
The Grand *Weiqi* Board: Reconsidering China's Role in Africa

Anna Samson

China's deepening engagement with Africa is attracting growing interest because it holds clues to the way in which China is managing its emerging power status. The prevailing analyses of the Sino-African relationship, however, tend to focus almost exclusively on its economic dimensions, identifying resource extraction and market access as the primary motivations for Chinese activities in Africa. While there is a confluence of interest between China's need for raw materials to support its domestic economy and Africa's desire for increased investment to fund development, it is argued here that China's interest in Africa also derives from the role the continent plays in China's grand strategy. China is structuring its relationship with Africa to erode the very axioms that underpin the current global order, posing a fundamental challenge to Western hegemony. China is strengthening its ability to achieve its broader strategic goal of crafting a Beijing Consensus that can successfully challenge, if not usurp, the prevailing Washington Consensus.

As an emerging power, China's economic, military and political activities have attracted considerable attention. Most of this attention has been directed towards examining China's role within Asia, given that this is the geopolitical region where its footprint is greatest. However, as China's economic power increases there is also growing interest in China's activities in other parts of the globe including in Africa.¹

In large part, the expanding focus of analyses of China's engagement in Africa is linked to speculation as to Chinese motivations and the consequences this may hold for the global order. The frameworks adopted for understanding China's activities in Africa, however, tend towards preoccupation with China's trade and aid relations with that region, viewing these relationships in purely instrumental terms. Consequently, most commentators continue to see Africa as a base from which China can draw resources to augment its economic power, thereby challenging the global economic position of the United States and/or using this to underpin its economic dominance within Asia. An examination of the economic foundations of China's engagement with Africa can be instructive for understanding the dynamics of China's rise. Yet, this provides an incomplete picture of China's relationship with African nations. A more comprehensive understanding of this relationship could be achieved through considering the longer term, broader strategic interests fuelling China's forays into Africa.

¹ H. Campbell, 'China in Africa: Challenging US Global Hegemony', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2008), p. 90.

Such an analysis has been attempted by some scholars. However, these works invariably perceive Africa's place in China's grand strategic calculations as similar to that which Africa occupies in the grand strategies of other great powers. While the objective strategic importance of Africa must be acknowledged as factoring significantly in China's motivations for deepening its engagement with this continent, continuing to view Africa in this limited way not only yields a partial explanation of the strategic foundations of the developing Sino-African relationship. It also frequently lends itself to the conclusion that China's interest in Africa is predominantly about challenging US military and economic hegemony. A more helpful approach is to consider Africa's strategic importance to China in the context of historical antecedents and the political, diplomatic and cultural opportunities available. African engagement is thus instrumental for China achieving its broader grand strategic objective of creating a 'Beijing Consensus' to replace the prevailing Washington Consensus.²

This article is an attempt to explore the strategic foundations of China's current activities in Africa and to contribute to a more nuanced discussion regarding both Africa's general strategic importance as well as the instrumentality of including Africa in analysis of China's grand strategy. The article begins with a brief examination of the prevailing discourse on the Sino-African relationship, showing that it frequently construes the relationship as one almost exclusively concerned with China's quest to obtain resources to fuel its economic growth and African states' efforts to achieve their development objectives. In identifying the shortcomings of a discourse that omits engagement with broader strategic questions regarding China's involvement in Africa, the overall strategic importance of Africa to China and other world powers will be laid out. The article will then explore the additional strategic considerations motivating China's activities in Africa, suggesting that together these amount to a strong indication that China's role in Africa should be more accurately seen as part of its grand strategy to construct a 'Beijing Consensus' that can effectively challenge the current 'Washington Consensus'.

² "Washington Consensus" was a term initially adopted by economists in the 1980s to refer to a model of economic development predicated on neoliberal economic principles and promoted by international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as well as the US Treasury and State Department. John Williamson, 'A Short History of the Washington Consensus', presented at *From the Washington Consensus towards a new Global Governance*, Fundación CIDOB, Barcelona, 24–25 September 2004, <<http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/williamson0904-2.pdf>>. In this article, the term is used to refer both to the norms and principles promoted by the United States as a global hegemon, as well as to the framework that underpins the current international order. Concomitantly, the term "Beijing Consensus" is used here to refer to a new global order grounded in norms characterising China's approach to international relations. For similar uses of the term see Giovanni Arrighi and Lu Zhang J., 'Beyond the Washington Consensus: A New Bandung?', in J. Shefner and P. Fernandez-Kelly (eds), *Globalization and Beyond: Alternative Disciplinary Perspectives in the Study of Global Trade and Development* (United States: Penn State University Press, 2011, forthcoming).

This article recognises that Africa is a diverse continent and that China has tailored its engagement with each country in Africa to respond to this heterogeneity and that each African nation has responded likewise. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, 'Africa' as a region and China's meta-relationship with it will be the focus of analysis. While this approach risks glossing over intra-regional specificities, the purpose of this paper is to help to begin to bridge a gap in the literature regarding China's grand strategic objectives and its engagement in Africa. At this level, there is much in common between China's relationship with individual African states and it is therefore considered reasonable in this instance to view Africa as a whole.

Explaining China's Role in Africa

Even the most casual observer of China's activities in Africa cannot help but note the importance of resource extraction and trade to the developing Sino-African relationship. Therefore, a significant proportion of scholarly work has focused on explaining China's role in Africa through the prism of trade and development.³ Some analysts have analysed the balance of trade between China and Africa, noting the exponential rise in the value of trade flowing between the parties: US\$90 billion worth of trade flowed between China and Africa in 2009, an 18 percent increase on 2006 levels and causing China to generate a US\$13 billion trade deficit with Africa.⁴

This trade relationship is not new or comparatively very substantial; Africa represents only four percent of China's total trade.⁵ What interests these analysts, however, is the rapidity of growth in the volume of trade (Chinese imports almost doubled between 2006 and 2009⁶) and the consequences that this trajectory will have on cementing commercial and political ties between Africa and China. The quality and quantity of trade is deemed to be linked to each party's mutually reinforcing goals. On the one hand, China is seeking resources to power the manufacturing sector that has formed an integral base for its economic growth and development project.⁷ China is also looking to establish markets for its products to fund its continued economic rise. On the other hand, Africa is endeavouring to generate income to finance its poverty alleviation efforts, promote domestic consumption, and support industrialisation to underpin economic development and increase integration into the global economy.

³ P. A. Raposo and D. M. Potter, 'Chinese and Japanese Development Co-operation: South-South, North-South, or What?', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2010), pp. 177-202.

⁴ Trade Law Centre for South Africa, 'Africa's Trading Relationship with Africa', 2010, <http://www.tralac.org/cause_data/images/1694/tralac_China_Africa_data_2010.xls> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ J. Angresano, 'China's Development Strategy: A Game of Chess that Countered Orthodox Development Advice', *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, vol. 34 (2005), pp. 471-98.

The professed virtues of this economic connection are viewed less sanguinely by other scholars who point to the adverse impact that resource extraction has on limiting the scope of industrial development in Africa, as well as the strangling of local manufacturing industries that occur when cheap Chinese imported goods are effectively 'dumped' on African markets.⁸ Here it is argued that despite inevitable scarcity contributing to increasing resource prices over the longer term, the encouragement that Chinese trade relations provide to Africa's specialisation as a primary producer necessarily undermines efforts to develop and diversify local productive capacity.⁹ This trade partnership, therefore, is not one between equals, but one that recreates the core-periphery divide that was perceived to characterise earlier European engagement in Africa and which threatens a similar consequence: compromising Africa's ability to pursue genuine social and economic development.¹⁰

Even more critical are those who focus on the political elements of China's trade and aid links with Africa. They point to the unsavoury nature of some of the regimes with which China negotiates market access, secures preferential importing agreements, provides loans, and undertakes development aid projects.¹¹ China's actions are believed to reinforce the power base of African governments and leaders who are notorious for undemocratic practices and systemic human rights violations. Some commentators go further, suggesting that the 'non-conditionality' and 'non-interference' principles that are central to the loan, aid, trade and investment agreements offered by China undermine efforts of the United States and other Western liberal democracies to encourage African states to structurally modify their domestic political-economies to improve governance, implement neo-liberal reforms and support democracy.¹²

The problems with the above analyses of Sino-African relations are threefold: first, they risk hyperbolising the dangers of China's interest in Africa, conflating influence with an excessive degree of control over the development of Africa's economic and social policies, and downplaying any sense of autonomy that African leaders and communities exercise in crafting the relationship. There is little doubt that Chinese 'no strings attached'

⁸ Adam Habib, 'Western Hegemony, Asian Ascendancy and the New Scramble for Africa', in Kweku Ampiah and Sausha Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 259-77.

⁹ Jean-Claude Maswana, 'A Center-Periphery Perspective on Africa-China's Emerging Economic Links', *African and Asian Studies*, vol. 8 (2009), pp. 67-88.

¹⁰ Raúl Prebisch, 'Commercial Policy in the Underdeveloped Countries', *American Economic Review*, vol. 49 (1959), pp. 251-73.

¹¹ Yiagadeesen Samy, 'China's Aid Policies in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges', *The Round Table*, vol. 99, no. 406 (2010), pp. 75-90.

¹² Fantu Cheru and Magnus Calais, 'Countering "New Imperialisms": What Role for the New Partnership for Africa's Development?', in Fantu Cheru and Cyril Obi (eds), *The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Critical Interventions* (London: Zed Books, 2010), pp. 221-37.

investment is attractive, especially when compared with the constraining conditionality of Western donors/investors.¹³ Yet this does not change the fact that Africa possesses something that China and other states want, which necessarily improves Africa's bargaining position within these relationships and enhances its capacity to play powers off against each other.¹⁴

Second, these analysts provide a selective reading of European and US engagement with Africa, falsely contrasting the current, supposedly unscrupulous investment decisions by China with the principled, edifying economic relationship cultivated by the West.¹⁵ This conveniently ignores the history of the West's dealings with autocratic African regimes. It also dismisses the extent to which China's commercial dealings can be influenced by international opinion. Paradoxically perhaps, this is because the Chinese model does not create a distinction between business and the state, unlike Western states which can distance themselves from the actions of their private sectors.

Third, these works unduly privilege the economic dimensions of the Sino-African relationship, viewing the short-term material objectives of both China and African nations as definitive. Although resource extraction and capital inflows are important to both parties, these considerations cannot fully explain all the dimensions of China's activities in Africa. Some scholars have recognised this and have attempted to explore the broader strategic motivations and consequences of China's African engagement.¹⁶ However, the shortcomings of these analyses flow from a historically static view of Africa where China's strategic interests in the continent are seen to mirror that of previous European powers. Consequently, China's grand strategy as played out in Africa is often conceived as neo-imperialist, creating new spheres of influence and cycles of dependence.¹⁷ China is also viewed as the newest player in the 'scramble' for Africa's resources, its courting of African regimes motivated by a desire to squeeze out the United States, Europe and others by establishing itself as Africa's preferred

¹³ Jonathan Holslag, 'China's New Mercantilism in Central Africa', *African and Asian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2006), p. 165.

¹⁴ G. le Pere, 'The Geo-Strategic Dimensions of the Sino-African Relationship', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 20-38.

¹⁵ Harry Hongyi Lai, 'China's Oil Diplomacy: Is it a Global Security Threat?', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2007), pp. 519-37.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Dot Keet, 'South-South Strategic Bases for Africa to Engage China', in Cheru and Obi (eds), *The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Critical Interventions* (London: Zed Books, 2010), pp. 21-33; Donovan C. Chau, *Political Warfare in Sub-Saharan Africa: US Capabilities and Chinese Operations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa* (Washington, DC: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007).

¹⁷ K. Ampiah, 'The Ideological, Political and Economic Imperatives in China and Japan's Relations with Africa', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 294-313.

trade/investment partner, and hoping this will pay dividends as resources become more scarce.¹⁸

Although more nuanced, these approaches seem to just refit the economic construction of the Sino-African relationship to a strategic framework of analysis. But the relationship between China and Africa is more than one of mutually beneficial economic convenience and more complex than the impression derived only through drawing parallels with Africa's strategic importance to the great powers of the past. Rather, looking at Africa's contemporary strategic significance as well as the way in which it is being positioned in China's longer-term strategic calculations provides a more rounded sense of China's strategic objectives and interests at play. Africa's overall strategic importance is historically consistent as a source of resources to support economic development and as a major maritime chokepoint. It is also unique to the present strategic landscape as the point of intersection for transnational security threats, as a base for projection of US military power, for the questions it raises regarding the robustness of the tenets of the established global international order, and for the diplomatic power contained within its newly independent states.

Africa's Strategic Significance Today

Due to the seemingly intractable nature of some of the social, political and economic problems that have befallen countries in Africa, it is true to say that the continent has in recent times attracted more interest as a 'humanitarian pet project' for the international community than for its strategic importance in the designs of great powers. This is not to suggest that Africa has never featured in grand strategy calculations. Certainly past European colonial powers such as Britain, France, The Netherlands and Portugal placed strategic significance on Africa in the course of executing their imperialist projects and competition for global dominance.¹⁹ Africa was particularly important to these states from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries for trade routes, as a source of slaves/bonded labour for domestic production, for imports of natural resources,²⁰ for establishment of corporate outposts and factories, and for the location of military bases. Wars were also fought between the powers for control of African territory.

With the success of abolitionism by the late nineteenth century and the advent of the decolonisation movement in the Global South in the second

¹⁸ Kweku Ampiah and Sanusha Naidu, 'Introduction: Africa and China in the Post-Cold-War Era', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 3-19.

¹⁹ Adekeye Adebajo, 'An Axis of Evil? China, the United States and France in Africa', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 227-58.

²⁰ G. Martin, 'The Historical, Economic and Political Bases of France's African Policy', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1985), pp. 189-208.

half of the twentieth century, some of the European powers' strategic goals in Africa became increasingly untenable.²¹ At the same time, one of the key motivations for the way in which the great powers sought to structure their engagement with Africa—namely lucrative resource extraction and uncontested trade routes maintained through territorial influence/control—remained in place. The means for achieving this strategic objective, however, had to shift towards more indirect measures such as trade agreements, development aid initiatives, and arms sales,²² all of which were also available for other non-European powers such as the United States, Russia and Japan to adopt.²³

Access to natural resources, some of which can only be found in Africa, therefore provides a historically consistent ground for Africa's continued strategic significance, especially as these resources are used to support domestic industrial development, contribute to economic growth and consolidate economic power. While Africa's gold was earlier the commodity of choice due to its role as a store of value and use in manufacturing, today oil from Africa is the pre-eminent resource of interest to global powers.²⁴ Diminishing domestic stocks in countries such as the United States and political risks associated with other suppliers in the Persian Gulf have catalysed efforts to diversify energy supply bases with the dual intention of weathering any future shocks to oil prices caused by disruption in supplies as well as being the 'last state standing' in the struggle for control of the last drop of the finite resource.²⁵

Linked to resource extraction and trade, Africa remains geo-strategically important because of the location of one of the major maritime chokepoints, Bab el Mandeb, connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Adjacent to the Horn of Africa, it is proximate to the African nations of Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. More than 40 percent of the world's

²¹ Habib, 'Western Hegemony, Asian Ascendancy and the New Scramble for Africa', p. 63.

²² However, more traditional means of exerting control over Africa as a means of achieving broader strategic objectives did not disappear completely; France, for instance, continued to overtly support (and in some cases were intimately involved in engineering) coups to secure regime changes in Angola. Adebajo, 'An Axis of Evil? China, the United States and France in Africa', pp. 227-58.

²³ Migration patterns as well as enduring language and cultural connections are still considered by some writers as factoring in European grand strategy development. However, while these issues do influence the continued interests of these states in the African continent, culture cannot reasonably be viewed as operating in a *strategically* definitive way for major European states. See Ana Cristina Alves, 'Chinese Economic Diplomacy in Africa: The Lusophone Strategy', in Chris Alden, Daniel Large and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (eds), *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008), pp. 69-81.

²⁴ Andrea Goldstein et al., *The Rise of China and India: What's in it for Africa?* (London: OECD Development Studies Centre, 2006), p. 11.

²⁵ Xuecheng Liu, 'China's Energy Security and its Grand Strategy', *The Stanley Foundation Policy Analysis Brief*, September 2006, pp. 10-11.

oil tankers pass through this narrow canal each year,²⁶ blockage of which would require rerouting of ships around South Africa or directing cargo overland through Saudi Arabia at significant cost.²⁷ Maintenance of sea lines of communication through Bab el Mandeb is therefore considered vital to states relying on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf and otherwise moving goods to Europe and the United States.²⁸

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the US military is paying increasing attention to the passageway, creating a new US African Command (AFRICOM) in 2008.²⁹ Like the other Regional Commands, AFRICOM is a military-led command that promotes military-military cooperation. Addressing the United States' broader security interests in Africa also comes within the purview of AFRICOM with its Africa Partnership Station East (APS-East) and Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) specifically aimed at developing maritime surveillance, interdiction and other amphibious operational capacity and interoperability on the East African coast, including around Bab el Mandeb.³⁰ AFRICOM also operates as a focal point through which civilian branches of the US government, such as USAID and the CIA, are able to direct their activities in Africa.³¹

The creation of AFRICOM and its activities on the continent beyond its eastern coast are indicative of the strategic emphasis that the United States is placing on Africa and its view of Africa as a base from which it can project its military power.³² It is also linked to the growing acknowledgement in military and strategic policy circles that a variety of transnational security

²⁶ Glenn Davis et al., 'Comment: Dangers at Sea', *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2007, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62840/glenn-davis-charles-dragonette-and-randy-young/dangers-at-sea>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

²⁷ US Energy Information Administration, 'World Oil Transit Chokepoints: Bab El Mandab', <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/Bab_el-Mandab.html> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

²⁸ J. P. Rodrigue, 'Straits, Passages and Chokepoints: A Maritime Geostrategy of Petroleum Distribution', *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec*, vol. 48, no. 135 (2004), pp. 357-74.

²⁹ Then President George W. Bush announced the creation of AFRICOM in 2007, although efforts to establish the command began in mid-2006: The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 'President Bush Creates a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa', 6 February 2007.

³⁰ W. E. Ward/USAFRICOM, *2010 Posture Statement United States African Command: Partnership, Peace, Stability*, Statement of Gen. William E. Ward, USA Commander, United States Africa Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee and the House Armed Services Committee on 9-10 March 2010, p. 16.

³¹ Daniel Volman, 'Africom: The New US Military Command for Africa', *Pambazuka News*, issue 327, 7 November 2007, <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/44273>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

³² Motivation for the establishment of AFRICOM was based on the concern that security and military operations on the continent were being de-prioritised by the commands that previously exercised responsibility for the region as resources for these commands became increasingly focused on prosecuting the war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 'President Bush Creates a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa', 6 February 2007.

threats intersect in Africa, which calls for external intervention. These threats include international terrorism, violent extremism, piracy, pandemics, narcotics trafficking and irregular migration.³³

The need to address these security threats has piqued the interest of countries beyond the United States. Responses now include NATO's counter-piracy *Operation Ocean Shield* off the coast of Somalia,³⁴ the European Union's establishment of Frontex to intercept and deter irregular migration particularly from northern Africa,³⁵ and Japanese funding for peacekeeping training centres.³⁶ All these activities are motivated at least in part by the desire to build military-civilian links to eliminate or at least localise security threats to prevent them from escalating into incidents that risk impacting in far more costly and direct ways on Western powers and their interests. Addressing these threats is acknowledged by Washington as instrumental to confronting the challenge posed by China to Western hegemony in the region.³⁷

These transnational security threats also influence the international consensus on managing aspects of the global order.³⁸ For instance, egregious human rights abuses, including those which amount to genocide and war crimes in states such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, raise questions regarding the implementation of the rule of law and international humanitarian law.³⁹ Further, the fallout from civil wars such as in Sudan raises questions regarding the role of peacekeeping coalitions.⁴⁰ Patchy improvements in poverty elimination put into doubt the pursuit of environmentally sustainable development, the collective commitment to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals and the success of structural reforms promoted by international financial institutions for delivering

³³ Newman identifies this renewed US interest in Africa as a "post-9/11 merging of underdevelopment, state failure and insecurity". Edward Newman, 'Securitizing vs. Desecuritizing African Problems', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol 30, no. 1 (2009), p. 68.

³⁴ Public Diplomacy Division, NATO HQ, 'Counter-piracy: Operation Ocean Shield', 28 January 2010, <http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_01/20100204_20100128-Fact_Sheet_Counterpiracy.pdf> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

³⁵ For Frontex's mandate see, <<http://www.frontex.europa.eu/>>.

³⁶ *Joint Communique regarding the Reinforcement of the Cooperative Relationship between Japan and the African Union*, August 2010, signed by Katsuya Okada, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan and Jean Ping, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/africa/au/visit_1008.html> [Accessed 7 December 2010]; Ampiah, 'The Ideological, Political and Economic Imperatives in China and Japan's Relations with Africa', pp. 294-313.

³⁷ Paul B. Jackson, 'Missions and Pragmatism in American Security Policy in Africa', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2009), pp. 45-9.

³⁸ Lloyd Sachikonye, 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Agenda?: Zimbabwe-China Relations', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), p. 124.

³⁹ Devon Curtis, 'Partner or Predator in the Heart of Africa: Chinese Engagement with the DRC', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 86-107.

⁴⁰ Adebajo, 'An Axis of Evil? China, the United States and France in Africa', pp. 231-2.

promised economic development outcomes.⁴¹ Although the grand strategies of major powers do not turn on each of these issues by themselves, the manner in which they are addressed speaks to the broader ideational challenges they pose, and evidence the constraints posed to states' grand strategies.

Similarly influential in the strategic calculations of global powers is the diplomatic power able to be leveraged by Africa in multilateral forums.⁴² Fifty-four African states have the potential to form a formidable force particularly through their membership in the Group of 77 (G-77) and other voting bloc activity in UN bodies. Outside of the UN, African states are vocal within other coalitions, including the Intergovernmental Group of Twenty-Four on International Monetary Affairs and Development (G-24) which promotes developing countries' interests in international policy arenas dominated by states of the global North.⁴³

Africa's strategic importance today is thus not limited to its ability to operate as one of the world's oil rigs or its capacity to facilitate or strangle efficient global trade. It also rests in the base it provides for the United States to more effectively project its military power, as well as to address transnational security concerns. In addition, Africa comprises a sizeable group of sovereign states able to exercise diplomatic power. Paths to securing a dominant foothold in Africa must therefore necessarily feature in the grand strategies of global powers such as the United States and emerging powers like China. Efforts to ensure strategic dominance will also only be effective to the extent that they reflect the broader strategic significance of Africa and do not focus entirely on traditional perceptions of the continent. The following section will explore the ways in which China's engagement in Africa is not only illustrative of China's strategic vision beyond the Asia-Pacific but also demonstrates China's understanding of the role that Africa can and does play in the achievement of its longer-term, grand strategic objectives.

Chinese Strategic Objectives in Africa

The strategic objectives underscoring China's engagement in Africa fall into two broad categories. The first are those that relate to challenging US and Western powers' hegemony in the region. In many ways, they provide the most obvious explanations of the strategic bases for China's activities in

⁴¹ Anthony Lake et al., *More than Humanitarianism: A Strategic US Approach toward Africa*, Independent Task Force Report No. 56 (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006), pp. 55-105; Susan E. Rice, 'Africa's Strategic Importance to the U.S.', Speech at Reed College, 20 March 2006, The Brookings Institute, <http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2006/0320africa_rice.aspx> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁴² Sanusha Naidu, 'Balancing a Strategic Partnership? South Africa-China Relations', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 186-9.

⁴³ See <<http://www.g77.org/>> and <<http://www.g24.org/>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

Africa. These include: constraining the United States' military dominance in the Horn of Africa and the continent more generally; expanding the Chinese sphere of influence across the region so as to effectively encircle the United States (and to a lesser extent Europe), controlling trade routes and ensuring preferential trading relationships; building long-term energy security through controlling energy prices; and using aid/trade/economic relationships to secure legitimacy for territorial ambitions within Asia.⁴⁴

The second range of objectives are less obvious and while derived from China's historical connections with Africa⁴⁵ they are focused on the very aim of undermining the Washington Consensus and rewriting the current global order through eroding the institutions and axioms that buttress the status quo. These objectives include: quelling criticism of Chinese autocratic government; promoting the virtues of state-led capitalism; building South-South solidarity; demonstrating that global stability can be achieved through respect for state autonomy; and socialising states to accept Chinese dominance. For the sake of analysis, each objective is explored here individually even though in reality these strategic objectives are often mutually reinforcing and interrelated.

CHALLENGING US AND WESTERN HEGEMONY

The establishment of AFRICOM is at least partly a response to the growing concern in Washington that US and European military dominance of Africa can no longer be taken for granted.⁴⁶ The fact that Washington has not yet been able to successfully convince an African country to host its military command is perhaps an indication that unquestioned Western military domination has already come to a close.⁴⁷ Although it does not have military bases in Africa, China has emerged as an effective challenger in three key ways. First, Chinese corporations have joined their Western counterparts in

⁴⁴ Although contemporary Chinese foreign policy has developed considerably since the time of Mao, his principles of encirclement in the context of guerrilla warfare arguably provide some foundations to Beijing's strategic outlook and approach. See Mao Tse-Tung, 'Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War', in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 1 (China: Peking University Press, 1967), pp. 179-254, Chapters 4 and 5.

⁴⁵ Le Pere, 'The Geo-Strategic Dimensions of the Sino-African Relationship', pp. 21-3.

⁴⁶ Sandra T. Barnes, 'Global Flows: Terror, Oil, and Strategic Philanthropy', *African Studies Review*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2005) pp. 1-22; Vice Adm. Robert Moeller, 'The Truth about Africom', *Foreign Policy*, 21 July 2010, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/21/the_truth_about_africom?page=0,0>; Paul B. Jackson, 'Missions and Pragmatism in American Security Policy in Africa', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2009) pp. 45-9.

⁴⁷ Liberia has expressed an interest in hosting AFRICOM, however there have been strong reservations expressed by other African nations to what is perceived as a potential increase in US military presence in the region. See Niko Colombant, 'Bush Comments Spark Debate on AFRICOM in Liberia', *Voice of America*, 20 February 2008, <<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/a-13-2008-02-20-voa27-66631922.html?CFTOKEN=59121246&CFID=156398879&jsessionid=6630b03732561d0825c41c2f713d711a6f43>> [Accessed 6 February 2011]; Laurie Nathan, 'AFRICOM: A Threat to Africa's Security', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol.30, no.1 (2009), p. 59.

selling arms to African nations.⁴⁸ In violation of UN arms embargoes and other internationally imposed sanctions, China has sold weapons to states such as Zimbabwe, Sudan and Liberia.⁴⁹ While some commentators argue that such arms sales are 'just business', far from evidencing a policy of non-interference, such arms sales amount to *de facto* declarations regarding China's willingness to militarily support regimes that are otherwise maligned by the West.⁵⁰

Second, through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China is intensifying its security relationship with Africa, conducting joint military training exercises and deploying peacekeepers.⁵¹ The United States and European nations are no longer the only powers to which Africa can turn to for support to enhance domestic military capabilities or in undertaking military operations. Conducting counter-terrorism operations in the region are also not exclusively the purview of the US with FOCAC asserting joint actions of China and its African partners in combating terrorism.⁵²

Possibly the most important way in which China challenges Western military dominance of Africa is through its promotion of the principle of 'Solving African problems by Africans'.⁵³ In practice this translates to a commitment by China to use its power to ensure that international mechanisms cannot be harnessed to support military intervention in African states in violation of their sovereignty. China is thus acting as a viable alternative military partner in Africa and thereby limiting the ability of the United States to leverage its military power to achieve its strategic objectives in the region.

Geo-strategically, the deepening connections between China and African nations are allowing Beijing to expand its sphere of influence beyond the Asian region and in doing so reduce the influence that the United States and Europe has on Africa. China's relationships with states across Africa are increasingly being viewed as a zero-sum game for the global powers.⁵⁴ Washington is concerned that apart from countries such as South Africa and

⁴⁸ Andrei Chang, 'China Expanding African Arms Sales', *UPI Asia Online*, 26 January 2009, <http://www.upiasia.com/Security/2009/01/26/china_expanding_african_arms_sales/1148/> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁴⁹ I. Taylor, 'Arms Sales to Africa: Beijing's Reputation at Risk', *China Brief*, vol. 7, no. 7 (2007), <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4069&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=197&no_cache=1> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁵⁰ Stephen Marks, 'Africa: China's Mythical Military Menace', *Pambazuka News*, 30 October 2008, <<http://allafrica.com/stories/200810310729.html>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁵¹ Kristen Gunness, 'China's Military Diplomacy in an Era of Change', Paper presented at the National Defense University Symposium on *China's Global Activism: Implications for U.S. Security Interests*, National Defense University, Fort Lesley J. McNair, 20 June 2006.

⁵² FOCAC, *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan 2010-2012*, FOCAC Fourth Ministerial Conference, 11 December 2009, part 3, <<http://www.focac.org/eng/dsjbjzjhy/hywj/t626387.htm>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Seifudein Adem, 'The Paradox of China's Policy in Africa', *African and Asian Studies*, vol. 9 (2010), p. 341.

Nigeria with long-standing historical connections to the West, many African states are now casting their lot in with China.

The combination of Chinese trade, aid, investment, diplomatic support and a sense of simply being 'taken seriously' by an emerging global power⁵⁵ is eroding the West's domination. Traditional projections of Western military dominance are also enjoying less traction in Africa. This perhaps explains also why AFRICOM is the United States' first regional combatant command to prioritise civilian/advisory activities over direct military engagement⁵⁶ and to have its headquarters outside the region. China is capitalising on the suspicion felt by a number of African countries towards moves by the United States to maintain, let alone enlarge its footprint in the region. China's trade and development efforts are thus succeeding in more than simply increasing market penetration. They are effectively encircling US and European interests in Africa, eroding their historically superior position on the continent and forcing a reconfiguration of traditional modes of Western engagement.⁵⁷

As noted above, energy security is a key consideration for all states lacking sufficient domestic supplies to maintain production and contribute to economic growth. China is thus not unique in its search for stable oil and other natural resource supplies, although it is fair to suggest that the impetus for China to lock in these supplies is perhaps more intense because its current industrialisation, poverty reduction and economic growth rates cannot be sustained without a consistent supply of primary resources.⁵⁸ China's interest in Africa's petro-states has, however, been pursued in a manner that differs qualitatively from that of Western powers in three distinct ways. First, China has sought to develop energy supply relationships with smaller oil-producing African states which have hitherto been largely ignored by the bigger oil consumers. China has, for instance, sealed production deals with Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) without encountering much of a challenge from the West.⁵⁹ Building confidence among smaller nations and learning how to do business

⁵⁵ Denis M. Tull, 'The Political Consequences of China's Return to Africa', in Chris Alden et al. (eds), *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008), p. 123.

⁵⁶ 'Pentagon: AFRICOM Won't Boost U.S. Troop Presence on the Continent', *Inside the Army*, 12 February 2007, cited in Lauren Ploch, *Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa*, CRS Report for Congress (2008), pp. 5-6. Ploch points out that while military operations remain part of AFRICOM's mandate, they play no more than a "supporting" role to the US' economic development and other (non-traditional) security interventions in the region.

⁵⁷ David Lai, 'China's Maritime Quest', *Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter*, June 2009.

⁵⁸ Cyril Obi, 'African Oil in the Energy Security Calculations of China and India', in Cheru and Obi (eds), *The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Critical Interventions* (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 181; Rodrigue, 'Straits, Passages and Chokepoints', p. 361.

⁵⁹ Obi, 'African Oil in the Energy Security Calculations of China and India', p. 183.

in Africa puts China in a stronger position in negotiations over oil deposits that are more hotly contested.

Second, China's negotiations with the larger oil producers have been sweetened with integrated aid packages. Avoiding charges of exploitation levelled at Western interests, China has posited itself as a development partner and more attractive as a long-term investor.⁶⁰ Third, and perhaps most importantly, the fledgling nature of African extractive industries and the direct link between China's oil companies and the state has allowed China to seal contracts that enable it to develop vertically integrated energy supplies. Through its state-owned oil companies China has been able to establish remarkable control over its energy supply chain from Africa, thereby significantly diminishing the political and other risks associated with oil investments from abroad.⁶¹

Further, having vertically integrated, state-owned supplies means that China is less vulnerable to energy price fluctuations and could perhaps even delay the impact on its domestic economy of rising global energy prices. So while Chinese companies currently hold only two percent of Africa's known oil reserves,⁶² they are better insulated from market forces than the much larger Western investments. This leaves China in a superior strategic position regarding its current energy security and its future ability—should its share of investments continue to rise—to manipulate energy prices in a manner that could compromise the productive capacity and economic autonomy of Western states.

Finally, for all the non-conditionality of its aid and loan arrangements with African nations, China has consistently used these arrangements as a means to generate support for its territorial ambitions in Asia, most noticeably in the recognition of Taiwan as a part of the PRC. China has been quite successful in this regard and only four African states—Burkina Faso, Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Swaziland—have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Some African nations have 'switched sides' within the past decade (South Africa in 1998, Liberia in 2003, Senegal in 2005 and Chad in 2006), much to the chagrin of Taiwan.⁶³ This demonstrates that African support is valued for its contribution to China achieving its 'One China' reunification objective.⁶⁴ Whether China's connections with Africa will

⁶⁰ Manuel Ennes Ferreira, 'Chinese in Angola: Just a Passion for Oil?', in Chris Alden, et al. (eds), *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008), pp. 306-7.

⁶¹ Heinrich Kreft, 'China's Energy Security Conundrum', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2006), pp. 107-20.

⁶² Obi, 'African Oil in the Energy Security Calculations of China and India', p. 186.

⁶³ K. Bradsher, 'Chad's Switch to Beijing's Side Draws Angry Response in Taiwan', *The New York Times*, 8 August 2006, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/08/world/asia/08taiwan.html?fta=y>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

⁶⁴ Tull, 'The Political Consequences of China's Return to Africa', p. 117.

also be leveraged to support its other territorial claims, for instance over the Spratly Islands, remains to be seen.⁶⁵

ESTABLISHING A 'BEIJING CONSENSUS'

Africa is central to China's long-term strategic objective to undermine the Washington Consensus that underwrites Western global hegemony. China is using its relationship with African nations to question the axioms that underpin the current global order, promoting an alternative, rival framework—a Beijing Consensus—for the conduct of international relations.

China has not hesitated to develop aid, trade, investment and military cooperation ties with regimes in Africa that are decried by Western powers for their failure to embrace democratic reforms, protect civil and political rights, promote transparency or accord with the tenets of 'good governance'.⁶⁶ China maintains that its non-judgemental approach to its relationship with African nations arises from its fervent respect for state sovereignty and its belief that governments should be free to pursue their domestic political agendas free from external interference.⁶⁷

This policy has a basis in self-interest that goes beyond the greater access it provides China to African markets. Promoting the principle of state sovereignty in Africa creates a *quid pro quo* for China, which is also concerned with dispelling domestic and international criticism of the autocratic nature of the Chinese government, its repressive actions in provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang, and the stringent restrictions it imposes on freedoms of its citizens. Through its political, economic and military support for these regimes in Africa, China is demonstrating that liberal democracy need not be a pre-requisite for state stability or development success.

The capacity of African nations to pursue alternative development paths to that promoted by Western liberal democracies is greatly improved by China's willingness to extend loans and undertake development projects in direct competition with the finance and development initiatives offered by international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary

⁶⁵ D. Lai, 'China's Maritime Quest'.

⁶⁶ Lucy Corkin, 'All's Fair in Loans and War: The Development of China-Angloa Relations', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 108-23.

⁶⁷ China's relaxation of its non-interference policy with respect to Sudan occurred only after overwhelming international pressure and was limited to convincing Sudan to agree to a UN peacekeeping force, not, as many human rights activists demanded, withdrawing Chinese investment from the country. This case is arguably the exception that proves the rule. See S. Srinivasan, 'A Marriage Less Convenient: China, Sudan and Darfur', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp 55-85.

Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.⁶⁸ Unlike the IMF or the World Bank, China does not mandate neo-liberal economic reforms as a pre-requisite for receiving its assistance.⁶⁹ Western governments have admitted that China's ability to break the IFI monopoly on financial aid has undermined their ability to encourage African countries to align their economic policies with the prevailing neo-liberal approach; calls to reduce industry protection, privatise state-owned enterprises, eliminate government subsidies and reduce government regulation of vital industries can now be more effectively resisted.⁷⁰ This, together with the fact that Chinese investment in Africa is driven by its national corporations, further promotes the virtues of state-led capitalism in direct contrast to the Washington Consensus model of development.

China challenging the influence of international institutions on the African continent is not limited to IFIs. China has continued to present itself to its African counterparts as a developing country, albeit one that has made good, and which believes it has an obligation to use its newfound economic and diplomatic power to support fellow developing states.⁷¹ China has not forgotten the role African states played in its attainment of a veto on the UN Security Council and has used its vote and continued membership of the G-77 to insulate African regimes from international sanctions.⁷² Similarly, African states have used their voting power in other UN bodies to protect China from criticism. These demonstrations of 'Southern solidarity' in international forums have frustrated Western states who view China and African nations' behaviour as little more than regime solidarity, hamstringing the consensus required to act as a global community.⁷³ China and Africa, however, consider their actions as challenging the inequality inherent in these institutions of global governance and have committed to reforming these institutions to better reflect their interests and those of developing countries more generally.⁷⁴ Finally, China is using Africa as a stage for testing its 'soft power' leverage. China is actively promoting Chinese culture—social, political and business—in the region through the

⁶⁸ Shalmali Guttal, 'Client and Competitor: China and International Financial Institutions', in D. Guerrero and F. Manji (eds), *China's New Role in Africa and the South: A Search for a New Perspective* (Nairobi: FAHAMU, 2008), p. 35.

⁶⁹ Habib, 'Western Hegemony, Asian Ascendancy and the New Scramble for Africa', p. 268.

⁷⁰ Daniel Bach, 'The European Union and China in Africa', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), p. 287.

⁷¹ Kweku Ampiah and Sausha Naidu, 'The Sino-African Relationship: Towards an Evolving Partnership?', in Ampiah and Naidu (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Africa and China* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), p. 333.

⁷² Liu Haifang, 'China's Development Cooperation with Africa: Historical and Cultural Perspective', in Cheru and Obi (eds), *The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Critical Interventions* (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 55.

⁷³ Adem, 'The Paradox of China's Policy in Africa', p. 341.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 'China's Africa Policy', 1 January 2006, <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t230615.htm>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].

establishment of Confucian institutes, migration programmes, tourism initiatives and volunteer brigades. The aim is to both challenge Western cultural dominance and appeal, and to ease states into accepting increasing Chinese influence on the continent.⁷⁵

The Sino-African relationship has thus begun to challenge the notion promoted by the West that global stability is best achieved through the creation of a normative consensus across states on matters of domestic policy. Mao's Tse-Tung's call to "let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" is finding traction in China's approach to Africa, assisted in no small measure by the perceived failure of the West's colonial project in the region. While it remains to be seen if China's enthusiasm for diversity will persist over the longer term, for now it is successfully eroding the normative dominance of the Washington Consensus in Africa and encouraging its replacement with a Beijing Consensus that focuses on respect for state autonomy, rejection of a democratic polity and wariness of neo-liberal economic structures.

Underestimating Africa's Importance in Chinese Grand Strategy

Too frequently China's engagement with Africa is viewed ahistorically and as emanating purely from unadulterated economic motivations for resources and market access. Such reading ignores the way in which China's trade and quests for energy security are indicative of a broader strategic plan to challenge traditional Western domination within Africa and, ultimately, to create a credible alternative to the prevailing global order that aligns more closely with China's interests while simultaneously eroding the very foundations of Western global dominance.

The United States and other Western nations cannot afford to simply view China's activities in Africa only through the lens of a tussle for economic primacy because this will leave the way open for China to use Africa as a springboard for achieving its broader strategic aims. At the same time, an awareness that China is playing a bigger strategic game in Africa should not encourage the West to prepare for direct confrontation with China over the continent. Such an approach would not only prove futile but probably be counter-productive. It would demonstrate a misunderstanding of China's overall strategic approach, framing dominance of Africa in terms of a chess game where success is measured by linear progression, constrained movements, head-on engagements and ultimate annihilation.⁷⁶ More appropriate is to view Chinese strategy in Africa in terms of a Chinese *weiqi*

⁷⁵ Emmanuel Ma Mung. 'Chinese Migration and China's Foreign Policy in Africa', *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2008), pp. 91-109.

⁷⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

game where success is achieved through encirclement and by adding to one's arsenal rather than subtracting from an opponent's. Victory is relational and attained through superior positioning.⁷⁷ Adopting this framework better explains not only the strategic motivations for China's engagement with Africa, but also how the Sino-African relationship furthers Chinese grand strategy. China's role in Africa can thus be understood as consistent with achieving direct aims of economic primacy, territorial influence and limiting the projection of US military power, as well as contributing to efforts to replace the prevailing Washington Consensus.

Anna Samson is a Masters student in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. anna.samson@gawab.com.

⁷⁷ D. Gossett, 'Weiqi: A Symbol of the Chinese Experience', *Asia Times Online*, 6 January 2010, <<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/LA06Ad03.html>> [Accessed 7 December 2010].