Building constructive China-US cooperation on peace and security in Africa

Introduction

External actors are increasing (and increasing the depth and scope of) their involvement throughout Africa—engagement which is critical to the development of African nations, but which has the potential either to increase security or further destabilise some of the continent's already fragile countries. A cooperative rather than competitive approach among two key external actors, the US and China – based on leverage points found within common interests – would greatly enhance the conditions for peace and sustainable development in Africa, as well as providing a point of opportunity to build more cooperation and less competition into the geopolitical relationship between the two countries.

Over the past decade, the African continent has seen deepening interest in partnership and investment from external powers. There are multiple reasons, but two in particular stand out: on the positive side, recognition of Africa as a commercial partner and potential economic powerhouse—not just a passive recipient of donor aid—has led to broad investment in a number of African countries, both as markets for goods and as sources of materials. Conversely, recognition that a lingering—and in some cases, growing—set of security challenges have regional and international ramifications has led to increased scrutiny of engagement and subsequent increase in Western interventions focused on governance and conflict.

The African continent does not lie at the forefront of China’s foreign policy concerns. Nonetheless, China has expanded its economic engagement and sought growing influence within specific nations based mainly on an analysis of market potential and its own economic needs. As China's engagement deepens, the attention of its policy community is increasingly turning to the challenges and opportunities that African peace and security present for China's own interests. Some of this is addressed in the Action Plan (2013-2015) of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which outlines commitments to provide continued support for post-conflict reconstruction and regional peace support operations.

China’s rising role is of critical importance to actors on the continent and needs to be acutely and deeply understood. Without careful management to ensure a conflict-sensitive approach, any influx of money and attention (particularly at the size and rate of investment that China is mobilizing) risks further destabilizing already unstable political, economic, and social systems. The same can and should, of course, be said of American investment and intervention, although the models used by the two countries—and thus the concerns—differ greatly. China’s involvement has already led to some tensions in this regard, such as a 2007 rebuke by the British government and widespread criticism of its failure to promote human rights and good governance. In addition, the rate of investment, particularly in natural resources, raises the likelihood of friction with the US, whose involvement is also growing rapidly, through the perception of competition in a zero-sum game.

US engagement is somewhat more multifaceted and, of course (as with China) varies greatly depending on the country. The US shares China’s perception of Africa as a largely untapped economic market and critical source of mineral resources, and therefore embraces increased economic relations across the continent. Development assistance represents a higher percentage of US engagement in Africa than in any other region on earth. In addition to poverty alleviation, the US supports governance and civil society development across the continent. In August 2014, President Obama welcomed African leaders to Washington for the three-day US-Africa Leadership Summit. At the same time, the US sees Africa as a growing security threat with the apparent rise in violent extremism, transnational crime, and more
entrenched violent conflict throughout the continent. Therefore, the Africa Command—AFRICOM—is one of the most active of five regional US Combatant Commands. The nature of US partnership, investment and interest on a country-by-country basis is of course (with AFRICOM’s activity in mind) shaped by strategic interests (such as basing and overflight rights, the CVE agenda, etc.) both within those countries, across regions and even outside the African continent entirely. This, perhaps needless to say, has its own negative and potentially negative ramifications and concerns raised by the international community.

While the existence of international concern over both Chinese and American involvement is certainly relevant to this study, a full analysis of them is somewhat beyond the scope of what’s needed here.

If we consider only inter-state conflicts, Africa has become a more peaceful continent\textsuperscript{vi} in the past two decades. However, protracted conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, outbreaks of violence in Kenya, South Sudan, Mali, Nigeria and the Central African Republic, as well as rising levels of violence and violent extremism across the north and Sahel regions have produced rapidly rising instability, destroying lives and undermining development efforts across the board. The growing levels of both intrastate conflict and regional spillover also reflect a disquieting correlation with regard to poverty: the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) estimates that by 2025, 80 percent of the world’s poorest will be concentrated within fragile and conflict-affected countries, with the bulk of those in turn concentrated within Africa.\textsuperscript{vi} In sum, this trend has direct implications for both the economic and national security interests of China, the US, and other international donors who are increasingly aware that in the era of globalization, the problems emanating from conflicts, insecurity, underdevelopment, disease epidemics, and illegal migration in Africa affect, directly or indirectly, other parts of the world. It also has direct implementations for the willingness of donors to continue investing in the region, withdrawal of which could reverse hard-won gains across the board.

Considering the breadth and complexity of security challenges in Africa, prioritizing outside agendas rather than internal needs is likely to create friction and foster competition\textsuperscript{viii}. A lack of cooperation among key international actors, a lack of recognition of the complexity and difference in challenges within different countries and different regions, or the presence of a zero-sum mentality and unhealthy competition could lead to a range of unintended consequences for African nations as well as for China and the US. While development cooperation in and of itself to date remains a wide gulf between the two countries, it is apparent that the actions of each country affect the other as well, and especially with regard to security. This offers a point of mutual interest and a potential window through which conflict-sensitive policy and cooperative action might be planned. If successful, this may in turn help leverage cooperation in other areas.

**Factors creating obstacles and friction**

First and foremost among the factors preventing the US and China from achieving their full potential for cooperation in Africa is the trust deficit in the bilateral relationship. Although distant from both countries, Africa is not viewed as “neutral ground”\textsuperscript{ix}. Rather, interaction between the US and China, as well as their respective policies towards nation states, are often framed against the broader backdrop of the bilateral relationship and imbued with wider strategic implications. A 2015 RAND Corporation study, for example, is devoted to the implications of Chinese-African relations on US national security\textsuperscript{x}. At the current stage, neither country is free from a sense of zero-sum competition, occasionally rising into overt rivalry.

China’s recent actions in maritime and territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas have brewed concern in the West of a turn towards increasing assertiveness in China’s foreign policy, while the US ‘pivot to the Asia-Pacific’ initiative\textsuperscript{xi} has been interpreted negatively in China as an attempt to contain China’s growing role in its own backyard. The tenor of these interactions provides a geostrategic backdrop against which less direct interactions, such as on the African continent, are viewed and understood. More
specifically regarding Africa. American analysts have shown growing concern about the US ‘losing out’ in Africa. Such a competitive theme is also popular among their Chinese counterparts, who are concerned that the US is attempting to undercut Chinese economic interests. Issues such as expanding influence and access are more likely to be conceived in zero-sum terms where ‘traditional security’ is concerned—especially situations involving potential military interventions for either side, which immediately raise fears on both sides of intelligence-gathering, military modernization races, and competition.

Although the US and China share an interest in promoting and maintaining regional peace and security, the two countries often have divergent definitions, approaches, and desired outcomes when it comes to specific issues, especially around democracy, governance, and human rights. Regardless of recent trends towards more proactive and cooperative engagement, China has retained a distinctive outlook on foreign affairs with core principles around respect for state sovereignty and ‘non-interference’ in internal affairs. It views US development funds spent on issues like governance and countering violent extremism as inappropriate, conflating them with perceived efforts to influence governance within China itself. Thus, while the Chinese have for example been involved in ‘quiet diplomacy in South Sudan, they are likely to remain withdrawn from any high-profile action that risks interpretation as internal interference without the consent of the host government.

Particularly contentious here is the US position regarding the role of civil society in governance, especially US emphasis on participation and inclusion of civil society actors in peace processes. The US’ fundamental interest in promoting accountable and transparent institutions and helping establish pluralistic, reform-minded communities is not in line with China’s philosophy. China has yet to support this approach due to implied criticism of its own foreign and domestic policies. This can create tension when US-funded and supported civil society organizations in African countries challenge more autocratic governments emboldened by their support from and relationship with China, such as has happened in Zimbabwe and Sudan. Likewise, differences in standards of foreign assistance and development projects have impeded bilateral cooperation, including the realization of a China-initiated joint development proposal – the first of its kind – of the Inga 3 dam in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has been dogged by concerns over human rights standards within the workforce, and potential environmental impacts. Notably, different positions and approaches between the US and China towards these issues can have profound local repercussions, including potentially leading to or exacerbating violent conflict, as each side has its own advocates in local politics and such divergence can become a source of tension locally.

Another obstacle is that the agenda and priorities for US-China bilateral cooperation are already crowded with other priorities. In the face of a mounting number of humanitarian crises (both natural and man-made), it is a difficult time to successfully prioritize preventive cooperation. On the Chinese side, domestic priorities still prevail, and there is a need to have realistic expectations about China’s willingness and ability to be increasingly flexible and proactive in its foreign and security policy. Practical cooperation can be easier to achieve at the grassroots level, but state-level institutions still take the lead in tackling security issues and thus must be included.

China’s international partners, including the US, must invest far more time and resources to understanding Chinese domestic pressures, internal politics, and foreign policy decision-making. In a country where 160 million people are living on less than $1.25 a day and increasing numbers of people complain openly about the country’s domestic problems, Chinese policymakers are increasingly aware of a need to be mindful of the negative domestic repercussions that may be created by a more proactive foreign policy. While the domestic economics of the United States are quite different, concern over foreign spending when domestic problems remain unfixed causes a similar reluctance to fund overseas development work.

In sum, the US and China often operate as though they are (or expect to be) in parallel spheres, where missed opportunities for cooperation impede progress towards greater security on the African continent.
Factors providing opportunity

For US-China cooperation to be effective and sustainable in the medium- to long-term it must be driven primarily by African communities, perspectives, and leadership, rather than towards the needs and perspectives of outside stakeholders. Doing otherwise risks repeating the foreign policy and development failures of previous years, and can contribute to the longevity of repressive regimes and degrade indigenous capacity and long-term sustainability even as short-term gains in security or development may be evident. In this, the shift from a donor aid mentality towards an investment and partnership mentality opens the door to a host of advantages as a fundamental implication of that shift is to empower African communities to take an active part in directing their own development and holding donors to account for the consequences of their own actions.

However, as China’s engagement deepens in Africa, its policy community is increasingly prioritizing the challenges that African peace and security present for China’s own interests, with emphasis on non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism, humanitarian disaster, ethnic strife, piracy, epidemics, trans-border crime, energy security, and food security. In Africa, such issues not only undermine overall local security, but also pose a direct threat to Chinese and US personnel, assets and investment on the continent. In the words of Lyle Goldstein, “while American and Chinese viewpoints on these issues are hardly congruent, they are surprisingly complementary”.\textsuperscript{xix}

While that list of threats sounds daunting and insurmountable, interestingly it represents a great deal of opportunity. That opportunity comes from two primary sources: first, breaking down the concept of security past the state-centric version central to nation-state geopolitics, and acknowledging a far more appropriately nuanced definition that includes the above range of sub-state and non-state threats; and second, it recognizes a nexus of security and development in both policy and practice that provides safe space for operations away from the limitations placed upon anything that suggests the primacy of military-to-military (mil-mil) cooperation. Focusing on security threats as defined in non-traditional terms would help to avoid some of the assumptions that tend to drive domestic as well as political aversion – both in China and the US – against connotations of heavy military intervention, while still answering the call to protect both private investment and development funds. Such reframing can also potentially expand the space for mil-mil cooperation around noncombatant issues (such as natural disaster assistance and epidemic containment) that are less likely to be interpreted in geopolitical zero-sum terms.

Another space for engagement comes from the commercial sphere. The wide spectrum of challenges in Africa and the limited availability of conflict-specific risk assessment mechanisms to commercial actors have resulted in a lack of confidence among large Chinese banks regarding commercial investments on the continent. Chinese policymakers and private businesses alike are keen to learn about others’ experience managing personnel on the ground, mitigating security threats, and managing complex relationships with the wide array of African governments. This desire represents a window of opportunity for engagement around corporate risk analysis, where ‘defense analysis’—even if the material is largely similar—may present a roadblock.

A further window of opportunity for cooperation is that China currently seeks to bolster its international image as a responsible world power. Conflict-sensitive development has become a real interest to China through its links with risk management, as other international actors and African nations have voiced increasingly loud concerns about methods and potential unintended consequences. The shared nature of many of those concerns is also an incentive for the US to support China as a responsible stakeholder in the international system.

Finally, even in the case of China and the US having apparently different goals and approaches, there is a shared interest in restoring the basic foundation of security across Africa leverage responsible involvement in operational-level development and peacebuilding efforts into a greater role in higher-level negotiation.
and political peacebuilding. Three primary examples would be promotion of ceasefires, leveraging local participation in peace processes, and prevention of poaching. Deeper engagement between the two powers on these issues would provide specific opportunities for reconciling differences and negotiating rule making at an operational level that would ease the transition to negotiation at a higher level. Proven cooperation on these issues would also solve a peripheral but critical problem by lessening the perception by local governments that one power can be played against the other for monetary or political gain, thus deepening the probability of productive African engagement and direction.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, given the fundamental motivation of both nations to invest, protect investments and operate in countries that are at least relatively peaceful and stable, to reduce regional and global threats affecting that stability—and the increasing importance of non-traditional security challenges—there is good reason to hope for greater cooperation between China and the US on peace and security in Africa. There are also sound reasons to hope for that cooperation to serve as a leverage point to open greater bilateral cooperation between the two powers outside of as well as within Africa. However, despite the apparent convergence of interests, a number of strategic and practical factors have prevented China and the US from fully realizing their combined potential. Specific measures already exist, identified within this research, that could alter that cost-benefit calculation for both China and the US towards the opportunities and away from the points of friction. These include:

- **Accept a broadened definition of security and focus on non-traditional security challenges and non-combat operations that offer opportunity without the connotation of mil-mil support or intervention**

Although it is often overlooked, China and the United States already have experience of working together, having engaged in joint work on disaster relief missions in the Asia-Pacific region, humanitarian assistance tackling public health crises such as the Ebola outbreak and anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Moreover, there have been consultations between China and the US on their engagement in UN peacekeeping operations within the framework of the US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue. Such initiatives help maintain open lines of communication and provide space for trial-and-error learning in a space where all parties have a higher risk tolerance than would be found in traditional security engagements.

There is potential for much increased cooperation in the area of non-traditional security. For example, given that both countries have made quite similar commitments to build the capacity of African militaries to rapidly deploy peacekeepers, there is potential for much closer cooperation between China and the US on UN peacekeeping operations, especially in helping to build Africa’s indigenous peacekeeping capacity. At a time when UN peacekeeping is going through a reform process, increased cooperation on peacekeeping has the potential to enrich and re-direct China-US relations and to forge a new Chinese-American joint leadership on the future direction of UN peacekeeping. To start with, China and the US could: make joint statements on peacekeeping co-operation and their vision of the future of UN peacekeeping; sponsor joint programs including international conferences on the reform of UN peacekeeping operations; and jointly sponsor peacekeeping training programs.

Although *military* cooperation has proven difficult in the struggle against terrorism and transnational organized crime, both China and the US have shown a willingness to be more engaged and work together to monitor and control the cash flow and financing of these groups. China has also demonstrated significant interest in combatting money laundering, an issue also linked closely to its domestic campaign against corruption. Considering that both Chinese and American companies have been involved in corruption scandals in Africa, it is in the interest of both countries to realize the untapped potential for bilateral and
multilateral cooperation in such efforts. Training and capacity building for local partners on anti-corruption presents similar opportunities, which will benefit from both countries’ experience.

- **Deepen mutual understanding and promotion of knowledge exchange in conflict-sensitive development and the management of conflict, crises, and risk in the business sector**

Chinese and American businesses and investments in Africa are simultaneously vulnerable to conflict and fragility and, if unwisely conceived and implemented, can themselves inadvertently contribute to conflict and instability. Fostering knowledge-sharing in conflict analysis and risk management for businesses and development entities from both countries would produce another mutually agreeable point of entry for greater cooperation. Such measures would not only help to promote conflict-sensitive engagement by Chinese and US actors on the continent but by highlighting the implications of the inextricably shared space in which both countries operate, also cater to Chinese interests without jeopardizing those of the US or creating a sense of competition. This could also provide an additional incentive for increased Chinese involvement.

- **Create room for Track 2 diplomacy and cooperation at the grassroots level**

Under the current relatively benign political climate between the two powers, non-governmental actors engaged in Track 2 diplomacy enjoy a great deal of autonomy even if Track 1 efforts remain unattainable in the short term. The greater level of distance from official engines of government allows for a level of engagement and creativity that government itself currently cannot afford. Projects that increase dialogue, build common understanding and reconcile different perspectives on conflict prevention and peace-building among academics, research institutions, NGOs, and other civil society groups in both countries can help to raise awareness, build momentum for continued collaboration, and facilitate future dialogue at a more official level. Such dialogue projects should aim to include (and where possible, prioritize) the voices and perspectives of policy communities from conflict-affected states.

- **Be flexible with terminology and avoid being trapped in arguments over semantics**

How the nature and purpose of engagement are defined can help to lend incentive and legitimacy to bilateral cooperation, or build roadblocks. In the case of crisis management, even something as subtle as a change in (for example) a US offer to China from ‘providing assistance’ to ‘providing analysis’ can open pathways that could otherwise remain closed for reasons of saving face. A better understanding of how the particular terminology and language used can affect diplomatic brinksmanship and perceptions of hierarchical relationships can uncover alternatives to assumed terms that stand to make cooperation more appealing to Chinese and American audiences alike.

- **Prioritize African perspectives**

China, the US, and other external powers are not the ultimate providers of African security or development. Sustainability demands that solutions remain in the hands of African governments, political leaders, civil society, and communities. African countries should ensure that it is their interests not those of the external partners that drive the conversation; however, it should be noted that national security and development plans that are led and developed by African states through broad-based inclusive processes involving civil society and other actors are not the norm. For their own security and development priorities, African countries should take a leading role in the inception, planning, and execution of any US-China cooperative initiatives in Africa.

- **Learn by doing**

Cooperation between China and the US on issues not directly related to combat operations or military coordination can also provide a testing ground for the two countries to learn practical cooperation by trial, thus setting productive patterns in place and gaining momentum for collaboration in other areas. Each
instance of this provides an opportunity for “proof of concept” and for building the kind of operational-level trust relationships that can bear fruit in the short term, but in the long term also involve the “pre-influentials” whose continued careers will take them to positions of greater influence in years to come.

Conclusion

While Africans must take the lead in finding their own solutions to the continent’s security and development challenges, navigating the growing complexity, scope, and interconnectedness of transnational and non-traditional security challenges requires the constructive engagement of key external stakeholders such as China and the US. With this in mind, a cooperative rather than competitive approach to stability and security in Africa should not be seen as ‘encroachment’ but as an opportunity and a challenge. In addition to the potential benefits for Africa, a focus on transnational challenges would help promote a broader, more internationalist perspective within the Chinese leadership which may constrain nationalist tendencies as China grows stronger. It will also open the door to opportunities for greater collaboration on a larger geopolitical stage as building blocks are laid through this engagement upon which trust and a mutual track record can be built. For China, the opportunity to learn from others with experience of conflict prevention, conflict-sensitive development, and peacebuilding to maximize their impact on peace and security and thereby secure long-term access to markets, investment opportunities, and resources in a more stable and prosperous Africa should be attractive. For the United States, the ability to better address complex security threats, share responsibilities with and learn from another power should be attractive. Such cooperative engagement Africa would also be consistent with China’s aspiration to be a responsible global actor on peace and security issues. For both countries, overcoming the entrenched zero-sum approach to international relations and their respective domestic political and economic pressures will be challenging, but a long-term vision for cooperation that is based on common interest and highlights the potential benefits both to Africa and to China and the US would be a good start.

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