Avoiding a New Berlin Conference:

A Framework for U.S. – Chinese Economic Cooperation in West Africa

by Kevin Peel, Justin Reddick, John Hoeck and Cynthia Dehne

In November 1884, representatives from 14 nations met in Germany to negotiate differences and formalize their colonial aspirations at the Berlin Conference. The result of the conference was to split the continent into spheres of influence of the main European powers, or what history has labeled the "Scramble for Africa." The borders created for these colonies disregarded the ethnic, religious, or cultural identities of the native populations and had, in large part, become the borders of the modern nations of Africa, especially in the region of West Africa. While every representative to that conference would have spoken about how they worked the best agreement for their nation's interests while preserving the peace among the major powers, the unintended consequences of their actions are still creating conflicts and costing lives over 130 years later.

Entering the second decade of the twenty-first century, a new "Scramble for Africa" has begun to emerge with a vast expansion of Chinese trade and investment on the continent, and

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the U.S. government looking to readdress its interests as it begins to fall behind. China's long-term presence posture has allowed Beijing to forge strong diplomatic relations with African governments and earn high favorability ratings among its populations, as it has grown into the continent's largest trading partner. However, there is growing concern among both foreign and West African observers that China's continued investment in the region is contingent on its ability to access natural resources, rather than on its intent to improve living conditions or economic growth. As the two global powers maneuver to secure their interests, it is critical that the interests of the local populations and the future development of their nations also be considered.

Despite the differences in approach, the U.S. and China have shared interests in West Africa—mainly, the building and maintaining of strong and secure nations. Through a cooperative, balanced strategy, the U.S. government and People's Republic of China (PRC) can achieve mutual economic success. Such cooperation brings four additional impacts, all adding to stability in the region:

- The containment or destruction of violent extremist organizations (VEOs).
- The ability to prevent and respond to pandemics or other serious health concerns.
- Increased ability of nations to effectively govern themselves, relatively free of corruption.
- An economic environment where the U.S., China, and the nations of West Africa can collectively prosper.

Chinese and U.S. Economics in West Africa

The U.S. government and the PRC approach economic aid to West African nations with two very different strategies. First, the U.S., through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), seeks to maintain elements of free and fair societies in countries that are recipients of aid. To do so, each agency stipulates conditions that must be met before any aid distribution. MCC looks at data points in three categories: ruling justly; investing in people; and encouraging economic freedom.[1] The goals of projects initiated by the MCC are reducing poverty and spurring economic growth in a country or region, geared toward increasing the quality of life of a population. The projects funded by MCC are tailored and highly supervised to ensure that each project does not fall victim to political corruption.

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While USAID shares MCC's commitment to economic growth and prosperity through aid projects, stipulations for aid distribution is more effect-based, rather than focused on qualities of free and fair government. In order for aid dispersal or project initiation, USAID requires that it specifically be tied to a criterion or criteria in one of the following broad categories: peace and security; democracy, human rights, and government; health, including education; economic growth, including environmental issues; humanitarian assistance; capacity building; gender; youth; and issues crossing multiple categories.[2] Because the U.S. government attaches certain conditions to aid in West Africa, many projects either never come to fruition or go unfinished due to changes in a country's political and human rights environment.

The PRC, on the other hand, is mostly concerned with resource extraction from West African nations and the transportation/export of those resources back to China. To secure mineral rights, the PRC issues cash aid to pay off Western or international loans or develops infrastructure within a nation, mainly with the goal of easing resource export. While the PRC has funded and constructed other means of aid—ranging from hospitals and schools to university scholarships and cultural exchange centers—its foreign aid activity in West Africa is largely "no-strings attached" with regard to democratic governance and human rights.[3] As such, the PRC, using state-owned companies, gains easy and inexpensive access to West African minerals and resources, with little or no concern for the internal affairs of the nations at hand.

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According to a Congressional Research Service report in 2012, Chinese-African trade surpassed U.S.-African trade in 2009, and the gap has continued to widen since.[4] However, polls conducted by Gallup, Afrobarometer, and Pew Research reveal these investments have not had a proportionally negative affect on West African views of the U.S., despite marked improvements in West African perceptions of China.

The Spring 2015 Pew Research poll examined Chinese perceptions in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. The percentage of respondents who held a favorable view of China were 70 percent in Nigeria and Senegal and 80 percent in Ghana. However, when asked about their views of the U.S., respondents from those nations were also overwhelmingly positive. Nigerians held a 76 percent, Senegal an 80 percent, and Ghana an 89 percent favorable rating of the U.S., the second highest in the world.[5] From 2014–2015, Afrobarometer, an African-led research network, found that 67 percent of Liberians chose the U.S. when asked which country is the best model for future development. That was the highest of all 36 nations surveyed, and 15 percent higher than any other nation that responded in favor of the U.S.[6]

Of the nations in the 2015 Pew Research poll, the U.S. conducted the least trade and foreign investment with Senegal since 2006. However, there has been a significant increase in the volume of trade between the two countries. In 2006, the U.S. exported $96.9 million worth of goods (in U.S. dollars) to Senegal and imported $20.7 million. By 2016, those figures grew to $169.6 million and $51.3 million respectively.[7] Over that same period, foreign direct investment (FDI) between the U.S. and Senegal decreased, from $19 million in stock in 2006 to $14 million in 2015.[8]

Over the same period, there has been a significant increase in the favorability rating of the U.S. in Senegal. According to a 2006 Gallup poll, 66 percent of adults ages 15 and older surveyed expressed approval of the U.S.[9] However, the Pew Research Center poll of American favorability ratings in 2015 showed that 80 percent of Senegalese surveys held a favorable view of the U.S., despite the decreased FDI.[10] This corresponds with the aforementioned Afrobarometer survey regarding the best economic model for development, where 33 percent of Senegalese favored the U.S., compared to 28 percent for China.[11]

Over the same period, Senegal and China experienced a substantial increase in trade with total trade volume (exports and imports) increasing from $196.7 million in 2005, to $845.3 million in 2012, and then to over $2.3 billion in 2015.[12] Chinese FDI stock in Senegal rose from $2.35 million in 2005 to $45.03 million just five years later, according to the PRC Ministry of Commerce.[13] This increase in both trade and investment may account for the high favorability rating that China currently enjoys with Senegal. In the Pew Research survey conducted in 2015, 70 percent of Senegalese held a favorable view of China, with only 11 percent responding with an unfavorable view.[14] This is supported by the Afrobarometer poll, which asked the Senegalese if they thought that Chinese economic and political influence in their country was mostly positive, mostly negative, or if they had not heard enough to say. 65 percent of Senegalese surveyed responded that they felt Chinese influence was a positive influence on the country.[15]

In contrast to Senegal, Ghana has been one of the largest trading and investment partners of the U.S. in West Africa. In 2006, U.S. exports to Ghana totaled $289.5 million, while imports were $192.2 million. Ten years later, those numbers climbed to $783.4 million and $287.7 million respectively.[16] American FDI stock in Ghana dwarfs the totals of Senegal, with a total of $3.1 billion reported in 2013, an increase from $974 million in 2006. Ghana also has $37 million in FDI within the U.S. and is one of the few West African nations with a reciprocal investment in the U.S.[17]

The result of this significant increase in American trade and investment is an improvement of already stellar favorability ratings among the Ghanaian people. According to the 2007 Pew Research Global Indicators Database, when polled on perceptions of the U.S., 80 percent of Ghanaians responded favorably. In 2015, the favorable response to the same question among Ghanaians climbed to 89 percent.[18] The 2014–2015 Afrobarometer survey further confirms this strong American favorability, with 37 percent choosing the U.S. as the best model for future development compared to only 15 percent that responded for China.[19]

This large increase in American trade with Ghana after 2006 pales in comparison with the explosion of trade between Ghana and China. In 2006, total trade between China and Ghana stood at an impressive $882.8 million, with $803.1 million being Chinese imports. By 2015, total trade volume had swelled to $6.6 billion, with $5.31 billion in Chinese exports to Ghana, compared to $1.29 billion in Ghanaian exports to China.[20] Chinese investment in Ghana also increased significantly, from $7.33 million in FDI stock in 2005 to $202 million by 2010.[21]

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These significant increases in both trade and investment since 2005 have also led to an improvement in China's favorability score among the Ghanaian people. In 2007, the Pew Research Center survey found that 75 percent of Ghanaians surveyed held a favorable view of China, which increased to 80 percent in 2015.[22] However, the reaction to the rise in Chinese-Ghanaian trade, especially with Chinese imports, has not been entirely positive. The 2014–2015 Afrobarometer survey asked African citizens in 36 nations whether they thought Chinese economic and political influence in their country was mostly positive, mostly negative, or if they had not heard enough to say. 36 percent of Ghanaians responded that it was a negative influence, compared to 34 percent whose said it was positive, the second lowest favorability of the 36 nations polled. The same survey also asked citizens if they believed Chinese economic assistance did a good or bad job of meeting their country's needs, with 41 percent responding negatively and only 30 percent responding positively.[23]

The resumption of peace in Liberia

corresponded to a significant boost in trade with the U.S., which stood at $75.3 million in 2002, the final year of the civil war. In 2006, total trade volume between the two nations was $207.7 million, with $139.9 million being in Liberian exports to the U.S. Ten years later, that trade volume has increased slightly to $240.6 million, with $176.5 million in U.S. exports to Liberia.[24] The U.S. also increased its FDI in Liberia over that period from $556 million in stock in 2006 to $929 million in 2015.[25]

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Due to the historic ties with the U.S. dating back to the nation's founding, it is a common assumption Liberians have a natural favorability toward Americans. However, there have been few surveys available to gauge Liberian attitudes towards the U.S. outside of the 2014–15 Afrobarometer survey, as the Pew Research Center has not surveyed Liberians in any of its Global Attitudes Surveys in the last decade. Gallup has published just three polls including Liberia, but they centered on the opinion of the U.S. government, which can be different from attitudes towards the nation as a whole. In 2007, Liberians polled by Gallup held a 35 percent approval rating of American leadership, compared to a 12 percent disapproval. The majority of respondents, 53 percent, held no opinion of the U.S. government .[26] Following the election of Barak Obama in 2009, U.S. government approval in Liberia spiked to 90 percent in 2010, only to plummet to 65 percent in 2011.[27] In 2007, Pew Research conducted their own survey in Ghana, where the U.S. received an 80 percent favorability rating as a whole; however, the U.S. government , and specifically the President, received only a 69 percent approval from the same respondents, which nearly matches the 70 percent result from the Gallup poll.[28]

China and Liberia have enjoyed a significant relationship since the turn of this century, marked by increasing levels of trade and investment. In 2006, Chinese-Liberian trade volume stood at $531.7 million, increasing to $1.54 billion in 2015. However, like the other two countries mentioned above, the trade is heavily weighted in China's favor, with $1.36 billion of 2015 trade accounted for by Chinese exports to Liberia.[29]

Liberian opinions about China are limited by the same lack of survey data that was found for opinions on the U.S. The most in-depth survey of Liberian opinions over the last several years remains the 2014–2015 Afrobarometer survey, which did ask several questions about China. Its data revealed that Liberians largely welcomed the increased trade and investment from China. When asked how they felt about Chinese economic and political influence in their country, 81 percent of Liberians responded favorably, compared to only seven percent who responded negatively. The 81 percent favorable rating was the highest positive response of the 36 nations in the survey.[30] Similarly, 68 percent of Liberians believed that Chinese economic development assistance did a good job of meeting their country's needs, compared to only 20 percent who felt the Chinese were doing a poor job.[31]

As shown by these examples, despite a significant increase in both trade and investment across West Africa, the gains China has made in public opinion polls have had no negative impact on perceptions of the U.S. or U.S. government in the same nations. Therefore, in West Africa, it appears that influence among the populations is not a zero-sum game, removing one potential source of conflict between the two nations.

PRC investment and West African Corruption

In 2000, *The Economist* published an article titled "The Hopeless Continent." The article asserted that corruption would lead to an African future characterized by barbarism.[32] The overwhelming belief was that most African states were rife with corruption and incapable of effective governance—a belief that is still prevalent today. Western development strategies in Africa are dominated by altruism, usually focusing on humanitarian aid and the spread of liberal democratic ideas. In the past, Western strategies advocated a linear democratization approach that begins with free elections and ends when states evolve to a constitutional democracy. Western African strategies largely failed to account for culture, context, and the citizens of African nations. However, as Beijing recognized great economic opportunity in resource-rich Africa, China adopted a much different strategy that promoted complementary economic interests. With a comprehensive African strategy focused primarily on economic interests, Chinese investment in Africa grew rapidly to include trade and infrastructure aid. Instead of advocating an altruistic approach centered on "helping poor people," they employ soft power tools and treat African states as equal trading partners. This approach allows China to quickly outmaneuver other nations, which concerns the Western powers. A broad assumption held by many in the West is that Chinese efforts—especially business ventures—increase corruption throughout the continent. When the root causes of corruption are understood, it is evident that PRC investment does not cause corruption in West Africa. Corruption in West Africa is caused by states with ineffective governance, limited transparency, and weak rule of law.

Although there is evidence that some business transactions between Africa and China have been influenced by corruption, this does not indicate that PRC investment in West Africa directly increases corruption. However, as argued by Economist Angus Deaton, all investment aid from richer to poorer nations has the potential to cause corruption and hinder national development.[33] Because African governments receive aid directly, they "need no contract with their citizens, no parliament, and no tax-collection systems."[34] The key to stability and preventing corruption is strengthening governance, transparency, and the rule of law. Without a solid foundation that includes these three tenets, states are weak and conflict-prone, economic development is hindered, and citizens remain poor.

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Though Africa is flush with resources, extraction and export of those resources rarely go toward improving citizens' quality of life, mostly due to corrupt African governments. Corruption indexes continue to paint a dire picture, pointing to high rates of corruption in most West African nations.[35] The 2016 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index show that Nigeria and Ghana failed to improve their scores. Additionally, Ghana's score decline is the second largest in the Index, falling from a score of 47 in 2015 to 43 in 2016.[36]

Unfortunately, the root causes of corruption in Africa are often misunderstood. While it is easy to blame the roots of African corruption on weak institutions left in place by colonial powers, this does not address the problem in its entirety or provide any potential solutions. The international community, in tandem with leaders from West African nations, should address corruption in the region actively. To mitigate corruption, institutions should be strengthened and governments must be held accountable. The U.S. and the PRC are in unique positions to tackle the problem of corruption, given the large economic presence each nation maintains in West Africa.

Unlike the West, China's strategy does not focus on saving or guiding a "desperate" Africa. Instead, China treats Africa as a business partner. While China directs investment efforts toward economic interests and resource extraction, the U.S. government directs aid toward the improvement of quality of life, to include humanitarian assistance, health and education, conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and rule of law programs. Both nations' efforts in West Africa are vital to building regional security and stability and paving the road for future prosperity.

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In 2015, PRC President Xi Jinping unveiled a "win-win cooperation" strategy between China and Africa with a goal of fostering mutual prosperity, while allowing investors to "do good while doing right." Part of this strategy consisted of $60 billion in Chinese aid in developing local economic capacity over three years.[37] The PRC also promised to cancel outstanding debts for Africa's least developed countries, provide aid for drought-stricken countries, and award scholarships to African students.[38] Additionally, President Xi agreed to assist with providing satellite reception to 10,000 African villages and upgrading health care facilities.

The U.S. and China can mutually benefit from a stable and prosperous Africa. Both Beijing and Washington have crucial economic and political interests in West Africa, so peace and stability are essential. By cooperating, the U.S. and China can craft a long-term strategy that promotes peace and development ultimately advancing everyone's interests. China's presence in West Africa is not altruistically motivated, but China's involvement does not directly increase corruption. Moreover, Beijing has mobilized immense resources to advance infrastructure projects throughout the region. If projects such as these were part of a more comprehensive strategy developed in concert with the U.S. and other key international players, the benefits experienced by West Africa would be immense.

A Proposed Operational Approach

For the U.S. government to maintain its level of influence and mind its interests in West African, while allowing the PRC to pursue its own interests, all while building a more stable and secure region, the following operational approach provides an option. This framework accounts for the current conditions in the region, proposes a desired end state, and relies on a whole-of-government approach, utilizing all instruments of national power.

The first step in this process is to build a sound understanding of the current conditions and desired end state for the region, taking into account current U.S. government interests and assumed PRC interests. As previously mentioned, several polls within West Africa have highlighted a positive perception of the U.S. government and its role in regional affairs, particularly after the 2014–2015 Ebola pandemic. This information was used to identify the roles currently being played by the U.S. government and the PRC in the region, and how best to achieve a desired end state that would be mutually beneficial to both nations and the region. The chosen time frame of five years represents the most realistic amount of time to fully mobilize and execute an operational approach such as the one proposed.

To address the comparative effects of the operational approach, it is also necessary to highlight the disparity of current PRC actions in the region compared to those of the U.S. government. Also of note are the emerging West African governments that are the most susceptible to foreign influence. By using these current conditions along with the five-year time frame, the desired end states of sustained U.S. government influence in the region, greater U.S. government and PRC economic cooperation, and strong intra-regional partnerships between stable West African governments were developed, as those were achievable and sustainable. The result is an operational framework, allowing implementation that optimizes existing plans and available resources. The goal is to strengthen West African nations individually, and the region as a whole, which is in the interest of both the U.S. government and the PRC.

Diplomacy: Laying the Groundwork

Emphasis of shared interests. By initiating direct communication between respective diplomats and government leaders, the intent is to emphasize how cooperation vice competition can have the greatest benefit for all parties involved. It may require compromise on a number of fronts, but the establishment and continued underscoring of shared interests (in addition to mutually exclusive interests) provide a solid foundation for action.

Initiation of joint ventures. In this step, the U.S. government and the PRC undertake projects in West Africa by either combining efforts on a single project (new/upgraded port facilities, road ways, water treatment facilities, etc.) or by engaging in complementary efforts (U.S. government builds a hospital, PRC builds a road leading to it; U.S. government builds a school, PRC supplies busses to bring children to school, etc.). Alternatively, joint ventures can ensure that structures are designed for and constructed with a standard voltage across an entire country or deconflict projects so both nations are not building duplicate roads, wells, or power grids. This step takes careful planning and consideration, especially with regard to how it impacts the host nation and region.

Shared interests align. Over time, from this strategy, currently unknown shared interests will begin to materialize. As more areas of cooperation in West Africa come to light and after the successes of joint ventures, opportunities and willingness for future cooperation will grow.

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Information: Preaching the Benefits

Promoting the benefits. Perhaps the hardest part of this whole process is promoting the benefits, while simultaneously presenting policymakers on both sides with feasible and attractive options. By demonstrating the financial benefits of cooperation with Chinese projects to maximize the benefits toward local populations and host-nation government stability, decisionmakers will be more apt to provide their support. It is imperative that U.S. national interests as stated in the National Security Strategy and the U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa serve as the foundation to educate both decisionmakers and the U.S. population on how working with the Chinese, instead of competing with them, is to our long-term benefit. This will involve cost estimates, assessments on measures of effectiveness, and an unfiltered outlook of the impact—to both governments and to the host nations of West Africa.

Achieve buy-in from the U.S. population. Using U.S. tax dollars to improve other nations is not always a popular idea and, frequently, meets staunch resistance from the U.S. population and media outlets. But this step is just as essential as the promotion of benefits, as without the support of the U.S. people, legislation authorizing actions taken in this framework would be quickly scuttled. Similarly, if the U.S. population is led to believe that the PRC is the recipient of the most benefit from cooperation, public perception would quickly sour.

Promote successes and gains. As projects begin to materialize and their impacts can be easily seen, a critical part of this process is displaying and selling those gains. In doing so, popular support is cemented for future ventures or areas for cooperation.

Military: Allowing Nations to Secure Themselves

Increased capacity. Nuanced deployment of U.S. military forces can be tailored to increase the capacity of West African nations. Much of this is already taking root, via the U.S. Army National Guard State Partnership Program, the Regionally Aligned Forces construct, and a number of multinational exercises in West Africa. The focus, in line with the NSS and AFRICOM mission, is currently to counter VEOs and build capacity in some key nations in the region. With some alterations, the focus can shift to capacity building, to include training and equipping, to allow for the nations of West Africa to maintain their own physical security.

Coordinate efforts with the AU. Integration of coordination of efforts with the African Union (AU) will augment single-nation military capacities and forge a path for greater regional military cooperation. This places less of a counterterrorism burden on Western forces and builds stronger regional relations.

Regional partnerships replace United Nations (UN) missions. Ultimately UN missions in West Africa can be replaced by host-nation or regional forces. Regional nations that can contribute capable, professional forces toward the AU or handle small, regional crises themselves diminishes the need for outside nations, including the U.S. and China, to send large forces to West Africa, which will promote greater regional stability, responsible national militaries, and increased trust and support of local populations for their governments.

Economic: Sealing the Deal

Increase industry access to electricity. Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, does not have reliable access to electricity. Considering that other cities of smaller scale in the neighboring nations likely experience the same rate of power or less, expanded access to electricity is an ideal starting point.

Promote economic growth and diversification.
Industrial access to economic diversification will not only strengthen the economy of any one nation, but the entire region. Combining Chinese investment with the U.S. Power Africa program could assist with broadening the reach of both nations' programs, while rapidly increasing power availability in targeted regions. By speeding up the access to dependable power, other investment projects from housing, to hospitals, to factories that rely on electricity could take shape through both the government and private sector and further stimulate economic growth.

Conclusion

Building a secure and stable West Africa is in the mutual interests of the U.S. government and the PRC. Through cooperation between Washington and Beijing, West Africa will begin to thrive in ways that benefit the region, the countries therein, the United States, and China alike. U.S. government and PRC leaders often tend to view their interests and approaches in the region as competitive and on a collision course. However, with cooperative and complementary efforts, each nation can continue to pursue mutual interests, while simultaneously improving the state of affairs in West Africa. ***IAJ***

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