administration is ticking ever louder. In particular, the hangover effects of Iraq on US credibility and legitimacy have at times constrained US engagement in areas like Sudan.

The American response to China's engagement in Africa will also be shaped by the overall US-China relationship. Broadly speaking, while US-China relations are generally stable, the American public, members of Congress, and executive branch officials are uncertain at best about the future with China, and at worst see China as an economic and security threat over the long term. This may inevitably limit the ability of forward-looking thinkers to build a more productive set of relationships for American interests in partnership with Chinese in Africa.

With regard to US views on China-Africa relations, a part of the problem lies in the lack of good information on the American side. US understanding of how Chinese motivations towards Africa are formulated and executed is thin at best.⁸ Likewise, US understanding of evolving African sentiment toward China's expansive engagement is limited. There is a tendency on the part of the United States and China alike to mirror image one another. American critics often focus narrowly on China's pursuit of energy as the best explanatory lens through which to understand China's policies in Africa. Yet in Sudan, for example, oil is important but no longer the sole strategic factor in Chinese foreign policy calculations, and China faces increasing debates and complexities in its policy choices.⁹ Progressives in the Chinese policymaking elite argue that Sudan's oil assets are not worth pursuing in the long run, and have suggested scaling back relations with Khartoum in an attempt to burnish China's image and international reputation. Inversely, there is a tendency among Chinese conservatives to argue that the United States and other Western

8 At a public statement at CSIS, Washington on 8 February 2007, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James C. Swan noted that it was important to see China's role in the continent within a broader context of China's global foreign policy strategy and vision of the evolving international system.

9 See official Congressional record for written testimony of J. Stephen Morrison and Bates Gill on 'China and Sudan,' submitted to the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on 8 February 2007.

countries are merely trying to force China out of Sudan to get to its oil.¹⁰ The Chinese critics are also quick to point out that the United States—by dealing closely with such countries as Equatorial Guinea—is just as likely to engage in an uncritical embrace of autocratic, corrupt, and unstable regimes.

US insistence on bringing a new peacekeeping force into Darfur under a sweeping UN mandate without Khartoum's consent is seen by Beijing as a violation of Sudan's sovereignty that raises the risk that a UN force might be used to apprehend high-ranking Sudanese officials indicted by the International Criminal Court. These actions run counter to the long-held Chinese principle of 'non-interference' and partially explain its cautious approach toward Sudan.¹¹ To untangle this gridlock, the looming humanitarian crisis in Darfur should be elevated in the US-China agenda. Washington should work with Beijing to test Khartoum's willingness to honour a ceasefire, oversee disarmament, protect humanitarian corridors, and move forward an internal Darfur dialogue. It should explore ways that China might more meaningfully contribute to the hybrid UN/African Union operation.¹²

US knowledge of how African opinion is responding to an expansive Chinese presence is lacking. At a minimum, American approaches need to be sensitive to the many and long-standing positive legacies and images the Chinese have in various parts of Africa—particularly in comparison with past practices of colonial and other Western powers. There is a dearth of quality, informed analyses of China's multiple impacts in those places in Africa where China has made its greatest plays, and there is often missing from American writings an essential humility and care in estimating how

10 Simon Robinson, 'Time Running Out,' *Time*, 10 September 2006.

11 China has exercised much prudence and caution in a series of UN Security Council resolutions targeting Sudan. The concepts of 'non-interference' and 'national sovereignty' are important bedrocks of Chinese foreign policy and have been the basis for its conservative posture towards sanctions or other punitive measures against Khartoum since discussions in the Security Council on Darfur began in mid-2004. China's abstentions have allowed the Security Council to adopt Resolutions 1591, 1593, and 1706 targeting Sudan.

12 J. Stephen Morrison and Chester A. Crocker, 'Time to focus on real choices in Darfur,' *Washington Post*, 7 November 2006.

US influence can be effectively brought to bear to shape Chinese approaches.

It is also true that in the long list of priorities in the US-China relationship, engagement in Africa occupies a second tier. Other pressing issues for Washington—from Iran to North Korea, and from East Asian stability to fending off China's economic challenge at home—will consume more time and energy in the formulation of China policy in Washington. Unfortunately, this also means that in return for Chinese cooperation on those issues, Washington may be less willing or able to expend the necessary political capital to gain greater cooperation from China in places such as Sudan.

In the absence of a better-formed and better-informed American official response to China generally, and to China-Africa relations in particular, more provocative voices fill the void in a negative and zero-sum way. Some American voices argue that the Chinese engagement in Africa is predominantly a form of crude mercantilism and political interventionism that directly threatens US interests and hence calls for confrontation, condemnation and containment.

An array of human rights advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations, for example, sustains intense pressure on the US government to take decisive, punitive measures on Darfur, including calls for forced humanitarian intervention. While the Sudanese accepted the Addis Ababa Agreement (the 'Annan Plan') of 16 November 2006 committing Khartoum to a ceasefire and three-phase expansion of a hybrid AU/UN force in Darfur, President Bashir in Sudan has obstructed its implementation. With the humanitarian situation worsening in Darfur, the American activist groups have intensified their efforts, which have included harsh criticism of China as a partner of Sudan. Others, including the authors of this paper, argue that China in Africa is a complex new reality which we only partially grasp: fast moving, multidimensional, and long-range in its various impacts. The Darfur issue, in particular, is a case in point where Chinese policy has seen subtle, incremental shifts. There is greater internal debate amongst policy elites in Beijing regarding the right approach to Khartoum on Darfur. There is also increasing recognition within foreign policy circles that direct pressures on China

and its economic stakes in Sudan could escalate in North America and Europe.

No less important, Chinese views on Darfur are shaped by discussions with African states. Many leaders in sub-Saharan African states find Khartoum's actions in Darfur offensive on human rights, religious, and racial grounds. Khartoum's continued obstruction of an AU/UN force, and the inability of the international community to bring greater stability to Sudan, mean in practice that African Union peacekeeping forces, including troops from South Africa, Rwanda and Nigeria, remain under grave strain, cannot be reliably sustained and for these reasons are placed at considerable risk. China for its part is vulnerable to being called to account within Africa for enabling Khartoum's intransigence and impeding the AU's efforts.

As a result, a gradual shift in Chinese thinking is exhibited in several concrete actions taken by Beijing to exert additional pressure on Khartoum. The Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Wang Guangya became very active, and was widely credited with gaining Sudanese acceptance for the Annan Plan in November 2006. In February 2007 there were hopes, perhaps unrealistically high, that President Hu might forcefully press President Bashir to accept the hybrid force. In public, China continued to emphasize its economic ties with Sudan and made new pledges of support, including aid in building a presidential palace. Understandably, these announcements drew international opprobrium.

In private, however, he apparently intervened personally to press President Bashir to stick to his commitments. And prior to leaving Sudan, President Hu delivered a rare public statement that outlined 'four principles' as the basis for an international approach to Darfur. The first, not unexpectedly, reaffirmed the principle of non-interference. But the fourth principle seems to contradict the first, saying: 'It is imperative to improve the situation in Darfur and living conditions of local people.' That is about as close as a Chinese leader has come publicly to supporting the emerging notion in the United Nations and the broader international community that governments have a 'responsibility to protect' their citizens from harm. Furthermore, in March 2007, Beijing announced that some economic leverage would be applied to exert additional pressure on Sudan. The Chinese Na-

tional Development and Reform Commission, the country's main economic planning agency, released a public document in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, noting that Sudan had been removed from the latest list of countries with preferred trade status.¹³ According to the announcement, Beijing will no longer provide financial incentives to Chinese companies to invest in Sudan. This latest move appears to be a signal of Chinese disaffection with President Bashir's unwillingness to comply with his commitments to implement the Annan Plan.

The announcement was welcomed by the US State Department and came shortly before Chinese Assistant Minister Zhai Jun arrived in Washington to meet with Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer for the second round of US-China subdialogue on Africa in March 2007. The inaugural dialogue was formally launched in November 2005 under the auspices of the US-China Senior Dialogue process initiated by former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick.¹⁴ While the first bilateral meeting on Africa focused largely on formalities, the second subdialogue in early March 2007 focused on the specific issues of debt sustainability, peacekeeping operations, Chinese companies' reputational risks in Africa, and transparency in the extractive industries. On Sudan, the Chinese side reportedly acknowledged the need for the international community to step up efforts and become more active in leveraging influence over Darfur.

Greater consensus has been achieved in the latest round of bilateral dialogue on Africa, in part because the United States is beginning to understand that China has real interests in Africa and will be engaged

13 Richard McGregor, 'Iran, Nigeria, Sudan off China incentive list', *Financial Times*, 2 March 2007.

14 At the official level, the United States and China in 2005 began to take some steps to think through their increasingly complex and interdependent relationship in a more constructive and strategic way. This effort, known as the 'senior leaders' dialogue', was led on the US side by the then Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick, who called for China to join the United States in becoming a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system. Both sides agreed to hold bilateral subdialogues on key regional issues. The door was thus opened in Washington to begin thinking more seriously about an effective US strategy for engaging China on Africa.

in the continent for the foreseeable future. Hence, continuing to see China's economic, political, or diplomatic activities in Africa as a zero-sum game would be counterproductive. This emerging trend line is an encouraging sign in this early debate; the challenge would be for Washington to make a strong commitment to invest at a high diplomatic level to understand the Chinese perspective and continue to test China's intentions systematically.

Looking ahead

The current situation carries both bad news and good news. On the one hand, there will continue to be critical voices and distractions in Washington that may impede the near-term official formulation of an integrated, coherent US strategy—a strategy that might leverage areas of common US-China interest while downplaying those areas where US national interests and values are in conflict with Chinese approaches. On the other hand, the trend line for China's expanded presence in Africa—and the challenges and opportunities it presents to American interests—will demand greater and greater American attention and action. Hence critical work needs to be done to generate new, longer-range thinking and greater intellectual content to help create effective US policies to engage China productively in Africa.

Looking ahead, such strategic thinking can begin forming around some critical starting points. Firstly, any US strategy will be heavily influenced by Washington's experiences in individual African countries that are high US priorities and where China at the same time is pressing itself forward. That has certainly been true of Sudan, and will almost certainly be true of Nigeria, Angola and Zimbabwe. Secondly, any strategy will require a commitment to create a far greater understanding of evolving African opinion and approaches to China's growing presence in the world and in the region. The American response, thirdly, must reflect a far more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of Chinese motivations and decision-making vis-à-vis Africa. Fourth, there will be a need to boost awareness of potential US-China-Africa operational collaboration in areas of common interest: especially counter-terrorism, public health, peacekeeping, and infrastructure development and rehabili-

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tation. On the other side of the equation, much more work is needed to devise strategies to press the Chinese on issues where US and Chinese perspectives clash: on democracy and human rights, business practices, transparency and accountability in the use of official wealth, and the environment. Finally, and perhaps most important, an American strategy towards Chinese engagement in Africa must more fully acknowledge and account for China's successes in negotiating its way forward with Africans in establishing new partnerships. The United States and other Western powers are neither gatekeepers nor chaperones. They are merely important players on a broadening, and more intensely competitive, playing field. How China does in Africa, for better or for worse, will ultimately depend on the nature of its relationships with African interests.

