

Africa, America, and China

Estimation or Underestimation?

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China and Africa are mentioned in tandem with increasing frequency. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend's 2021 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee called for caution and concern toward Chinese activities in Africa, stating that the United States cannot afford to underestimate Africa's economic potential and its strategic consequences.¹ Unlike the United States, China is heavily invested in African infrastructure, telecommunications, and government-to-government ties. What accounts for this investment? And has the United States underestimated Africa?

There are several possible answers to this first question. First, China's interest in prestige and respect might be driving its interest in Africa. Or, it might recognize its domestic economic pressures and is seeking an outlet to ensure regime stability. Last, it may be hedging against future war and is therefore working to gain access to twenty-first century minerals. Against these reasons, might the United States be underestimating Africa?

Africa's Constrained Potential

To the question of underestimation, it's necessary to first establish Africa's geopolitical situation and its potentials and pitfalls, both of which are significant. Africa accounts for 20 percent of the world's landmass but, as a result of Mercator map projections, its true size is often underrepresented on two-dimensional maps. Compared to the world's most populous or most developed nations, Africa is larger than all of them combined. The 54 nations on the African continent represent the largest voting bloc in the United Nations, and these countries are represented by the African Union as a singular intergovernmental, continental-level organization. There is no shortage of natural resources there, and Africa has many marketable and valuable commodities. These include petroleum in the north and on the Atlantic coast, precious and rare minerals in the center of the continent, and agricultural products such as timber and fish across its coastlines. It stands astride the world's busiest shipping lanes.

Beyond these natural resources, there is also human potential. Africa has a growing population, with the population of Nigeria expected to exceed that of the United States in the coming years.² Gross domestic product has been steadily

increasing—particularly since before the turn of the century. In many cases, growth of its countries has proportionally exceeded that of the United States. Africa is a continent of the young. It is a continent of significant diversity, as evidenced by the 200-plus different ethnicities present there.

Pitfalls compete to offset these potentials. Africa remains largely underdeveloped, and there are more persons living in extreme poverty in Africa than in the rest of the world combined. Compared to the rest of the world, Africa has been largely unable to escape poverty: although the percentage of Africans living in poverty has technically decreased, the number of Africans living in poverty increased by almost 50 percent in the past 30 years.³

Geography poses a challenge to addressing underdevelopment and impoverishment. Despite the large expanse of arable land in the center portions of the African continent, its development—and associated aspects of transportation and commerce—have historically been constrained by the area's physical geography as the high plateaus render many of its longest rivers unnavigable. To offer a pair of examples: Rapids and waterfalls prohibit navigation through the majority of the Zambezi River basin, and the Congo River's downstream rapids similarly limit movement into the heartland—and therefore inhibit effective access to its abundant natural resources. Infrastructure is of no help either; even today, there exists little transcontinental rail access to move goods and to support the movement of services either on Africa's north-south or, for the most part, its east-west access. There are only a few air transportation hubs on the African continent, and Africa has a comparatively low volume of power lines.

Historical disadvantage further challenges African potential, although the continent didn't necessarily begin that way. Africa has historically been self-governing, with major empires such as the Songhai, Mali, Ghanan, and Zimbabwean Empires recognized as effective governing bodies while tribal and ethnic structures provided small-scale governance in areas beyond the reach of the historical empires. Succeeding these historic empires, though, are several external influences that have contributed to the underdevelopment and impoverishment that exist today.

First, the slave trade starting in earnest in the seventeenth century and climaxing in the nineteenth century is estimated to have caused the removal of 18 million able-bodied Africans from their home continent, degrading relations between communities and corrupting legal structures in the process. Many African countries still have not recovered from the slave trade, as evidenced by Nathan Nunn's 2008 economic study, using ship registers and family names to calculate slave exports for each modern-day African country. Comparing the low and high slave export countries against their gross domestic product growth, he found a

robust negative relationship between slave exportation and economic development. This suggests that the slave trade from centuries ago continues to impact Africa today.⁴ If the slave trade weren't destructive enough to the natural economic development of Africa, nineteenth-century colonialism further worsened Africa's prospects. In the few decades following the 1884 Berlin Conference, Africa was almost entirely colonized at the outset of World War I. Only the kingdom of Ethiopia and Liberia remained uncolonized—the latter retained its freedom as originally established only through the repatriation of slaves from the Americas.

Although African countries started gaining their independence in the years following World War II, African heads of state opted to retain preexisting borders—meaning that externally derived boundaries would continue to shape and constrain African politics and political economies. Differences in language, different postcolonial systems of governance and governing, and even currency issues—such as how the Central African franc (minted in Cameroon) and the West African franc (minted in Senegal) are both held in reserve by the French treasury—impact how African states internally and externally act.⁵ The so-called inviolability of borders likely masked inherent weaknesses of the African states, weaknesses that became exposed as they declared independence from colonialism, and therefore account for generally unfavorable assessments of its governments and their degrees of freedom.⁶ This and the preceding governance and economic factors challenge African potential.

Security & Human Security Issues Further Impact African Potential

Apart from governance and economics, other challenges persist on the African continent. Clearly, Africa remains gripped by violent conflict. In spite of both African and international interventions, terrorism persists in the Horn of Africa, the Maghreb, the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, and, as a recent development, in southern and central Africa.⁷ The historic trading routes transiting the Sahel and the Sahara, lacking effective governance, are now used in trans-Saharan trafficking and threat finance, and both Central Asian heroin and South American cocaine travel through Africa toward Europe.⁸ Looking beyond the humanitarian aspects, the illicit ivory trade and other poaching threaten African environments and tourism opportunities, and African coastlines remain the most affected by piracy in terms of hijackings, boardings, and armed robberies. Topping off these threats posed by nonstate actors, there remain state-level issues such as the recent Western Saharan cease-fire cessation with Morocco as well as emergent conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Security challenges also include human security challenges. Illegal, underreported, and unregulated fishing in African exclusive economic zones limits economic development and causes environmental and food security concerns. Migration to Europe has destabilizing effects on both the African and European continents, and the Mediterranean is without question the deadliest sea crossing. Environmental concerns are plentiful, with decreases in rainfall in the Sahel, rises in sea level across the Indian coast, droughts in southern Africa, low crop yields in eastern Africa, and weaker trade winds in the Atlantic coast further exacerbating an already tenuous security situation. In addition to illegal fishing, food insecurity has stressed African countries in the Sahel and in Libya; reached crisis levels in parts of eastern, central, and southern Africa; and is at emergency levels in northeast Nigeria and South Sudan.⁹ Climate change grips the Sahel and East Africa and, beyond the global impacts of COVID-19 (and its likely impacts on an already weak African economy), infectious disease greatly effects Africa—with HIV being particularly acute in southern Africa and malaria endemic to the majority of the continent. On top of all these security challenges, state fragility in many parts of Africa creates security concerns and security risks.

China's Unquestionable Interest in Africa

Having established the potentials and pitfalls of Africa against the backdrop of several factors, understanding Chinese interest in Africa is also necessary to determine whether Africa is being underestimated by the United States. Despite the historical and geographic factors constraining African potential and the confluence of both national security and human security challenges, China is interested in Africa—across a variety of indicators. China has invested significantly in African ports.¹⁰ Chinese loans have steadily increased,¹¹ as has Chinese direct foreign investment.¹² China is without question the largest trading partner for most African states. China's first overseas military presence is on the African continent with a naval base in Djibouti. China is increasingly interested in the African cellular sector, and it is building the information technology background that serves as the foundation for smart cities throughout many African countries.¹³

In addition to business ties, there are governmental, educational, and perceptual connections. Chinese senior leaders are routinely visiting Africa,¹⁴ in contrast to a comparative lack of interest on the part of the United States,¹⁵ upon taking office, three of Chinese president Xi Jinping's first four overseas trips were to Africa: Tanzania, South Africa, and the Republic of Congo.¹⁶ (The fourth was Russia.) African students are increasingly studying in China,¹⁷ and due to the

likely combination of all these factors, Africans across the continent generally take a positive view toward China.¹⁸

China might take a similar view, and Chinese interest in Africa could be explained through a few theories spanning the elements of national power and their possible uses. China might first recognize the historical perspectives of African nations and their struggles for literal and figurative independence throughout the centuries. By posturing itself as the champion of African governments, China might be seeking the affirmation of the sizable UN voting bloc resident on the African continent, courting votes in the UN General Assembly. This could increase its comparative diplomatic and informational power on the international stage. Among the UN Security Council's five permanent members, China provides the largest contribution, the majority of which is posted in Africa. This additionally speaks to China's interest in diplomatic prestige.

Another reason speaks to economics. While China is heavily invested in African infrastructure, it implements these investments largely through Chinese workers and Chinese companies as opposed to locally available African manpower. These investments might curry favor with African governments, but they might not garner the same from African citizens. China is likely cognizant of this situation, but due to its need to maintain its own economic workforce, it is probably determining how to keep its own workforce employed even if it means the benefactors of that work and workforce aren't the average Chinese.

Military power provides a third explanation. Africa is rich in the minerals commonly used in telecommunications, space technology, and information technology. China possibly recognizes the opportunity to extract coltan, titanium, and the like to support its own military research and development. It also offers another explanation for why China would heavily invest in infrastructure beyond its borders.

Comparing and Assessing US Investments and Interest

Having established the Chinese interest, the question of underestimation exists within a sphere of several US investments in Africa, investments that are of a dissimilar, apples-to-oranges nature. The US Agency for International Development has been heavily invested in the health sector for years, offering HIV/AIDS relief and retrovirals to relieve human suffering from that disease.¹⁹ The United States convenes forums to address malaria and other infectious disease. The United States routinely deploys capabilities to address humanitarian disasters and emergencies such as its 2014 support to Liberian Ebola relief efforts and tropical cyclone Idai affecting Mozambique and southeastern Africa in 2019.

The United States also supports African militaries' responses to security challenges.²⁰ Its train-and-equip programs to support African peacekeeping capabilities date back more to the 2000s, and it has supported African counterterrorism responses to varying degrees in the Horn of Africa and in northern and western Africa. It has delivered sophisticated aviation capabilities to several African countries and built border response units, counterterrorism companies, and logistics formations. Its maritime exercises and capacity-building programs dwarf those by any other state.

Considering the types of American and Chinese investments, then, it's clear both countries view Africa differently. To China, Africa is viewed as an opportunity to increase Chinese prestige and power across several different measurements of national power. From an American perspective, Africa conversely represents one of many regions where the United States remains engaged, at varying degrees, not only for its own national interests but also for those African national interests intersecting with American interests. Perhaps the United States has underestimated Africa, but only due to the challenges to American leadership, values, and interests in other global regions.

Fortunately, America has several comparative advantages in its approaches to Africa. America typically seeks comprehensive solutions in that it includes local sustainability into either the development or defense activities in addition to relief of suffering or the delivering of security capabilities. It values human rights and other commonly accepted international norms of behavior, sometimes withholding aid and assistance if receiving governments are complicit in activities considered unacceptable such as human trafficking or the use of child soldiers.

In view of these comparative advantages, then, the United States must come to terms with Chinese investment in Africa and not try to compete investment-for-investment. There is scant American domestic support to improve other nations' infrastructure before its own. The United States is already a recognized global leader, so China's efforts to increase its prestige merely reflect its perspective that it remains affected by American global leadership and in a manner greater than the United States is affected by China. The United States enjoys universal access to Africa, and while the Chinese command one base in Africa, the United States enjoys cooperative security agreements in a far greater number of locations.

This comparison and assessment conclude on a positive note: while the United States might have underestimated certain aspects of Africa, and might have done so for too long, America retains a predominant position even despite Chinese advancements and initiatives across recent decades. Africans remain respectful and appreciative of American cooperation; if America chooses to make Africa a

priority, any Chinese comparative advancement will be erased. It is now up to America to decide how it views Africa. 🌐

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Notes

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