

Where Beijing, Washington, and African Governments Can Work Together: From Competition to Cooperation

Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Princeton N. Lyman, Jianhua Zhong, and John Goodman
Africa-U.S.-China Trilateral Cooperation Research Series No. 1
(originally published in [Foreign Affairs](#) on March 3, 2017)

THE
CARTER CENTER



One Copenhill
453 Freedom Parkway
Atlanta, GA 30307
(404) 420-5100
www.cartercenter.org

The first month of Donald Trump’s presidency has raised the specter of heightened competition between China and the United States. The tensions have been at their peak over issues involving the two countries’ trade policies, their roles in the South China Sea, and their policies toward Taiwan. But in Africa, too, Trump’s team appears concerned about competing with China, which is the continent’s largest trading partner. Among a list of questions that the president’s transition staff submitted to the State Department about U.S. policy in Africa was one that asked, “Are we losing out to the Chinese?”

Many officials in Beijing and African capitals likewise believe that China and the United States are locked in a zero-sum competition on the continent. Such views have been common since the 1990s, when China began to accelerate its engagement with Africa by building infrastructure, investing in natural resources and other sectors, and increasing its foreign aid contributions to the region.

These attitudes, however, gloss over the opportunities that China and the United States have to work together. Despite the inevitable competition between the two countries, Beijing and Washington can still cooperate on issues where they share interests. In Africa, it should be clear to both sides that their shared priorities dwarf their differences—and that these priorities are also held by many on the continent.

Africans, Americans, and Chinese broadly agree on the importance of supporting economic growth and development, combating disease, mitigating conflict, enhancing political stability, and fighting violent extremism and organized crime. Because the basic objectives of China, the United States, and African states overlap, collaboration can offer real benefits to all three. What is more, coordination among Beijing, Washington, and African capitals is not as quixotic as it may sound.

Together with the African Union and the subregional Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the United States and China have already been working closely on the peace processes in Sudan and South Sudan, easing the contention between the two states over oil, urging South Sudan’s two warring parties toward peace, and generally seeking to reduce the tensions between Sudan and its southern neighbor. Since 2010, China and the United States have coordinated their efforts in a successful antipiracy operation off the Horn of Africa. And in West Africa, Beijing and Washington worked together to help the region overcome the Ebola crisis that erupted in 2014.

Chinese and U.S. officials alike have pledged to step up their cooperation on the continent in recent years. Yet only a few U.S.–Chinese projects are currently underway in Africa, and there as elsewhere, the two countries risk drifting apart. Given the overlapping interests of Africans, Americans, and Chinese, there is still much to do together, especially when it comes to peace and security issues. By cooperating on peacebuilding, working together on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, and addressing the causes and consequences of violent extremism in the Sahel and Sahara, African states and their Chinese and American partners can help create a more stable, more prosperous continent—to the benefit of the countries involved, their relationships, and the rest of the world.

Supporting Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping operations are a pillar of Africa’s security. The U.N. spends more than 80 percent of its annual peacekeeping budget on the continent, and China and the United States play essential roles in supporting its efforts. Beijing has sent some 2,600 Chinese citizens to serve as U.N. peacekeepers in Mali,

South Sudan, Ivory Coast, and elsewhere. In September 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to assign 8,000 more Chinese troops to serve in a standby peacekeeping unit that could be deployed during crises. For its part, the United States has sent 68 Americans to serve as peacekeepers; Washington also offers its strategic lift capabilities to certain kinds of U.N. operations. The United States and China are the two largest donors to the U.N.'s peacekeeping budget, paying for 28 percent and 10 percent of it, respectively.

At the same time, Beijing and Washington are pursuing their own peacekeeping programs. In 2014, President Barack Obama announced that the United States would create a Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership, under which Washington would provide \$110 million to Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda to help them develop their peacekeeping capacities over the following five years. The money should help those countries boost the interoperability of their peacekeepers and help them improve the technical skills in areas such as engineering that make peacekeeping operations more effective. China, for its part, has pledged some \$100 million to the African Union's standby peacekeeping force and has a number of bilateral peacekeeping training programs of its own.

The overlaps among these programs are clear. But at the moment, China and the United States are not doing enough to make sure that they avoid duplicating or undermining each other's efforts. The two countries share little information about their training programs, for example, even when it comes to basic questions such as the standards they use and the skills they are helping their African partners develop.

The first step should therefore be for China and the United States to share this kind of information. Such a move would not necessarily require joint Chinese–U.S. training programs, a sensitive issue given the military competition between the two sides. Next, Beijing and Washington should coordinate their support to on-the-ground peacekeeping operations, dividing up their efforts so that each country plays to its strengths. U.N. peacekeeping missions often require outside assistance in niche areas, from managing supply chains and evacuating casualties to shuttling troops and supplies by air and undertaking engineering projects. The states and organizations that handle those problems—China, the United States, the U.N., the African Union (AU), and the African subregional organizations developing their own standby forces, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—should work out together which of those tasks each will handle, either on a mission-by-mission or a more general basis. Those kinds of conversations are still rare.

Finally, China and the United States should back the African Union as it works to end the continent's wars, a goal it seeks to accomplish by 2020. To help Africa get there, at a summit in Rwanda last year, the AU pledged to help mediate conflicts; train more African peacekeepers; and stabilize funding for its own peacebuilding operations, such as those in Somalia and northeastern Nigeria, instead of relying on ad hoc funding, as it does now.

China and the United States could help the AU meet those goals. Together with their African counterparts, for example, they could carry out research projects on the continent's flashpoints. Both countries could also back the efforts of the African Union's Peace and Security Council, the AU's top conflict-management body, to develop its planning, research, and logistics capacities. As they do so, they should share the lessons of their own experiences with preventive diplomacy. Finally, when U.N.

peacekeepers are not an appropriate option—as when the goal is to end a conflict by subduing the combatants, instead of keeping the peace by policing them—China and the United States should encourage the U.N. Security Council to fund the AU’s deployment of its own troops. Improvised steps such as appointing special envoys—a role that three of us have held—are not an adequate substitute for the AU’s ability to resolve conflicts on its own.

Replicate What Works

One of the challenges involved in getting China, the United States, and the African Union to collaborate on peacekeeping operations is that there are not many existing models for doing so. That is not the case when it comes to working together against piracy. Since 2008, an international coalition operating under the auspices of the United Nations has helped shut down pirates who have hijacked merchant ships around the Gulf of Aden. By sharing information, coordinating their patrols, and helping Somali authorities develop their own anti-piracy tools, the group—in which China, India, Russia, the European Union, and many others take part—has drastically reduced piracy: from 236 attacks in 2010 to just one in the first nine months of 2016. China has not officially joined the multilateral operation, but it participates in practice, sharing information with other states and coordinating the Chinese Navy’s patrols with those of its counterparts.

Some of that anti-piracy operation’s successes could be replicated in the Gulf of Guinea, off of West Africa, which has become another major area of concern for maritime security over the past decade and a half. In 2015, according to the International Maritime Bureau, pirates attacked vessels 54 times there, and in 2016, they kidnapped 44 sailors. Left unaddressed, piracy will stunt the economic development of West Africa, driving emigration, raising shipping costs, and endangering sailors. The gulf’s insecurity will also hinder the fight against the gangs that control the trans-Sahelian traffic in humans, drugs, and weapons, since it gives those groups and their affiliates—among which extremist organizations are dominant—a free hand to help bring drugs from South America to Africa and onward to Europe, and to make money from ransoming hostages.

One of the sources of the gulf’s piracy problem is weak governance: tiny budgets for maritime operations keep the region’s states from consistently enforcing the law at sea. Making matters worse, the lack of enforcement also means that ships from outside the region can illegally deplete its fish stocks, depriving coastal states of a source of revenue and driving local fishermen to migrate. Unlike East Africa, West Africa is not a good candidate for an international anti-piracy flotilla: it is not home to any failed states and is backed by a number of healthy subregional organizations, such as the ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

Twenty-two Central and West African states took a major step toward controlling the region’s waters in 2013, when they adopted the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, a document signed under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization that outlines how the region can deal with illegal activities at sea. In October, African states further laid out how they could cooperate on maritime security issues in a charter approved at an AU summit in Lomé, Togo. But if African states want to establish an effective architecture for maritime governance, more work remains. For example, none of the three so-called

Maritime Centers called for by the Yaoundé Code, which are charged with facilitating cooperation in the Gulf, is fully operational yet.

The next step should be for West and Central African states to establish a forum in which they can regularly exchange information about maritime activities. A similar information-sharing body already exists in the Gulf of Aden; it meets monthly to coordinate the work of the various organizations and countries securing those waters. Once it's operational, the Interregional Cooperation Center called for by the Yaoundé Code could establish and lead a similar forum for West and Central Africa. This is where China and the United States should get involved: The two countries could use the forum to coordinate the maritime security support programs that each provides to the region's states, making everyone's work more efficient. Such steps could help to stabilize the vast, vulnerable, and valuable ocean corridor that stretches from Angola to Senegal.

Tackling Terror, Together

North of the Gulf of Guinea, at the intersection of West Africa and the Sahel, climate change, food insecurity, unemployment, radical ideologies, and the harm caused by trafficking networks have spawned a wide range of extremist groups. Organizations such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and Boko Haram, which have carried out attacks in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger, pose an enormous challenge to the region's security. Boko Haram, the world's deadliest terrorist organization, has disrupted food and industrial production throughout northeastern Nigeria and has caused a major humanitarian crisis there and in the neighboring states.

Here, too, Beijing and Washington have a role to play. Officials from the area's subregional organizations, including ECOWAS, the club of five Sahelian nations known as the G5 Sahel, and the eight-country Lake Chad Basin Commission, have told us that their region needs coordinated foreign aid to address the causes and devastating consequences of extremist activities. The World Food Program and UNICEF need \$368 million and \$143 million, respectively, for their operations in the region this year. China and the United States could help fill these gaps. They could also help ferry aid by air to the remote areas of northeastern Nigeria. Until the millions of suffering and displaced civilians in the Lake Chad Basin are relieved and resettled, Boko Haram will continue to be able to recruit new members, and the region's economies—especially Nigeria's—will suffer.

Over the long term, the region will also have to address one of the root causes of its instability: the dramatic decline of Lake Chad, whose surface area has shrunk from some 9,650 square miles in 1963 to 520 square miles today. The drying out of the lake, a major source of water and fish, has been caused by a combination of human use and climate change and has helped impoverish millions. It has pushed young people into the ranks of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, set off clashes among nomadic groups and farmers fighting over scarce land and water, and driven emigration. The Lake Chad Basin Commission is working on a development plan to mitigate the effects of the lake's disappearance and would benefit from outside help. Beijing and Washington, along with the European Union and other donors, should provide financial aid and technical assistance in water management, crop research, soil preservation, infrastructure, and industrial development.

Win-win-win

These are just a few of the dozens of areas of potential cooperation among China, the United States, and African governments. But it is also vital to be clear-eyed about where collaboration is probably not possible. Mistrust, military rivalry, commercial competition, and different approaches to governance have long characterized Chinese–U.S. relations. In Africa, too, Beijing’s and Washington’s approaches diverge: China’s commitment to noninterference in the internal affairs of other states differs from the standards-based and at times conditional methods traditionally embedded in U.S. foreign policy and aid programs. The Trump administration has not defined its approach to these issues yet, but it is safe to assume that even as China and the United States’ interests in Africa’s stability and development will continue, their rivalry in some areas will persist. When it comes to competition between Chinese and U.S. companies, democracy and human rights, and soliciting African support in multilateral forums such as the U.N., China and the United States will probably chart their own courses.

Another obstacle to collaboration is the wariness some Americans and Chinese, and indeed some Africans, feel about the two countries appearing to create a condominium aimed at dividing up Africa’s resources, as colonial powers did in previous centuries. But that anxiety should not blind policymakers to the benefits of common efforts. So long as it is Africa-led, collaboration among China, the United States, and African actors can help everyone. The goal should be to transform occasional moments of cooperation—such as the shared efforts of China, the United States, and African governments during the Ebola crisis—into what the China expert Kurt Campbell has called “habits of cooperation” on those areas where all parties largely agree.

On both sides of the Pacific, powerful forces are calling into question the China–U.S. entente of the last 40 years. In Africa, a few may gain from playing on such tensions. But most Africans, most Chinese, and most Americans will benefit far more from working together.

Works Cited

Campbell, Kurt M. “Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs.” September 20, 2012. <https://china.usc.edu/east-asia-and-pacific-maritime-territorial-disputes-and-sovereignty-issues-asia>

Cooper, Helen. “Trump Team’s Queries About Africa Point to Skepticism About Aid.” *New York Times*, January 13, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/13/world/africa/africa-donald-trump.html?_r=0

Matfess, Hilary. “Boko Haram’s Resilience: Its Adaptive Tactics Require a New Approach.” *Foreign Affairs*, December 19, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2016-12-19/boko-haram-s-resilience>

Matfess, Hilary. “Nigeria’s Suffering Civilians and the Plague of State Violence Against Them.” *Foreign Affairs*, January 30, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/west-africa/2017-01-30/nigerias-suffering-civilians>

Mead, Walter Russel. "The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order." *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt>

Patey, Luke and Zhang Chun. "Improving the Sino-African Relationship." *Foreign Affairs*, December 7, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2015-12-07/improving-sino-african-relationship>