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The US-China Competition in Africa: Drivers, Mechanisms, and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study examines US-China Competition in Africa by analyzing its driving forces, mechanisms, and implications within the context of transformations in the international system. It focuses on the energy, commercial, and security interests that have motivated both powers to expand their presence across the continent, highlighting the differences in their approaches. China has relied primarily on economic partnerships, unconditional development assistance, and the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), whereas the United States has emphasized political conditionality alongside security and military initiatives. The study concludes that Africa has become a pivotal arena for the reconfiguration of global influence, while the rivalry between the two powers has broadened the strategic options available to African states, even as it remains closely linked to securing vital resources and strengthening geopolitical influence

Keywords: US-China Competition, Africa, China, United States, Energy Resources.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, Africa has undergone a profound transformation in its position within the international system. After remaining for many years—particularly during the Cold War—on the periphery of the strategic priorities of the major powers, the continent has re-emerged as a region of growing geopolitical significance. This shift has been driven by evolving global geopolitical and economic dynamics, together with Africa's abundant natural resources, vast energy reserves, and strategically advantageous geographic location. Consequently, the continent has become one of the principal arenas of competition between established and emerging powers.

Within this context, United States policy toward Africa has undergone a significant evolution. From its relatively limited engagement during the Cold War, Washington adopted a more active approach following the end of that period. This engagement intensified further in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, when security considerations, counterterrorism, and the need to secure and diversify energy supplies became central pillars of U.S. strategy toward the continent. Africa consequently assumed greater strategic importance for the United States, particularly in light of its expanding petroleum reserves and Washington's efforts to reduce its dependence on traditional energy suppliers, most notably the Middle East In parallel, Sino–African relations can be traced back to the Bandung Conference of 1955. Initially, these relations were predominantly political and ideological, centered on supporting national liberation movements and promoting South–South cooperation. Following the end of the Cold War, however, they gradually evolved into broad economic and developmental partnerships, driven largely by China's rapidly expanding demand for energy resources and raw materials in support of its sustained economic growth. As a result, Africa has become a strategic partner for China—not only as a vital source of energy resources, but also as a promising market for Chinese exports and an important platform for expanding Beijing's economic and diplomatic influence.

Against the backdrop of the simultaneous expansion of both American and Chinese engagement, Africa has emerged as a major arena of international strategic competition, where political, economic, and security considerations increasingly intersect. Within this competitive landscape, energy security occupies a central position as one of the principal determinants shaping the foreign policies of both powers. Consequently, African oil has acquired strategic significance, becoming a pivotal factor in the reconfiguration of the balance of influence across the continent.

Building upon this context, the present article addresses the following central research question:

How have strategic interests—particularly those related to energy security—shaped Sino–American competition across the African continent?

This central question gives rise to the following subsidiary research questions:

- What strategic importance does African oil hold within the foreign policies of China and the United States?
- What are the principal drivers that have made Africa an arena of competition between the two powers?
- What mechanisms have China and the United States employed to consolidate their influence and advance their strategic interests across the African continent?

Based on this research problem, the article advances the following principal hypothesis:

Energy security constitutes the primary determinant of Sino–American competition in Africa and shapes the diverse policies and instruments employed by both powers to consolidate their influence across the continent.

This overarching hypothesis is further developed through the following subsidiary hypotheses:

1. The greater the strategic significance of Africa's petroleum reserves, the greater the continent's importance within the foreign policy priorities of both China and the United States.
2. Conflicting economic and energy interests between the two powers contribute to the intensification of their strategic competition across Africa.
3. The political, diplomatic, economic, and military instruments employed by China and the United States in Africa reflect their shared pursuit of energy security while simultaneously strengthening their strategic influence throughout the continent.

Accordingly, this article seeks to analyze the multiple dimensions of Sino–American competition in Africa by examining its underlying drivers, strategic interests, and mechanisms of implementation, ultimately highlighting its geopolitical implications for the continent's future.

1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SINO–AFRICAN RELATIONS.

China's policy toward the African continent has undergone successive transformations shaped by changing international and regional dynamics. It has evolved from an approach primarily centered on political and ideological considerations—particularly support for national liberation movements during the Cold War—to a more comprehensive strategy founded on strengthening economic and developmental partnerships. This strategic shift has accompanied China's emergence as a major economic power and an increasingly influential global actor, as well as its growing need to secure reliable energy supplies, expand overseas markets, and consolidate its presence within the international arena.

1.1 *Strategies of Chinese Policy in Africa.*

Relations between the People's Republic of China and African states have been closely associated with the struggle of national liberation movements against colonialism. Their origins coincided with the Bandung Conference of 1955, during which China recognized the strategic importance of the developing world in enhancing its international standing, both by securing support for its foreign policy and by garnering international backing for its legitimate claim to China's seat at the United Nations amid its diplomatic rivalry with Taiwan. The legitimacy of Sino–African relations is rooted in the shared historical experiences of both parties. Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasized this historical foundation when he stated: "China–Africa friendship is deeply rooted in history and continues to deepen with the passage of time." [1] This shared historical legacy subsequently became the cornerstone of China's political discourse toward Africa, which has consistently emphasized solidarity among Global South countries based on their

common experience of resisting colonialism and foreign domination.

Guided by this vision, China formulated its policy toward Africa in accordance with the foreign policy principles articulated by Zhou Enlai, namely: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. As noted in the literature, "These principles have remained the foundation of Sino–African relations throughout successive Chinese administrations."[2]These principles have constituted the normative framework governing China–Africa relations and have significantly contributed to strengthening political trust between the two sides, particularly during the 1960s, when China promptly recognized newly independent African states and actively supported national liberation movements. In return, many African countries endorsed the People's Republic of China as the legitimate representative of China and declined to recognize Taiwan.

During the 1970s, "China moved to intensify Sino–African diplomatic relations at a time when Sino–Soviet relations were experiencing growing tensions following the military escalation along the Sino–Soviet border in 1969." [3]. Against this backdrop, Beijing expanded its diplomatic presence across Africa, taking advantage of the deterioration of its relations with the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, it strengthened cooperation with developing countries and promoted the Three Worlds Theory, introduced by Deng Xiaoping before the United Nations in 1974. [4] During this period, Africa emerged as a strategic arena for expanding Chinese influence, while African diplomatic support played an important role in China's restoration to its permanent seat within the United Nations Security Council in 1971. Following the era of Mao Zedong, Chinese foreign policy gradually shifted toward prioritizing economic development while preserving Africa's strategic importance. This orientation was reflected in a series of high-level official visits, most notably Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang's tour of eleven African countries between December 1982 and January 1983, as well as in China's growing reliance on foreign assistance programs founded upon principles of mutual economic benefit. With the end of the Cold War, China repositioned itself strategically across the African continent by capitalizing on its accumulated historical ties and longstanding political relationships. This became particularly evident in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square events of 1989, despite the fact that China "faced severe criticism from Western countries, while its relations with developing countries—and African states in particular—remained largely unaffected. Indeed, most African political elites expressed solidarity with the Chinese government, thereby further increasing the importance of these countries in Chinese strategic thinking."[5] At the same time, Beijing remained firmly committed to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, particularly regarding issues related to human rights. Through sustained diplomatic engagement, China successfully broadened African support for its positions within international organizations.

These developments demonstrate that China's policy toward Africa has evolved from a primary emphasis on political and ideological dimensions to the establishment of broader economic and development partnerships, without abandoning the political foundations upon which the relationship was originally built. China has strategically leveraged its historical legacy and diplomatic capital to strengthen its presence across the continent, secure access to natural resources, expand its markets, and advance its broader ambition of consolidating its position as an influential global power within the international system.

1.2 *China's Political and Economic Interests in Africa:*

During the Mao Zedong era, Sino–African relations were largely characterized by the predominance of political and ideological discourse. As one study observes, "China's rejection of the rules governing the international system was driven more by ideological considerations than by practical conduct. Isolation constituted an alternative strategic choice, while China's economic conditions prevented it from advancing beyond the category of poor countries, with nearly half of its population dependent on agriculture." [6] However, the rise of Deng Xiaoping marked a decisive turning point in Chinese foreign policy. By introducing the policy of Reform and Opening-up, founded upon what became known as "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," Deng fundamentally reoriented China's development strategy. His famous dictum, "It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice, it is a good cat"[7]epitomized this pragmatic approach. The demands of sustained economic growth subsequently compelled China to redirect its foreign policy toward serving its economic and strategic interests, thereby making Africa an indispensable partner in achieving these objectives.

Securing reliable energy supplies soon became the foremost priority of China's African policy. China's strategy toward Africa has therefore been closely linked to its need to guarantee stable access to petroleum and other raw materials essential for sustaining rapid economic growth. As one source notes, "After the United States strengthened its grip over the Gulf region, while optimistic expectations regarding the oil reserves of the Caspian Sea declined, China found itself compelled to diversify its sources of oil supply." [8] As domestic oil production declined and internal energy demand increased, Beijing increasingly relied on imports. According to available statistics, "China's oil imports from Africa account for approximately 25% of its total global oil imports," [9] while "31% of China's petroleum requirements are supplied by African sources." [10] This growing dependence explains the significant expansion of Chinese investment in exploration, production, and refining activities, particularly in Sudan, Angola, Nigeria, and Gabon.

Beyond energy security, Africa has also emerged as a promising market for Chinese exports and an important destination for Chinese investment. Trade between China and Africa expanded remarkably, increasing "from US$10.6 billion in 2000 to US$18 billion in 2003, nearly US$30 billion in 2004, and US$73 billion in 2007." Likewise, Chinese foreign direct investment grew rapidly after "the Chinese government encouraged Chinese companies to expand into Africa, considering it a promising region for trade and investment." [11]Consequently, hundreds of Chinese enterprises established operations across the continent, extending their activities into trade, infrastructure development, energy, and service industries.

China's interests in Africa, however, extend well beyond economic considerations to encompass broader political and diplomatic objectives. As one scholar argues, "From the perspective of Chinese policymakers, engagement with Africa is essential for sustaining China's economic growth, while simultaneously contributing to the expansion of China's influence and prestige as a major global power." [12]

Accordingly, Beijing intensified its official engagement with African states, fully recognizing the strategic importance of Africa's collective voting power within the United Nations and other international organizations. Indeed, "African countries constitute a regional bloc and a stable voting coalition that consistently supports Chinese positions whenever China faces criticism within multilateral forums such as the United Nations and its specialized agencies” .[13] In the same vein, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao affirmed that "China stands ready to coordinate its positions with African countries in the formulation of international economic rules and multilateral trade negotiations." [14]

Taken together, these developments indicate that China's interests in Africa are founded upon a close interdependence between economic and political objectives. China seeks to secure stable access to energy resources and strategic raw materials while simultaneously expanding its markets and overseas investments. At the same time, it endeavors to strengthen its international influence by cultivating long-term strategic partnerships with African states, thereby reinforcing its status as an emerging global power.

1.3 *Drivers of China's Engagement with Africa:*

China's engagement with the African continent has intensified markedly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly following the establishment of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Chinese policy has been guided by the twin principles of unconditional economic cooperation and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. This orientation has been closely linked to China's need to secure a stable flow of strategic raw materials—most notably petroleum—while simultaneously expanding external markets capable of absorbing Chinese manufactured goods amid the country's sustained economic expansion. Growing energy demand has become one of the principal drivers of this policy. Although China achieved self-sufficiency in oil production during the 1960s, becoming one of the world's leading producers, this equation changed fundamentally following Deng Xiaoping's policy of Reform and Opening-up, which triggered unprecedented industrial growth. Indeed, "The final decade of the twentieth century witnessed an economic vitality in China unparalleled by that of any comparable economy." [15] As domestic consumption continued to rise while national production became increasingly unable to satisfy demand, China became a net importer of oil in 1993, making energy security a strategic priority of its foreign policy.

Against the backdrop of mounting risks associated with traditional energy supply routes—particularly those in the Middle East—Africa assumed an increasingly prominent position within China's energy security strategy. As one study observes, "Energy resources consequently became the principal focus of China's expanding engagement in Africa, accounting for the largest share of its investment strategies and diplomatic efforts on the continent."[16]Although China possesses substantial domestic petroleum reserves, forecasts indicate a persistent increase in energy consumption, making access to overseas energy resources indispensable for sustaining its industrial transformation. Within this framework, Beijing has significantly strengthened its diplomatic and economic presence throughout Africa, employing development assistance and investment as key instruments for consolidating long-term strategic partnerships. This growing Chinese engagement prompted former French President Nicolas Sarkozy to remark: "China may transform its appetite for raw materials into a strategy of domination, particularly in Africa." [17]

This strategic orientation has been reflected in the steady expansion of Chinese investment in Africa's energy sector, particularly in Sudan, Angola, and Nigeria, where Chinese enterprises have invested extensively in oil exploration, production, and transportation infrastructure. At the same time, China's rapid economic growth has further accelerated domestic energy demand. According to one source, "The Chinese economy expanded at an exceptional rate of 93%,"[18] while projections suggest that "China's energy consumption will increase at a rate four times higher than that of Europe and the United States, requiring a 150% increase in oil consumption."[19] Consequently, the African continent has become one of the fundamental pillars of China's energy security strategy and one of the principal arenas of international competition over strategic natural resources.

1.4 ***Chinese Trade and Investment in Africa:***

China’s foreign policy underwent a profound transformation following the rise of Deng Xiaoping to power, as economic considerations assumed a central position in Beijing’s external orientation, in line with his philosophy of reform and opening-up, encapsulated in his well-known statement: “It does not matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat.”[20]During this period, “while the socialist system was maintained in the political sphere, China embraced a market-oriented economy in the economic sphere. Although cordial relations with Africa continued, the Chinese leadership increasingly prioritized economic concerns, leading to a reassessment of Africa’s strategic importance, the nature of China’s interests on the continent, and the appropriate strategy to pursue. This policy was rapidly translated into a new pattern of relations governed by the duality of Chinese investment—particularly in infrastructure—and trade in exchange for natural and energy resources.” [21] This strategic orientation was further consolidated with the publication of China’s 2006 White Paper on Africa, entitled China’s African Policy, which affirmed that “China is a reliable partner for developing countries in all fields.” [22]

China expanded its economic presence in Africa primarily through its multinational corporations, particularly those operating in the oil, gas, and infrastructure sectors, while capitalizing on a range of competitive advantages. Its strategy was founded upon the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, enabling Chinese firms to invest even in countries subject to Western sanctions or political isolation. This approach was complemented by the adoption of low-cost bidding strategies and the deployment of a highly efficient yet comparatively inexpensive Chinese workforce. As one study observes, “China does not possess a competitive advantage over its Western counterparts in an open market; however, in a relatively closed market such as Africa, Chinese companies are able to benefit from government influence.” [23] Likewise, “the extensive diplomatic engagement, together with governmental support for large-scale projects ‘for the benefit of governments’ and the provision of development assistance by the Chinese government to prospective recipient countries, constitutes a defining characteristic of the bids submitted by Chinese companies.” [24] These factors contributed substantially to the rapid expansion of Chinese investment throughout the continent, both through large state-owned enterprises and through small and medium-sized firms, which collectively played a pivotal role in consolidating China's economic influence.

According to figures released by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce at the end of 2003, China had established 116 joint contractual investment companies across 49 African countries, with a cumulative investment of approximately US$1.2 billion. Moreover, between 2000 and 2007, Chinese entities participated in nearly 800 development projects across Africa, including 137 agricultural projects and 333 infrastructure projects, among numerous others. One of the

defining characteristics of Chinese investment in Africa has been its relatively low implementation costs compared with those of Western firms. These investments significantly expanded the presence of Chinese enterprises and commercial outlets across African markets, particularly in the sectors of trade, construction, transportation, and energy. [25]

Concurrently, Sino-African trade experienced remarkable growth, driven by China's increasing demand for raw materials and energy resources, alongside Africa's growing imports of low-cost Chinese manufactured goods. During the first half of 2004, bilateral trade reached approximately US$20.5 billion, representing a 50 percent increase compared with the corresponding period in 2003. Furthermore, 41 African countries concluded free trade agreements with China, reflecting Beijing's sustained efforts to deepen commercial integration with the continent. Although Africa continued to account for only a modest share of China's total foreign trade, the overwhelming majority of these exchanges were concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, enabling China to emerge as the region's largest Asian trading partner. [26]

The overall structure of Sino-African trade remains characterized by a clear pattern: China imports crude oil and primary commodities while exporting manufactured and consumer goods. This complementary trade relationship not only serves the structural requirements of the Chinese economy but also helps secure the continuous flow of the strategic resources indispensable for sustaining China's long-term economic growth.

2. *U.S. POLICY IN AFRICA:*

1.5 *U.S. Energy and Commercial Interests in Africa:*

The United States' energy policy has evolved beyond the mere pursuit of secure and stable oil supplies to become an integral component of a broader grand strategy aimed at preserving its global leadership and maintaining its dominance within the international system. As one study notes, “This was facilitated by the United States' ability to capitalize on the outcomes of the Cold War, which left it as the sole dominant power in international relations. Such dominance, however, could only be sustained through control over the lifeblood of the global economy—oil.” [27] Against this backdrop, energy security assumed a prominent place among the priorities of successive U.S. administrations. Indeed, “President George Walker Bush's foremost priority upon entering the White House was to achieve energy security.” [28]

To this end, he established the National Energy Policy Development Group, chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney, whose recommendations emphasized the diversification of energy supply sources and the exploration of new strategic regions, foremost among them the African continent.

Africa consequently acquired growing strategic significance within U.S. foreign policy owing to its abundant and increasingly attractive petroleum reserves, particularly those located in the Gulf of Guinea and West Africa. According to available estimates, “its oil production increased by 36 percent between 1992 and 2002, compared with only 16 percent for the rest of the world.” [29] As a result, oil-producing states such as Nigeria, Angola, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and Equatorial Guinea attracted heightened interest from American petroleum companies, especially after the Cheney Report identified Africa as one of the priority regions for U.S. energy security. The strategic appeal of African crude oil is further reinforced by its favorable physical characteristics, as “experts have confirmed that African crude contains relatively low sulfur content, thereby reducing refining costs.” [30] Moreover, the fact that many African oil fields are located offshore minimizes security risks while lowering transportation costs relative to supplies originating from the Persian Gulf.

The strategic value of African petroleum became even more pronounced amid the sustained growth in U.S. energy demand, with projections indicating a continued increase in dependence on imported oil. Consequently, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, African oil emerged as one of the principal pillars of U.S. national security and long-term energy strategy.

American interests in Africa, however, have never been confined solely to the energy sector. They have also encompassed significant commercial and investment objectives, reflecting the continent's vast consumer market and abundant natural resources. African markets increasingly attracted the attention of U.S. policymakers, particularly given that “in addition to representing a market of more than 700 million consumers, Africa is a region whose

commercial and investment potential cannot be overlooked by American interests.” In this context, President Bill Clinton declared in 1999 that “The time has come to open the field widely to competition and transparency, making it in Africa's interest to align itself with the world's strongest economy. Africa is no longer the exclusive preserve of the colonial powers.” [31]

Accordingly, U.S. commercial interests became closely intertwined with its energy objectives within a unified strategic framework. Following the events of September 11, this approach was further reinforced through the adoption of the doctrine of preemptive action, accompanied by an expanded American political, economic, and strategic presence across the African continent.

1.6 ***U.S. Security Interests in Africa: From Counterterrorism to Militarization:***

The transformation of U.S. policy toward Africa following the September 11, 2001 attacks was driven by the growing prominence of security considerations. The "Global War on Terror" became the framework through which Washington redefined its engagement with the continent. As one study states, "The security and economic interests of the United States require it to remain close to the 'arc of crises' or regions of instability stretching from Africa to southern South America through the Middle East and Asia."[32] Before assuming office, President George W. Bush had declared that "the African continent did not constitute a strategic priority for him." [33]

However, this perception changed fundamentally after the 9/11 attacks, when Africa became an integral component of the U.S. defense architecture and a central pillar of its counterterrorism strategy.

The United States consequently intensified its military and security cooperation with a number of African states and launched initiatives aimed at strengthening their capacity to combat armed organizations. Military coordination also expanded across the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. In March 2004, the Chiefs of Staff of Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, and Tunisia convened to discuss military cooperation in combating terrorism, with particular emphasis on the African Sahel. At the same time, the U.S. administration sought to expand its military footprint on the continent. Indeed, "U.S. officials confirmed in 2004 that the principal objective of the Bush administration was to secure the right to establish military bases in Morocco and Algeria," [34] as part of a strategy based on preemptive intervention and the protection of American interests in regions of geopolitical significance.

This growing military presence was closely associated with oil- and gas-rich regions, demonstrating the intersection between security considerations and energy interests. In this context, it has been argued that "the American mindset pursues oil—or, as the British saying goes, 'go where the oil lies.' President George W. Bush had extensive experience in the oil industry, Dick Cheney had served as the chief executive of one of the world's largest oil companies, and Condoleezza Rice had been a member of the board of directors of Chevron." [35] This observation illustrates the extent to which U.S. security strategy has been linked to safeguarding energy resources and strategic supply routes, particularly given the central role of oil in the American economy.

This strategic orientation culminated in the incorporation of Africa into the global U.S. War on Terror. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice emphasized this by stating that "Africa's history and geographical location enable it to play a pivotal role in the war on terrorism; Africa's role is of paramount importance to our war on terror." [36]

Similarly, "Africa as a whole was incorporated into the American war on terrorism through a series of security and military cooperation initiatives... culminating in the establishment of a dedicated United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)." [37] This approach was based on the assumption that fragile states could serve as potential safe havens for terrorist organizations. Accordingly, the U.S. National Security Strategy affirmed that "one of the critical objectives of American policy in Africa is to strengthen fragile African states and assist them in building local capacities to secure their borders... with the aim of denying terrorist groups safe havens." [38]

Nevertheless, this perspective did not receive unanimous support among African governments. While the United States emphasized international terrorism as the principal justification for expanding its military presence, most African governments remained primarily concerned with addressing domestic security threats and internal conflicts. Consequently, it is difficult to separate the War on Terror from the protection of U.S. economic—particularly energy—interests in Africa, as security considerations have frequently served as a strategic framework for consolidating American military and geopolitical influence across the continent.

3. *MECHANISMS OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN PRESENCE IN AFRICA:*

1.7 *Political and Military Mechanisms:*

Both China and the United States have relied on a variety of political and military mechanisms to consolidate their presence in Africa, although the nature and objectives of these mechanisms differ significantly. China has primarily emphasized diplomacy, political partnerships, and limited military cooperation, whereas the United States has combined diplomatic influence with direct military expansion in pursuit of its strategic and security interests. At the diplomatic level, China has sought to strengthen its relations with African states through frequent high-level official visits and by promoting partnerships based on equality and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. In this context, "Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin strengthened Sino-African relations through his visit to Africa and by presenting his Five-Point Proposal (establishing a diversified friendship, achieving equality in bilateral trade, strengthening unity and cooperation, promoting common development, and fostering a forward-looking vision for independence)."[39] Furthermore, "the principal dimension of China's penetration into Africa is diplomatic expansion," [40] which has relied on diplomatic engagement, development assistance, and participation in peacekeeping operations. The principle of non-interference has remained one of the defining pillars of Chinese foreign policy, as expressed by a Chinese diplomat who stated: "Non-interference is our trademark, just as intervention is the trademark of the Americans..." [41]

In contrast, the United States strengthened its diplomatic presence through a succession of official visits, beginning with President Bill Clinton's visit in 1998, followed by George W. Bush's visit in 2003, and later Barack Obama's visit to Ghana in 2009. Washington also supported the appointment of Kofi Annan as Secretary-General of the United Nations. Peacekeeping operations likewise became an important political and military instrument for both powers in Africa. China expanded its contribution to United Nations peacekeeping missions by deploying personnel to Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan, becoming "the largest contributor to peacekeeping operations in Africa among all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council." [42] In addition, in 2006 China allocated US$3.5 million to support African Union peacekeeping operations. The United States, for its part, participated in several peacekeeping missions and launched the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) in 1997 to train and equip African peacekeeping forces, while progressively increasing financial appropriations for this purpose.

On the political front, China has used its permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council to support a number of African governments and causes, in return for continued African backing of its positions on international issues, particularly the One China Policy. Among the most notable examples are its support for Sudan and Zimbabwe. President Hu Jintao affirmed that: "Beijing will always pursue a friendly policy toward Sudan. Regardless of changes in Sudan's domestic or international situation, this policy will not change." [43] This position contrasted with that of the United States, which sought to impose sanctions on Sudan while framing its policy around concerns related to human rights, terrorism, and the Darfur crisis.

In the military sphere, the United States strengthened its direct presence through the establishment of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), announced in 2007 as the principal framework for coordinating military and security activities across the continent. This presence was reinforced through a range of military assistance programs, including joint military exercises, professional military education, and the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. China, by contrast, maintained a more limited form of military cooperation, consisting primarily of military assistance, training African military personnel, and exporting arms to selected African countries. As one source notes, "In 2003, China's arms sales to Africa amounted to US$1.3 billion," [44] while Beijing maintained that such assistance was intended "to enhance African countries' capacity for self-defense, a legitimate right guaranteed under international law." [45]

This divergence illustrates the fundamentally different approaches adopted by the two powers. Whereas the United States has relied on militarization and an expanded military presence to safeguard its interests, China has preferred to advance its strategic objectives through political engagement, diplomatic influence, and limited military cooperation, thereby reinforcing its long-term presence across the African continent.

1.8 *Economic Mechanisms:*

Economic assistance has constituted one of the principal instruments of China's engagement in Africa. Beijing has strategically employed development aid to strengthen its relations with African governments, secure access to natural resources, and gain political and diplomatic support. As one study notes, "the use of foreign aid to strengthen ties with governments has served as a means of securing new resources and gaining diplomatic allies. Africa has received the largest share of China's development assistance, amounting to approximately 44%, or the equivalent of US$1.8 billion." [46] Unlike the Western model, Chinese aid has generally been characterized by the absence of political conditionality. This distinction was highlighted by Rwandan Finance Minister Kaberuka, who stated: "Chinese aid comes in a different way from that provided by Washington, Paris, and London... without lectures on democracy and human rights." [47]

Consequently, several African countries—including Sudan, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, and Zambia—strengthened their cooperation with China following the reduction or suspension of Western assistance. This approach was accompanied by a substantial increase in Chinese financial commitments to the continent. The value of Chinese aid rose from approximately US$107 million in 1988 to US$2.7 billion in 2004. Moreover, "the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), together with other smaller financial institutions, occupies a central role in Beijing's contemporary engagement with African governments by providing loans for construction projects and infrastructure investment." [48] As a result, concessional loans and the financing of large-scale infrastructure projects became among the most significant instruments of China's economic presence in Africa.

China's role was particularly evident in the development of basic infrastructure, where it financed strategic projects that international financial institutions had been unwilling to support. One of the most prominent examples is the TAZARA Railway, linking Tanzania and Zambia over a distance of approximately 1,800 kilometers. Furthermore, "in 2006, China extended concessional loans to finance the rehabilitation and restoration of transportation networks in several African countries,"[49]including railway systems, transport infrastructure, and the reconstruction of road networks in Angola. As one source observes, "the growing role of Chinese companies in Africa's infrastructure sector reflects their strong competitive advantage, owing to the lower cost of their projects compared with those of competing Western firms while maintaining the same technical standards." [50]

Chinese cooperation has not been confined to economic development alone; it has also extended to the health sector through what is commonly referred to as "health diplomacy." This initiative dates back to 1964, when China dispatched its first medical team to Algeria. Since 2002, China has also organized international training programs focusing on the prevention and treatment of diseases and epidemics affecting African populations. These initiatives illustrate the diversity of the economic and developmental mechanisms employed by Beijing to strengthen its presence and consolidate long-term partnerships with African countries.

1.9 *The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC):*

The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), launched in Beijing in October 2000, is regarded as the most significant institutional mechanism for organizing China–Africa relations. It was established “to provide a platform for dialogue and collective consultation between China and African countries on issues of vital importance to developing nations.” [51] The forum reflects Beijing’s determination to consolidate its international presence. It aims to deepen mutual understanding, strengthen political consultation, and expand economic cooperation, with ministerial conferences convened every three years. The first ministerial meeting, held in 2002, brought together representatives from 45 African countries and 17 international and regional organizations. During the meeting, China reaffirmed that its relations with Africa were “free from political conditions,” thereby embodying its long-standing principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. China further reinforced this policy by canceling the debts of several African countries amounting to 10.5 billion Chinese yuan (approximately US$1.27 billion), thus effectively adopting “a policy of unconditional debt cancellation.” [52] This policy significantly strengthened the China–Africa partnership while helping to secure the growing Chinese demand for energy resources and raw materials.

From another perspective, U.S. economic policy in Africa has been based on the principle of political conditionality, linking aid to democratic reforms and respect for human rights. At the same time, Washington promoted the slogan “trade, not aid” through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which sought to expand trade with Sub-Saharan African countries and provide technical assistance to stimulate U.S.–Africa

commercial relations. The initiative imposed a number of reform conditions on participating African states, and "targets countries occupying strategic locations that reduce the cost of transporting resources through the U.S. naval fleet in West Africa." [53] Moreover, the U.S. Congress stipulated that governments responsible for serious human rights violations would be ineligible to benefit from American assistance.

The contrast between the two approaches reveals a clear divergence in the instruments of influence employed by the two powers on the continent. While China relied on financing, investment, and unconditional debt relief, the United States adhered to a policy of conditional assistance. Consequently, a considerable number of African countries increasingly strengthened their cooperation with Beijing. In this context, Michael Watts argues that "the strategic interests of the United States in Africa are not limited to securing reliable and inexpensive oil imports, but also include containing rising powers such as China." [54]

Furthermore, the limited scope of the AGOA initiative, which focused primarily on trade without adequately addressing debt relief and broader development challenges, rendered it less attractive than the Chinese model. This is particularly evident given that "African debtor countries pay thirteen dollars in debt service for every one dollar they receive in aid, thereby spending 70 percent of their export earnings on debt repayment." [55] Consequently, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation has emerged as one of the principal instruments of economic competition between China and the United States on the African continent.

4. *CONCLUSION*

The study of the Chinese–American competition in Africa reveals a profound transformation in the continent's geopolitical significance within the contemporary international system. Africa has become a strategic arena where the interests of energy security, trade, security, and investment converge, making it one of the principal theatres for the reconfiguration of the global balance of power. The analysis demonstrates that the divergence in the objectives pursued by China and the United States is reflected in the distinct instruments they employ. China has sought to consolidate its presence through economic partnerships, infrastructure investment, unconditional development assistance, and cooperation founded upon the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. By contrast, the United States has relied on political conditionality, security alliances, military engagement, and the linkage of economic cooperation with democratic governance and human rights.

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10. Mohamed Khataoui, Oil and Its Impact on International Relations, (Beirut: Dar Al-Nafaes, 2010), p. 212.

11. Mohammad Awad Al-Hazaimeh, International Issues: The Legacy of a Bygone Century and the Burden of the Coming Century, (Amman: Dar Al-Hamed for Publishing and Distribution, 2007).

NOTES

[1] Excerpt from the speech of the President of the People's Republic of China at the opening of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, November 4, 2006.

[2] See: Hamdi Abdel Rahman Hassan, Arabs and Africa in a Changing Era (Cairo: Dar Misr Al-Mahrousa, 2009), p. 186.

[3] 3 Hamdi Abdel Rahman, Africa and the Challenges of the Age of Hegemony: What Future? (Cairo: Madbouly Bookstore, 2007), pp. 87–88.

[4] See: Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics (Tripoli: Academy of Graduate Studies, 2005), p. 325.

[5] Hamdi Abdel Rahman Hassan, Arabs and Africa in a Changing Era, p. 189.

[6] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 324.

[7] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, trans. Othman Jebali Al-Mutallouthi (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2009), p. 23.

[8] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, Doctoral Dissertation in Political Science and International Relations (University of Algiers, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Department of International Studies, 2012/2013), p. 456.

[9] Ibid., p. 358.

[10] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 24.

[11] Ibid., p. 26.

[12] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 461.

[13] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 36.

[14] Ibid., p. 37.

[15] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 333.

[16] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 25.

[17] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 464.

[18] Michael Klare, Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict, trans. Adnan Hussein (Beirut: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, 2002), p. 23.

[19] Ibid., p. 23.

[20] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 23.

[21] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 442.

[22] Ibid., p. 416.

[23] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 61.

[24] Ibid., p. 62.

[25] See: Adel Abdel Razzaq, “The Economic Dimension of China–Africa Cooperation in Light of the Global Financial Crisis,” African Horizons, No. 30 (Cairo), p. 90.

[26] Hamdi Abdel Rahman, Africa and the Challenges of the Age of Hegemony: What Future?, p. 151.

[27] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 377.

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[29] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 393.

[30] Mohammed Khtaoui, Oil and Its Impact on International Relations (Beirut: Dar Al-Nafaes, 2010), p. 212.

[31] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, pp. 142–143.

[32] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 142.

[33] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 403.

[34] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 143.

[35] Mohammed Awad Al-Hazaimeh, International Issues: The Legacy of a Past Century and the Burden of a Coming One (Amman: Dar Al-Hamed for Publishing and Distribution, 2007), p. 201.

[36] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 411.

[37] Abdelhalim Ghazli, United States Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa after the End of the Cold War, p. 412.

[38] The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (September 2002), adapted.

[39] Hilal Mohammed Reda, “China’s Economic Presence in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges,” International Politics Journal (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, No. 163, January 2006), pp. 143, 147.

[40] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 53.

[41] Ibid., p. 86.

[42] Ibid., p. 42.

[43] Hamdi Abdel Rahman Hassan, Arabs and Africa in a Changing Era (Cairo: Dar Misr Al-Mahrousa, 2009), pp. 141, 186.

[44] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 40.

[45] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 347.

[46] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 37.

[47] Ibid., p. 356, adapted.

[48] Chris Alden, China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?, p. 39.

[49] Hamdi Abdel Rahman Hassan, Arabs and Africa in a Changing Era, p. 127.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 359.

[52] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 360.

[53] Ibid., p. 164.

[54] Hamdi Abdel Rahman Hassan, Arabs and Africa in a Changing Era, p. 173.

[55] Kazem Hashem Nehmeh, Africa in International Politics, p. 167.