The U.S. and China in Africa

By

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United States Interests in Africa

The United States has five “hard” interests in Africa. First, it obtains about 20 percent of its imported oil from Africa and wants to expand this access. Second, it seeks the political support in international forums of as many as possible of Africa’s fifty-three countries, which constitute more than one-quarter of the members of the United Nations. Third, it desires to increase exports to Africa. Fourth, it wants to maintain access for U.S. military aircraft to over fly/land in African countries and for U.S. Navy ships to dock in African ports. Fifth, important “negative” interests include African support in the fight against terrorism, drug smuggling, money laundering and international crime so that these problems do not come to the United States.

Some analysts would include as U.S. interests in Africa the expansion of democracy on the continent, economic development of African countries, support for free markets, etc. These are at best “soft” interests. In my view, they are more appropriately described as goals or objectives of U.S. policy. They are not “hard” interests.

United States Policy in Africa

It is still early in the Obama administration to know authoritatively its policy towards Africa. Of all the major regions of the world, Africa will retain its ranking as having the lowest priority in U.S. foreign policy. Historically, there has also been relatively little change in policy towards Africa when power shifts from one administration to another in Washington. There is no reason to believe the situation will be significantly different following the most recent political transition. At the same time, there will be policy changes on the margins and probably a few major initiatives from the Obama administration.

Just weeks after the inauguration of President Obama, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs described U.S. policy towards Africa as follows. First, the United States will provide security assistance programs that are critical to securing the objective of a peaceful African continent, including the elimination of the ability of terrorists to operate in the region. Second, the United States will promote democratic systems and practices and support the rise of freedom. Third, it will encourage sustainable and broad-based, market-led economic growth. Fourth, it will support health and social development, especially the reduction of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

The Obama foreign policy team offered some indications during the presidential campaign on the way the new administration would deal with Africa. It expressed a goal of rooting out corruption, encouraging 100 percent debt cancellation for the world’s heavily indebted poor countries and promoting research aimed at creating a green revolution in Africa. It said it would strengthen U.S. support for democracy, good governance and the rule of law in Africa. It promised to focus on programs such as funding for training and border security and rely less on military responses as it works to counter terrorism. The Obama team commented that it will support democratic activists living under the most repressive regimes. Obama said he will call on China to use its influence to prevent Sudan from acting contrary to international law and promised to
impress on China’s leaders that their support for repressive regimes in Sudan and Zimbabwe runs counter to the well-being of the people in those countries.

Obama campaign materials recognized the growing importance of China in Africa and concluded it would be mutually beneficial if Africa and the United States developed strategies for cooperating with China in critical areas such as poverty alleviation, health care and protection of the environment. The Obama team seems to accept the desirability of identifying programs and policies where it can work cooperatively with China in Africa.

**Areas for U.S.-China Collaboration in Africa**

The areas identified below for U.S.-China collaboration try to take into account both American and Chinese interests while, at the same time, benefiting one or more African states.

- As part of a broader dialogue on global energy security, the United States and China can include developing oil derivatives and renewable energy, encouraging efficient energy consumption, developing energy technology, and increasing the safety, efficiency and environmental protection of oil extraction in Africa.
- Together with other donors, the United States and China could engage in dialogue on coordinating development assistance to Africa to avoid duplication and ensure more effective distribution of limited resources. The best mechanism for this coordination is the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD.
- The United States and China could explore collaboration in combating malaria in Africa. The United States is supporting an increase in the capacity of health care infrastructure in Africa while China is building ten antimalaria centers in Africa and has a factory in Tanzania that produces the antimalaria drug artemisinin. China is one of the world’s major producers of artemisinin, which medical experts agree is a highly successful program for preventing malaria when used in combination with other drugs and is part of a holistic program that includes insecticide-treated bed nets.
- Neglected tropical diseases offer another area for U.S.-China collaboration, particularly hookworm infection and schistosomiasis, which each afflict some 200 million Africans. USAID and the Gates Foundation are working to reduce both diseases in Africa, and China has its own experience in combating them. China is also among the largest producers of praziquantel, the principal drug for treating schistosomiasis.
- Historically, both the United States and China have separately helped African countries to improve their agricultural output. The two countries can explore the possibility of undertaking joint agricultural assistance projects in Africa.
- The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) could engage its Chinese counterparts on ways to establish joint projects related to UN peacekeeping operations and maritime security. This has already occurred on an ad hoc basis in Liberia.
- The United States and China can work together to help African coastal states reduce smuggling, illegal fishing, piracy, drug shipments and threats to offshore oil facilities. The U.S. Coast Guard has been particularly successful in cooperating with its Chinese counterpart organizations. China has provided patrol
boats and training to both Sierra Leone and Nigeria and recently joined international efforts to curb piracy off the coast of Somalia.

- The United States and China could work to build greater trade capacity in Africa, which Africans have identified as a priority. Both the United States and China are in a position to help African states boost their competitiveness in the global market, especially for products other than raw materials. The United States is trying to do this with its Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, while China has a more modest program that eliminates duty on about 600 items for those African countries that are on the UN list of less-developed countries. China also has a loan fund that encourages Chinese businesses to establish manufacturing operations in Africa.

- The United States and China, in collaboration with other donors, could be more supportive of African concerns in the context of the World Trade Organization. China supported India during the collapse of the last Doha round, which worked to the detriment of African agricultural exports. The Doha round is an opportunity for both the United States and China to support African aspirations.

- Both the United States and China have demonstrated their concern over the negative impact of climate change and environmental degradation. China appears to be increasingly receptive to taking steps to end environmentally damaging practices. Growing recognition of the impact of climate change on Africa, which will face some of the most dramatic negative effects, could open opportunities for constructive discussion and cooperation.

- China is learning that it needs to become more aware of the role of African non-governmental organizations and civil society. The United States has a comparative advantage in this area. This could be an area where the United States offers constructive advice on ways to interact more effectively with this increasingly important component of African society.

- It is in the interest of the United States and China to identify funding on both sides of the Pacific to enhance contact among Chinese and American Africanists. This might include funding for university and think tank representatives to attend conferences, host professor exchanges and engage in joint research with African scholars. The Ford Foundation funded a program in the 1990s to bring Chinese scholars to the United States to study African affairs at the graduate level in U.S. universities. This program no longer exists, and today there is limited contact between American and Chinese scholars on Africa.