

Speech for Savannah State on China-US-Africa Relationships

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Introduction

Distinguished Hosts, thank you for inviting me to speak at the Confucius Institute's 5th Anniversary Lectures on the challenges and opportunities that exist, thanks to the important relationships between China, the United States, and Africa.

Where do I begin? African states have had long histories with China and the United States and while the history is rich, the future is even more exciting. I really do believe that the relationships and interactions between these three blocs could define the 21st century. What is clear is that the best future for all involved is one characterized by cooperation and transparency, and one where the African people have a full say in charting their developmental path.

However, to see where these relationships could lead us, it is important to understand where we are coming from and I would like to begin by quickly outlining the United States and China's partnerships and interactions with African states since the wave of independence that swept through the continent in the 1960s.

U.S. engagement with Africa

Deep U.S. engagement with Africa, post-World War II, began immediately at independence and started with programs such as the United States Peace Corps in 1961, and has continued in recent years with legacy investments made by successive U.S. Presidents: President Bill Clinton's African

Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) worked to improve economic and trade relations between the United States and Africa and was so successful, that it was renewed through 2025 under President Obama.

President George W. Bush's Presidential Malaria Initiative (PMI) and President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) addressed two health scourges that had devastated huge populations in Africa, saving millions of lives. President Barack Obama sought to spur growth by catalyzing energy access through the Power Africa Initiative. He also invested to build connections with both leaders of today through the African Heads of State Summit and the leaders of tomorrow through the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). I had a front row seat to both of these initiatives in my role as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and they were both strong examples of American cooperation at its finest.

President Trump's Prosper Africa Initiative commits to increasing two-way trade and investment between the United States and Africa Prosper Africa and unleash the entrepreneurial spirit of Americans and the people of African nations. Prosper Africa promises a one-stop shop that makes the full range of those services available to U.S. and African businesses and investors and stresses the value of transparent markets and private enterprise for driving growth. The current US government also aims to sustain the legacy of engagement through the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, one of the few success stories of bipartisan collaboration in America's current political climate. The BUILD Act reimagines the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) into the United States International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC), and gives the organization renewed investment capabilities and capacity.

These may sound like just a long list of acronyms to you – and maybe they are. But I would argue that in one way or another, all of these efforts have catalyzed human capital and economic potential, incentivized democracy and good governance, and promoted shared values and ideals, such as the dignity of life, the respect for human rights, and the pursuit of prosperity on the continent. In the process, strong relationships were built which continue to underpin the US-Africa relationship.

It is these strong people-to-people ties, as well as the other historical bonds that should make us excited about the future of the U.S.-Africa relationship. Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that in 1619, exactly 400 years ago, the first enslaved African were brought to the U.S. which will forever be a taint on our relationship with Africa but would in the long run become a strong connector to the continent. Today, the United States boasts a large and vibrant African diaspora community, who have been great contributors to America both economically and socially and continue to serve as conduits for increased collaboration and connection with the continent.

China's emerging relationship with Africa

China's presence in Africa is newer, but no less pronounced. It is remarkable how significantly the Sino-African relationship has developed over the past 40 years. In 1980, the total Sino-African trade volume was \$1 billion. By 2000, that number had risen to \$10 billion. In 2018, that number reached \$204.19 billion. China is now Africa's largest trading partner and the continent's largest creditor. The conventional wisdom is that China's increased focus on the continent is motivated by short-term commercial and strategic interests. That narrative is not nuanced enough, and experts point to instances of how Beijing's motivations are broader and more oriented towards

long-term cooperation. One example of this is China's increased engagement with African leadership.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 and is a strong marker of this new model of "South-South cooperation." The 2018 summit in Beijing saw representation from every single African country, including over 30 heads of state and analysts argue that it opened up a new era of China-Africa relations.

There is no doubt that China's story of development from an impoverished country to a middle-income, industrial powerhouse is attractive to African states who also seek to be better incorporated into the global economic system. China has definitely pushed that narrative and sought to be "Big Brother China" to the continent. As African states seek to learn from the China model, they have turned their gaze to Beijing. This has allowed China to move into the continent in a new way over the past two decades. Thankfully, "stadium diplomacy" has given way to more useful investments. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has seen the rollout of critical projects in Africa built by the Chinese, including major railways in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria; port development in Djibouti and Tanzania; and infrastructure development in many other parts of the continent. There are now nearly 10,000 Chinese businesses on the African continent and Chinese assistance is broadening into diverse forms of investment and lending.

China's engagement with the continent is not just economic, it is cultural. Each year, the list of Chinese universities offering scholarships for Africa's brightest students grows. Across the continent, Chinese communities are springing up. In fact, last year, in the city of Kano in northern Nigeria, Emir Muhammad Sanusi appointed a Chinese trader who had lived in the city for close

to 20 years as chief of the growing Chinese community in the Emirate, and a member of the ruling council.

Why Africa?

It is no surprise that both China and the United States are looking to deepen their engagement with the African continent. When looking at today's global challenges - migration and refugees, climate change, growing youth populations, insecurity, and a retreat of democratic institutions - they all have an impact on and are impacted by developments in Africa.

However, this is not just about the world's "problems." This is also about the world's greatest opportunity. African countries hold immense promise: estimates are that by 2050, the population of the African continent will have doubled from 1.2 billion to 2.5 billion, representing a quarter of the world's population – and the global market. This story is even more compelling when we think of the fact that African states have come a long way and are poised to continue their burgeoning growth. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecasted that Africa will grow at 3.4 percent this year, with Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Côte d'Ivoire expected to lead the continent with economic growth rates over 7 percent. Further economic growth is likely to be unlocked with the emergence of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), reducing trade barriers and opening vast markets. Africa is already a leader in the use of digital technology and cities across the continent from Nairobi to Lagos and Kigali are transforming into technology hubs. With improvements to infrastructure, upgrades to its business and investment climate, and further economic diversification, Africa's upward economic trajectory is sure to extend far into the future.

The U.S. and China: a new “scramble for Africa?”

There is a growing sense that the US and China are in competition to carve out their share of this African future. Amid talk of a new Cold War, Former National Security Advisor John Bolton’s speech last year framed much of the US administration’s Africa strategy as a battleground for great power competition rather than engagement with African leaders. Some have even dubbed this a “new scramble for Africa.” These are certainly uneasy times in the U.S.-China relationship, but I disagree with these narratives and this zero-sum approach.

We are not in a new Cold War – and Africans have far more agency than those narratives would have us believe. Despite this agency, Africa has not always gotten the best bargain in its dealings with foreign powers. The idea that Africa can benefit from competition between the U.S. and China is false. As the complicated and intricate relationship between the U.S. and China, two very large, powerful countries that have both begun to retreat on their global commitments due to domestic realities evolves, I fear that the general outcome may not be in Africa’s interest.

There is an African proverb that says, *“when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”* All we need do is look to the current state of the global economy to see this playing out. With many African countries set to see impressive growth over the next few years, the U.S.-China tensions and a lack of investment has the global economy on the brink of a “synchronized slowdown.” It is in all parties’ interest that the US and China come to an understanding on trade. I believe that a meeting of the minds is inevitable, and I hope that when it happens, African perspectives are considered as they should be.

China and the U.S could learn a lot from each other

There is a lot that China can learn from the U.S. and its engagement in Africa – and also much that the U.S. can learn from China and its recent success on the continent. China should glean that people must be at the heart of development: **it's not about what you do, but who you do it with**. Skills and knowledge transfers matter and at the end of the day, it is human capital that grows economies, not scaffolding, steel, and concrete. The U.S. would also do well to understand the importance of taking the long-view in its approach to the continent. Very often, U.S. interaction has all the pieces required to create change – however, American attention spans are short, and the U.S. has often moved on too quickly to the next partner or project. **True transformation requires patience and commitment**, and a promise to show up every time.

It is in America's interest to view engagement with the continent as a key and important element in and of itself. Africa is more than just another theatre for great power competition. The United States should show up in a big way even when it may seem that engagement with the continent is not in its strategic interests – *because it actually is*. Those who would criticize Chinese predatory lending or the governments who accept these deals must also acknowledge that in many cases, the United States and the West is not showing up or offering viable alternatives.

This is especially the case because U.S. investment in diplomatic engagement is lagging. Over the past five years, China increased spending on diplomacy by 40 percent while, during the same period, America's spending on core diplomacy fell by a third. Foreign Service members in the field, many of whom are serving in Africa, have reported that they are outnumbered four or five to one by Chinese diplomats, especially those working on economic and commercial issues.

Members of Congress have mentioned that African ambassadors complain to them, saying that their governments and their private sector actors would like engagement with American companies, but cannot find anyone at our embassies to make these crucial contacts. Nearly 100 American business associations—including the Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers—wrote to Secretary Pompeo last year asking for more FSOs at embassies and consulates. It remains to be seen whether the government will heed this sound advice.

A win-win-win situation is possible

Ultimately, the future is about Africa and its people. The U.S. should be focused on building a strong partnership with Africa which is based on shared values of peace, prosperity, sustained economic growth and development, and a firm commitment to good governance, gender equity, and the rule of law. I see no reason why China cannot share in those values. In fact, China is in a unique position to spread these ideals given its strong footprint on the continent. All sides should work together to build sustainable growth for Africa and the world.

Africa is the last frontier for economic growth, with a booming population, abundant natural resources and untapped potential. In a world where so many regions are seeing slower growth, as they reach their capacity for the raw inputs of growth, Africa remains an opportunity. To effectively cash in on Africa's potential, the continent's leaders must be empowered to choose from a wide variety of options and offers, about what would be best for their people.

Whether that option comes from China, from the United States, other emerging players on the continent such as India or Turkey, or whether they emerge from the continent itself, we must support Africans to move forward as they see fit. In the U.S.-China-Africa relationship, win-win-

win cooperation is possible and common development can be achieved. If we all took a step back to consider it, we would see that if we banded together to support Africa's growth and development, we would all be better for it.