



ISSN-L: 2958-5732

# INSIGHT

Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis  
National Defence University, Islamabad



Number: G&RS-12

July 5, 2023

## US-CHINA RIVALRY IN AFRICA

### Author(s):

*Muhammad Qasim*  
(Intern)

### Edited by:

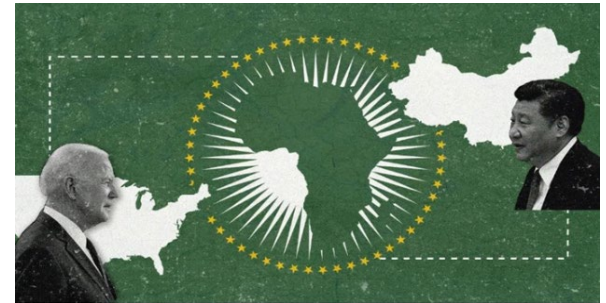
*Amb (R) Fauzia M.*  
*Sana*

The US-China rivalry in Africa has garnered global attention, revealing a complex web of power politics, economic interests and strategic manoeuvres. While both nations claim to prioritise Africa's development and prosperity, critically examining their actions exposes underlying motives and questionable practices. This insight aims to dissect the US-China rivalry in Africa, shedding light on the implications and potential pitfalls of this geopolitical game.

Africa has been part of ancient civilisations, been known for its trade and has been a place of intervention and colonisation by foreign powers like the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Britain and France from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. The colonisers actively engaged in extracting minerals, transatlantic slave trade and took millions of Africans from their homes as slaves to North America. The colonisation of several powers over hundreds of years has brought changes to the continent's infrastructure, governance systems and enforced racial hierarchies.<sup>1</sup>

African continent, with the world's second-largest population after Asia,<sup>2</sup> has a vast economic potential and is rich in mineral resources like gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt and oil reserves.<sup>3</sup> Africa has thus long been a place of interest for major powers that colonised various countries, intervened militarily with the dominant intention to extract their mineral resources and subsequently use them in the global markets to enrich their economies.

The African continent is increasingly becoming an arena for great power competition between the US and China.<sup>4</sup> According to some experts, it is starting to look like a new Cold War,<sup>5</sup> but rather than the fight for alliances in ideology, the competing states are looking towards developing relations which would help them in future. Their competition is mainly in the economic sphere rather than the military. At a time when the US and Russia are locked in a battle of wills in Ukraine on the one hand and the US-China standoff on the other, global



diplomacy to win over allies has heightened.<sup>6</sup> Both the US and China are looking to win over nonaligned countries in places like Africa.

In December 2022, the US hosted Africa Summit in Washington to "unlock the potential of the decisive decade"<sup>7</sup> after a long gap of eight years. The first such summit was held in 2014. President Biden pledged a \$55 billion support package as a US commitment to invest in food security, health, education and infrastructure<sup>8</sup> and advance priorities and support of the US-African who have joined hands through the African Union's Agenda 2063.<sup>9</sup> According to Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken, "Africa is a major geopolitical force. It has shaped our past, it is shaping our present, and it will shape our future."<sup>10</sup> The visit of US Vice President Kamala Harris to African countries in March 2023 has set the ground for the US to solidify its Strategy for Africa.<sup>11</sup>

The military presence of the US in Africa is its bases in Djibouti, Kenya, Niger, Egypt and Cameroon. The role of its military in the region is to fight against terrorism, train African partners in responding to crises and protect US interests. The bases also have the mission of sharing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance data with allied and partner nations.<sup>12</sup>

UN missions in Africa increased in the 1990s due to the end of the Cold War and the decrease in superpower rivalry. There was a perceived opportunity for the US to address African conflicts

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and humanitarian crises. Since then UN has maintained its peacekeeping operations, of which the US is the largest financial contributor. The UN has 14 peacekeeping operations worldwide; seven are in Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested in infrastructural projects in various African countries such as Algeria, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Mozambique. It has reignited the US and the West's interest in Africa. Since 2000, China has hosted the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which is seen as a crucial tool for furthering China's diplomatic and economic objectives. China has mainly invested in the development of infrastructure, as well as resource extraction by Chinese mining and energy firms.<sup>14</sup> According to a study by the Centre for Global Development (CGDev), Chinese development banks lend far more to Africa than the US, Germany, France and Japan combined.<sup>15</sup> Concurrently, US Congress has been funding a Countering Chinese Influence Fund since 2019 to challenge China's influence in Africa and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

***The African continent can prove to be a decisive battleground in determining the future course of global politics.***

With an investment of \$155 billion over the previous 20 years, China has remained one of the leading financiers of infrastructure projects in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, Beijing has gained considerable influence and contacts with several African nations. It has prompted some observers to see BRI, launched in 2013, as a vehicle for "Chinese geopolitical expansion."<sup>17</sup>

According to China's official (BRI) website, 42 African countries have signed MOUs for rail, roads, energy and infrastructural development projects with China. One of the major projects is the Chechell Beltway project that strategically connects Algeria with Niger, Nigeria and Chad, thereby accessing a combined market of 275 million people and these landlocked markets to Algerian seaports. China is also working on the Addis Ababa to Djibouti railway line in Ethiopia. The construction of Port of Doraleh, near Djibouti, is another project under BRI that offers sea access to and from Ethiopia, Africa's fastest-growing economy and the continent's second most populous country.<sup>18</sup> Opening Ethiopia up to trade is integral to China's African strategy.<sup>19</sup> Other projects included in BRI are the East Africa Rail Corridors, the Mombassa-Nairobi Railway in Kenya and the construction of Africa's longest bridge in Mozambique.<sup>20</sup>

China is Africa's largest trading partner, hitting \$254 billion in 2021.<sup>21</sup> It also remains the largest lender to African countries and is the largest provider of foreign direct investment, supporting hundreds of thousands of African jobs.<sup>22</sup> For the US, the trade in goods and services with Africa in 2021 stood at \$83.6 billion.<sup>23</sup> According to an analysis in Nikkei Asia, after displacing the US as Africa's leading trading partner in 2009, China will likely import \$300 billion worth of African goods between 2022 and 2024.<sup>24</sup>

China has pledged military cooperation with African partners and provided \$60 million in military support as part of the FOCAC plan for 2016–18. The Chinese base at Djibouti has a dock capable of accommodating aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.<sup>25</sup> In the FOCAC plan of 2019–2021, 50 programmes were to be established to improve security coordination between China and African nations. China has already invested \$10 billion in international security, with a significant amount spent on Africa. The Chinese security support in Africa ranges from regular military and civilian police to private security companies.<sup>26</sup>

US commentators often describe China's investments in Asia, Central Asia and Africa as a debt trap by China. The US has repeatedly accused China of a deliberate strategy to loan 'unmanageable sums' to bring countries under its sphere of influence.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, China considers itself a promising partner for Africa that has built gradual relations and brought about development and stability through progressive economic measures to benefit both. It can be argued that the US interest in Africa is spurred by China's increasing presence and is driven by its desire to counter China's influence.

On the brighter side, the US-China rivalry could bring prosperity, security and development in the region to benefit all, especially the people of Africa. For observers, the African continent can be a decisive battleground determining the future course of global politics, with China emerging as the strongman.

For Pakistan, the opportunity lies in increased economic activity via trade through the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). The sectors in Pakistan that can collaborate and benefit immensely are the textile, agriculture and pharmaceutical industries.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, the rivalry between the US and China in Africa is a contest for geopolitical influence. China's ambitious BRI serves as an instrument to expand its sphere of influence and secure access to Africa's resources. Through extensive investments in infrastructure projects, China positions itself as a formidable player, extending its economic reach and solidifying diplomatic ties across the continent. In response,

the US, recognising China's growing influence, seeks to counter it through its strategy of disruption and maintain its strategic interests in Africa.<sup>29</sup> Through military partnerships, security cooperation and initiatives like Prosper Africa, the US endeavours to counterbalance China's economic sway and preserve its geopolitical advantage. Consequently,

African nations are caught in the middle, subject to a tug-of-war between these global powers. Thus, the African continent can be a decisive battleground in determining the future course of international politics.

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