

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

Increasingly, external actors are involving themselves in Africa – engagement which is critical to African development, but which has potential either to increase security or further destabilise some of the continent’s already fragile countries. A cooperative rather than competitive approach between two key external actors, the US and China – based on common interests – would greatly enhance the conditions for peace and sustainable development in Africa, as well as providing each with direct benefits.

Introduction

For the past decade, the African continent has seen deepening interest in partnership and investment from external powers. The reasons are multiple but two in particular stand out: on the positive side, recognition of Africa as a commercial partner and potential economic powerhouse—not just a 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 intervention.

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 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 security¹ 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),² 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. China’s involvement has already led to some tensions in this regard, such as a 2007 rebuke by the British government³ and widespread criticism of its failure to promote human rights and good governance.⁴ 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.

Key recommendations for China-US collaboration

- Accept a broadened definition of security and focus on non-traditional security challenges and non-combat operations that offer opportunity without the connotation of military-military support or intervention
- Prioritize African perspectives
- Deepen mutual understanding and promotion of knowledge exchange in conflict-sensitive development and the management of conflict, crises, and risk in business sector involvement

US engagement is multifaceted. 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](#)

¹ For more on China’s role in Africa, see Saferworld’s 2011 report, ‘China’s growing role in African peace and security’, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/500-chinas-growing-role-in-african-peace-and-security>

² <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t954620.htm>

³ McGreal, C; ‘Chinese aid to Africa may do more harm than good, warns Benn’. February, 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/08/development.topstories3>

⁴ Alessi, C and Xu, B; ‘China in Africa’. April, 2015 <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-africa/p9557>

[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.

Looking only at inter-state conflicts, Africa has become a more peaceful continent⁵ in the past two decades. However, protracted conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, outbreaks of violence in Kenya, South Sudan, 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 reflects a disquieting trend with regard to poverty: the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) estimates that by 2025, 80 per cent of the world's poorest will be concentrated within fragile and conflict-affected countries, with the bulk of those in turn concentrated within Africa.⁶ This trend has direct implications for the 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.

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. A lack of cooperation among key international actors and 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 to date remains a wide gulf between the two countries, the issue of African security 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'. 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. 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 'returning to the Asia-Pacific' initiative has been interpreted negatively in China as an attempt to contain China's growing role in its own backyard. More specifically regarding Africa, American analysts have shown growing concern about the US 'losing out' in Africa.⁷ Such a competitive theme is also popular among their Chinese counterparts, who are concerned that the US is attempting to undercut Chinese economic interests.⁸ 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. 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.

⁵ Straus, S; 'Africa is becoming more peaceful, despite the war in Mali'. January 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/30/africa-peaceful-mali-war>

⁶ Kharas, H and Rogerson, A. 'Horizon 2025: creative destruction in the aid industry'. July 2012. <http://www.odi.org/publications/6687-creative-destruction-aid-industry-development-kharas-rogerson>

⁷ Yun, S and Rettig, M. 'American and Chinese trade with Africa: Rhetoric vs. reality'. August, 2014. <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/214270-american-and-chinese-trade-with-africa-rhetoric-vs-reality>

⁸ Yun, S. 'The limits of US-China cooperation in Africa'. April, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/africa-in-focus/posts/2015/04/06-limit-us-china-cooperation-in-africa-sun>

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 Sudan and Zimbabwe. 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 exacerbating⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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.

As a result, 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.

However, as China's engagement deepens in Africa, its policy community is increasingly focusing attention on the challenges that African peace and security present for China's own interests, with attention 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".¹¹

The greatest opportunity for US-China cooperation would be a move beyond the state-centric view of security and an acknowledgement of a far more appropriately nuanced definition of security, which recognizes a nexus of security and development in both policy and practice. 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 military to military (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

⁹ Shinn, D. 'Africa, China, the United States, and Oil'. June, 2015. <http://csis.org/story/africa-china-united-states-and-oil>

¹⁰ The Economist 'What China wants', <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21613263-after-bad-couple-centuries-china-itching-regain-its-place-world-how-should> August 2014

¹¹ Goldstein, L. 'Not Congruent but Quite Complementary: U.S. and Chinese Approaches to Nontraditional Security' China Maritime Study 9, Naval War College, July 2012

have resulted in a lack of confidence among large Chinese banks regarding commercial investments on the continent. Chinese policymakers and business actors 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 bring in 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 for further development and peacebuilding efforts. 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 that one power can be played against the other for monetary or political gain; and thus deepening the probability of productive African engagement and direction.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, given the fundamental motivation of both nations to invest and operate in countries that are at least relatively peaceful and stable, and 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. 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 that could alter the cost-benefit calculation for both China and the US towards greater collaboration. 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

The two countries already have experience of working together, having engaged in military cooperation through 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.¹² 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 and mil-mil 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,¹³ 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 cooperation and their vision of the future of UN peacekeeping; sponsor joint programmes, including international conferences on the reform of UN peacekeeping operations; and jointly sponsor peacekeeping training programmes,

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 anti-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**

¹² http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1173145.shtml

¹³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-us-support-peacekeeping-africa> and <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t954620.htm>

development and the management of conflict, crises, and risk in the business sector

Chinese and American businesses and investments in Africa are vulnerable to conflict and fragility; and if unwisely conceived and implemented, these ventures can 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 also cater to Chinese interests without jeopardizing the US ones 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, 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 peacebuilding 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) 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 from 'providing assistance' to 'providing analysis' can open pathways that could otherwise remain closed for reasons of saving face, or diplomatic brinkmanship and perceptions of hierarchical relationships to make cooperation more appealing to the Chinese audience.

▪ 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.

Conclusion

While Africans must take the lead in finding their own solutions to the continent's security and development challenges, the 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 would greatly contribute to enhanced conditions for peace and sustainable development. For the US, the rise of China 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. For China, the opportunity to learn from others with experience of conflict prevention, conflict-sensitive development, and peacebuilding in order to maximize its 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. Such cooperative engagement 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.

Background

This briefing builds on high-level roundtable discussions hosted by Saferworld in Washington DC in October 2014 and March 2015 during which Chinese, African, and US governmental, non-governmental, and academic participants discussed the prospect of and mechanisms for achieving practical cooperation through an exploration of security: its meaning and the means of achieving it. These discussions are part of a Saferworld project that aims to promote improved understanding of effective policy and operations, and to lay the foundation for constructive dialogue between China and the US on cooperative interaction to support peace and security in Africa.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

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