

US-China Relations Study Group

US-China Relations as Seen from Africa: Phase Shift?

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Introduction

When looking at the nature of involvement by China and the United States in Africa (in this case, mainly sub-Saharan Africa), there is an important characteristic to consider. The main focus of China's involvement is economics and development. China's concern about security is related to an environmental position that will promote its involvement in economics and development. On the other hand, the U.S. involvement in Africa is focused on security issues, particularly its counter-terrorism strategy.

China's Involvement in Africa: The Economic Dimension

The strategic background to China's involvement in Africa is, of course, the inclusion of Africa in the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. It is believed that there are four aims here. The first is to gain the political support of African countries for China. Second is to strengthen China's involvement in security in Africa; the third aim is to strengthen connectivity at the continental level through the development of transportation networks on the African continent and the achievement of a huge economic market there. Finally, the fourth is to envision a huge economic zone with a view to connecting it to South America across the Atlantic Ocean. Regarding this interest, President Xi made the following remarks in his keynote speech at the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19 held on June 17, 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We call on the international community to build an open world economy, enhance macroeconomic coordination, and jointly keep global industrial and supply chains stable and unclogged. We express strong support to the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

“We recognize the importance of digitalization in the post-COVID-19 era and support efforts to speed up the development of Africa's digital economy and expand exchanges and cooperation on digitalization, information and communication technologies, especially tele-medicine, tele-education, 5G and big data.”¹

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is an African-led economic zone initiative that was originally scheduled to be operational on July 1, 2020, but, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is set to begin on January 1, 2021.

In addition, China's large-scale infrastructure construction in recent years has replaced the symbolic buildings of the 2000s (African Union (AU) headquarters, stadiums, and ministry buildings) with industrial hubs and transportation infrastructure such as ports and railroads, which are considered to be directly related to economic activities. Two representative examples in the area of port facilities are the construction of the multi-purpose port of Doraleh in Djibouti and the establishment of a free trade zone in the port of Djibouti. The construction of these was jointly financed by the China Merchants Group, the Djibouti Ports & Free Zones Authority, and the Corporation for the Management of the Free Trade Zone of Djibouti. China paid 45.6% of the \$560 million cost of building the Doraleh-based multipurpose port, which was completed in May 2017 (financed by the Export-Import Bank of China). In addition, the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone, the largest in Africa with a total area of 48 square kilometers (more than four times the size of Tokyo's Haneda Airport), will be built and operated by a group of Chinese companies at a cost of \$3.5 billion, although China's share is not clear. It is also a project that symbolizes a base of the “One Belt, One Road” concept. Facing the Red Sea, Djibouti is located at a strategic point on the maritime transportation route leading from the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal that passes through the Mediterranean Sea, and is positioned as a hub port under the “One Belt, One Road” concept in the long term.

The 750-kilometer Djibouti-Ethiopia Railway, which connects Djibouti with Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, a major regional power in the Horn of Africa region, was opened in 1917 during the colonial era, but was aging rapidly. With a total investment of \$4 billion (the Export-Import Bank of China has a 70% stake), the railroad was converted to standard-gauge rails and renovation work to electrify the entire line began in 2012. The entire line was newly opened to traffic in October 2016. With the opening of this railroad, the travel time that used to take three days by car was reduced to ten hours. This project is also an important part of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, and its opening means

that Ethiopia, as a landlocked country, has a very important route to the port.

In East Africa, China was involved in the construction of a 480 km long standard gauge railroad between the port city of Mombasa and the capital city of Nairobi in Kenya at a total cost of \$3.8 billion (90% of which was invested by the Export-Import Bank of China). Previously, the railway was a single line with narrow-gauge rails, and it took 12 hours to travel one way. The project was built to improve the efficiency of railroads in Kenya and was completed in May 2017. The one-way travel time was reduced to four and a half hours, and the number of users exceeded 1.5 million in the first year of operation, while the volume of cargo transported by rail increased tenfold, resulting in more efficient movement of people and goods. In addition to extending the railroad to the landlocked countries of Uganda and Rwanda, there are also plans to connect it to the Djibouti-Ethiopia railroad.

China's Involvement in Africa: The Security Dimensions

In addition, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China is seeking to strengthen its security cooperation in Africa. The background for this effort is that it is not desirable to have an unstable security environment in Africa, which is perceived to be a part of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015, President Xi announced that China would provide \$100 million in military assistance to the African Union (AU) over the next five years. Using this support, in addition to developing the AU’s African Standby Force (ASF) and strengthening its emergency response capabilities, the report also mentions the deployment of the first helicopter unit in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. The Sixth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCACVI) held in Johannesburg in December of the same year also referred to comprehensive security cooperation, and the “Action Plan 2016-2018” formulated here states that the AU will provide \$60 million in military assistance to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) initiative over a three-year period.

He also mentioned a new approach regarding cooperation with UN peacekeeping operations in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015. China announced the intention to lead the creation of a permanent police squadron for peacekeeping, as well as a peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 people. This announcement was praised because it would lead to a quicker response to the often delayed formation of peacekeeping forces. Furthermore, China has been eager to dispatch combat troops in UN peacekeeping operations in addition to responding to non-combat areas such as logistics, transport, and medical personnel. It is interesting to note, however,

that under the current UN peacekeeping system with its decentralized and fragmented command and control structure, each country's deployed troops have a high degree of freedom in their activities, and China's People's Liberation Army has also shown a kind of "soft power" activity, such as providing free medical services, donating school supplies to schools, teaching Chinese language and martial arts, and building relationships with local communities. This can be said to be an aspect of trying to improve the image of the People's Liberation Army both locally and in China.

China's Involvement in Africa: Debt Trap Diplomacy?

The so-called "debt trap diplomacy," which has been pointed out as a cause for concern in recent years regarding the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, has become an issue for China as well. There have been moves to suspend or cancel the continuation of infrastructure construction projects receiving huge loans from China due to unprofitability, excessive debt, and even problems with the terms of the loan contracts. In 2018, President Bio of Sierra Leone in West Africa canceled the construction of a new airport, which was planned to be built with a loan from China. In Tanzania, while President Magufuli made welcome remarks about Chinese aid, he also made a decision in June 2019 to halt construction plans by a Chinese company for the Bagamoyo port near Dar es Salaam, rejecting requests for rental years and tax exemptions. Although Tanzania has taken a firm stance of not accepting foreign investment that is not advantageous, the construction of Bagamoyo Port was agreed upon during President Xi's visit to Africa in 2013 immediately after his inauguration. However, as the project is a symbol of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, Tanzania showed a strong sense of caution.

In light of these circumstances, President Xi made the following statement at the China-Africa Unity Infectious Disease Control Special Summit held on June 17, 2020.

"Within the FOCAC framework, China will cancel the debt of relevant African countries in the form of interest-free government loans that are due to mature by the end of 2020. For those African countries that are hardest hit by the coronavirus and are under heavy financial stress, China will work with the global community to give them greater support, by such means as further extending the period of debt suspension, to help them tide over the current difficulty. We encourage Chinese financial institutions to respond to the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) and to hold friendly consultations with African countries according to market principles to work

out arrangements for commercial loans with sovereign guarantees. China will work with other members of the G20 to implement the DSSI and, on that basis, urge the G20 to extend debt service suspension still further for countries concerned, including those in Africa.”²

Specific measures for debt repayment will be negotiated on an individual basis from now on.

U.S. Involvement in Africa

From the economic point of view, U.S. policy toward Africa is basically a continuation of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a policy conceived during the Clinton administration. This is a policy of essentially zero tariffs on imports from Africa, which will be reviewed in FY2025. Under the Trump administration, the “Prosper Africa” program (“Prosper Africa”) was mentioned in the “New Africa Strategy” announced by then Assistant Secretary of State for National Security Bolton in December 2018. The aim of this program is to promote private investment in Africa by supporting the development of an environment for private investment by USAID, but there have been doubts about the implementation of this program, such as the lack of sufficient budgetary measures for this purpose.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the United States’ primary concern is its counterterrorism strategy, and, in November 2002, it established Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, where about 2,000 troops have been stationed. Currently, its activities are centered on un-manned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks targeting al-Shabaab in Somalia, and it is also looking at the situation in the Gulf, including that in Yemen on the other side of the Red Sea. In this connection, the U.S. has been involved in the development of human resources for peacekeeping operations in Africa (including counterterrorism) through military training programs since the Clinton administration. Bases for the counterterrorism strategy have also been set up in West Africa, with drone stations in Niamey and Agadez, the capital of Niger, where about 800 U.S. soldiers are stationed, and in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, where about 120 troops are stationed.

Area of U.S.-China Tension: The Horn of Africa or the Red Sea?

The U.S.-China relationship, having gone through different phases of involvement as mentioned above, has been multi-layered with various actors in recent years. What

moves could be made in the Horn of Africa or the Red Sea region, where tensions have been rising?

Until around 2017, the United States has been perceived as a region that could cooperate with China on Africa to a certain extent in terms of peace and security. This point was made by General Thomas D. Waldhauser, then commander of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM), in a 2017 congressional hearing. A major shift in this perception was the above-mentioned New Africa Strategy published by Bolton in December 2018. In it, Bolton mentions the construction of a Chinese base in Djibouti and the related Doraleh Container Terminal, warning that Djibouti is about to transfer this strategic terminal to a Chinese state-owned company, and that, if this happens, the balance of power in the Horn of Africa will collapse in favor of China. General Stephen J. Townsend, commander of USAFRICOM, raised similar concerns at a congressional hearing in 2020.

Experts such as Dr. Deborah Brautigam have been cautious about the way China's involvement in Djibouti is positioned as a target for "debt trap diplomacy" and, in turn, a threat to U.S. security in the region. On the other hand, there is some debate that China's economic involvement in the region could open up opportunities for the United States. However, it is necessary to continue to pay close attention, as there are extremely multilayered geopolitical dynamics in the region, including involvement by the Gulf states, Turkey, and Russia.

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This is an English translation of the original Japanese-language NPI Commentary posted on the NPI website on February 24, 2021.

Notes

¹ [Full text: Joint Statement of the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19 - Chinadaily.com.cn](#)

² [Full text: Keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19 - Xinhua | English.news.cn \(xinhuanet.com\)](#)