(Composite image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

China's Energy Empire in Africa and Its Threats to U.S. National Security

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As the United States moves out of two decades of counterterrorism-focused national security policy and turns its focus to strategic competition, it must examine its competitors and develop a strategy to understand and address their influence worldwide.[1] The People's Republic of China (PRC) has risen to a level that was unimaginable two decades ago, and the world is beginning to realize the impact of this swift ascendance. Culturally, politically, and economically through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is extending its reach across the globe. While it may once have been considered benign, today the nation poses a real threat to American hegemony. China has sought to surpass Western power in nearly every field, and in some, it has done so. This article focuses on Chinese influence in Africa and its resulting dominance in the field of the rare minerals and rare earth elements that are critical for producing clean energy and defense technology. As the United States prioritizes national security through clean energy options, it must address China's outsized influence in Africa through comprehensive and integrated strategies to mitigate the risks of current power dynamics.

The United States and China have maintained a complicated relationship since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Tensions have risen and fallen over the last seventy-three years and have remained high in recent years as the world has watched China's ascent to global power. From its place as one of the world's poorest countries in the post-World War II era, China began a period of economic reform and transition under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s during which its economy was finally opened to interact more significantly with other nations.[2] This entrance into the world economy quickly had an impact on China's economy, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the nation's GDP growth was consistently well above that of the United States and other leading economies.[3] In 2008, China became the United States' largest creditor, and in 2010, it became the world's second-largest economy, demonstrating the significant financial advancement that had taken place over the previous thirty years.[4] This massive development has poised China as a contender for global influence comparable to that of the United States, and today it matches or surpasses the United States in many fields—population (and thus standing military manpower), manufacturing and technology exports, research and development, education statistics, and more.[5]

China's International Influence

With the exacerbation of geopolitical tensions in recent months—evident in China's declaration of partnership with Russia and U.S. engagement with Taiwan—China's increasing international influence has become a primary threat to U.S. hegemony.[6] As the major powers in the East and West respectively, China and the United States have assumed roles as competitors in the great-power competition of the twenty-first century. Like the great power competition of the twentieth century, the diametrically opposed values of communism and capitalism, authoritarianism and democracy, vie for influence. But in comparison to Russia's global influence campaign during the Cold War, China's international expansion is even more aggressive.

One major way in which China has developed this global power and influence is its Belt and Road Initiative. Unveiled in 2013 by Chinese president Xi Jinping, the BRI seeks to "promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road."[7] Since its introduction, the BRI has grown to encompass 148 nations, which make up over two-thirds of the world's population, and the PRC has invested significant amounts of money across these nations.

Commonly investing in local infrastructure projects, the PRC declares development as one of the BRI's goals, and dozens of nations have taken advantage of the loan packages China offers, partly because Chinese loans are perceived to have fewer strings attached than Western aid packages. While many Western and especially U.S. aid and trade deals are contingent upon a nation upholding human rights standards or behaving according to international norms, China's loans are generally not distributed with the same conditions. In many cases, this opens the door for countries with poor human rights records—and in the extreme, international pariah states—to benefit from and build relationships with China. This is a security issue since it reduces the impact of international pressure and empowers rogue states to continue dangerous patterns of behavior. One example is Iran, with whom China signed a quarter-century strategic partnership

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agreement in 2020 that included support for infrastructure development in exchange for discounted oil and gas prices.[8] This clearly undermined U.S. efforts to apply economic pressure to Iran as it opened a significant revenue stream through China. A low barrier for entry is not the only attractive aspect of doing business with China. Chinese aid also regularly takes the form of loans for much-needed infrastructure projects and China is estimated to have matched the amount of money the United States spends on foreign aid as of 2021.[9] The massive amounts of funding that it will provide to benefactors is surely another draw, especially to cash-strapped developing nations.

The increase of global Chinese influence should be of concern to U.S. policymakers, but this article seeks to focus on the threat that Chinese influence poses on one continent in particular—Africa. Historically underrepresented, African nations are becoming increasingly important politically, culturally, and above all, in the global economy as the world turns its eye on Africa as a rich source of critical materials necessary for the international shift toward renewable energy. Chinese presence in Africa is a complex web of political, cultural, and economic engagements, which makes each facet important to examine and analyze.

African Battleground

Western influence remains prevalent on the African continent, largely as a remnant of colonialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like much of the global south, Africa was the scene of various proxy conflicts between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War period. While the United States was able to secure its dominance on the continent in years since the Cold War, Africa is once again becoming a battleground for the modern-day great-power competition. Economist Marek Hanusch examined Afrobarometer data from twenty African countries and observes that while Western influence remains prevalent, the gap between African opinions of China and the United States is closing as Chinese investments are wooing those nations.[10] In fact, Hanusch concludes that economic engagement through trade, aid, and investment is the primary driver of positive attitudes toward China in Africa.

As evidenced by the BRI, a primarily economic policy in the trappings of diplomatic and cultural outreach, China is aware of the influence that economic engagement carries. As its reach expands across the continent, so will follow its political involvement. The nature of Chinese involvement in African economies is manifold, from state-funded aid to foreign direct investment loans to bilateral trade. China also distributes these investments very differently from the United States. For example, though the two nations gave comparable amounts to African countries in 2018, only 22 percent of Chinese investment was through official development aid, compared to the United States' 93 percent.[11] China's other 78 percent of aid was through "Other Official Flows," a wide-reaching term encompassing foreign direct investment and other investments across the continent. In recent years, approximately 75 percent of Chinese aid went to infrastructure projects through loans, while 0.4 percent went to humanitarian aid.[12] Notably, China also overtook the United States as Africa's largest trading partner in 2009, further contributing to its economic profile in the continent.

Though often viewed as a medium of development assistance for African nations, much Chinese lending carries the danger of a significant loss of political viability by means of property reclamation in the case of a default. As exemplified in 2017 when the port of Hambantota was signed over to China due to Sri Lanka's inability to continue paying, improper management of Chinese loans can carry the risk of losing ownership of the critical infrastructure for which those loans were taken.[13] This was also seen in early 2022 when international news sources reported that Entebbe Airport, a major international transit hub in East Africa, would be used as collateral if Uganda failed to pay the $200 million Chinese loan it took for expansion of the airport.[14] These are not isolated incidents, and the loss of major infrastructure that also provides revenue for these countries only amplifies the challenge of repaying outstanding debts. Opaque financial deals and aid packages also remove the protections of international accountability, placing recipient countries at a greater risk for exploitation. So-called "debt trap diplomacy" is an increasingly evident phenomenon as China engages with nations across the continent. Having been offered massive loan packages at above-average interest rates, nations whose economic output is insufficient to support the required payments are becoming further indebted to China, providing greater leverage in other arenas.

Outsized Chinese political influence in Africa, which is largely tied to its economic engagement, is another major factor in these increasingly complicated political relationships. Several African nations owe more than a third of their national debt to China, including Angola (38 percent), Djibouti (47 percent), Equatorial Guinea (50 percent), and Republic of Congo (53 percent).[15] This provides China with significant leverage as those nations create foreign policy, vote in international bodies like the United Nations, and enforce strategic alignments. Scholars Carla Jones, Mengge Li, and Hermann Ndofor find that "Chinese FDI to Africa resulted in reduced political alignment between African countries and the United States."[16]

In writing for the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, Donovan Chau argues that China has intentionally focused on developing its relations with countries that the United States deems key partners in Africa.[17] Chau highlights the impact that Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa's increasingly close relationships with China may be because of their positions as key regional leaders. Rather than a simple economic exchange, he demonstrates how these relationships expand to encompass political, cultural, and military influence. Classifying these actions as "political warfare," Chau lists the myriad ways they have expanded Chinese influence across the continent. Even the increasing presence of Chinese culture in many countries is a tool to be used to China's advantage.

From widely available funded Chinese language training to Confucius Institutes and Chinese Central Television (CCTV), these instances of cultural melding seek to synchronize other countries with China's priorities, and this also opens the door for increasing Chinese military presence across the continent. In 2016, China built its first overseas military base in the East African nation of Djibouti, less than ten kilometers from the United States' only permanent military base in Africa.[18] In December 2021, China announced plans to build a second base, this time in another heavily indebted nation, Equatorial Guinea, which are proceeding despite U.S. efforts to dissuade the small West African country.[19] Gen. Stephen Townsend, former commander of United States Africa Command, emphasized that Chinese "extended leases on ports and airports" posed a security concern for the United States as China seeks additional locations to expand its military presence.[20] In addition to enabling further Chinese presence on the African continent, the impact of melded Sino-African priorities certainly influences local perspectives toward U.S. presence as well.

There are many reasons that China's increasing influence in Africa should be of concern to the United States—political and cultural leverage have legitimate consequences in the geopolitical sphere. However, an even more pressing issue is the role that Africa plays in China's strategic positioning as an energy giant. There are two faces to this issue—first, the ways in which China currently benefits from African energy production, and more critically, the ways in which it is positioning to do so in the future.

African Resources

While not always the first to come to mind at the mention of petrostates, Libya, Algeria, and Nigeria hold major oil reserves on the African continent.[21] Though China still relies on the Middle East for the majority of its oil, its budding relationships with African countries have increased the frequency of oil-related trade deals. Like its deal with Iran to provide infrastructure funding for reduced oil prices, China manages a series of exchanges with countries across the continent. Even before its major rise to power in the 2000s, China built ties with African countries and exchanged military equipment and political support for guaranteed oil resources.[22] China currently relies on Africa for over one-third of its oil, and this energy-based partnership is expanding as China increasingly invests in developing renewable energy technology.[23] Through this, China has gotten a head start in the renewable energy market that the rest of the world, including the United States, is now under pressure to match.

Immediately upon his assumption of the presidential office in January 2021, President Joe Biden released Executive Order 14008, which reestablished the U.S. commitment to addressing climate change at the national level.[24] Within this order, Biden outlined general goals for the United States, specifically partnering with other nations to meet the necessary benchmarks for achieving climate stability and building resilience against the existing effects of climate change. In addition, he mentioned some specific goals for the United

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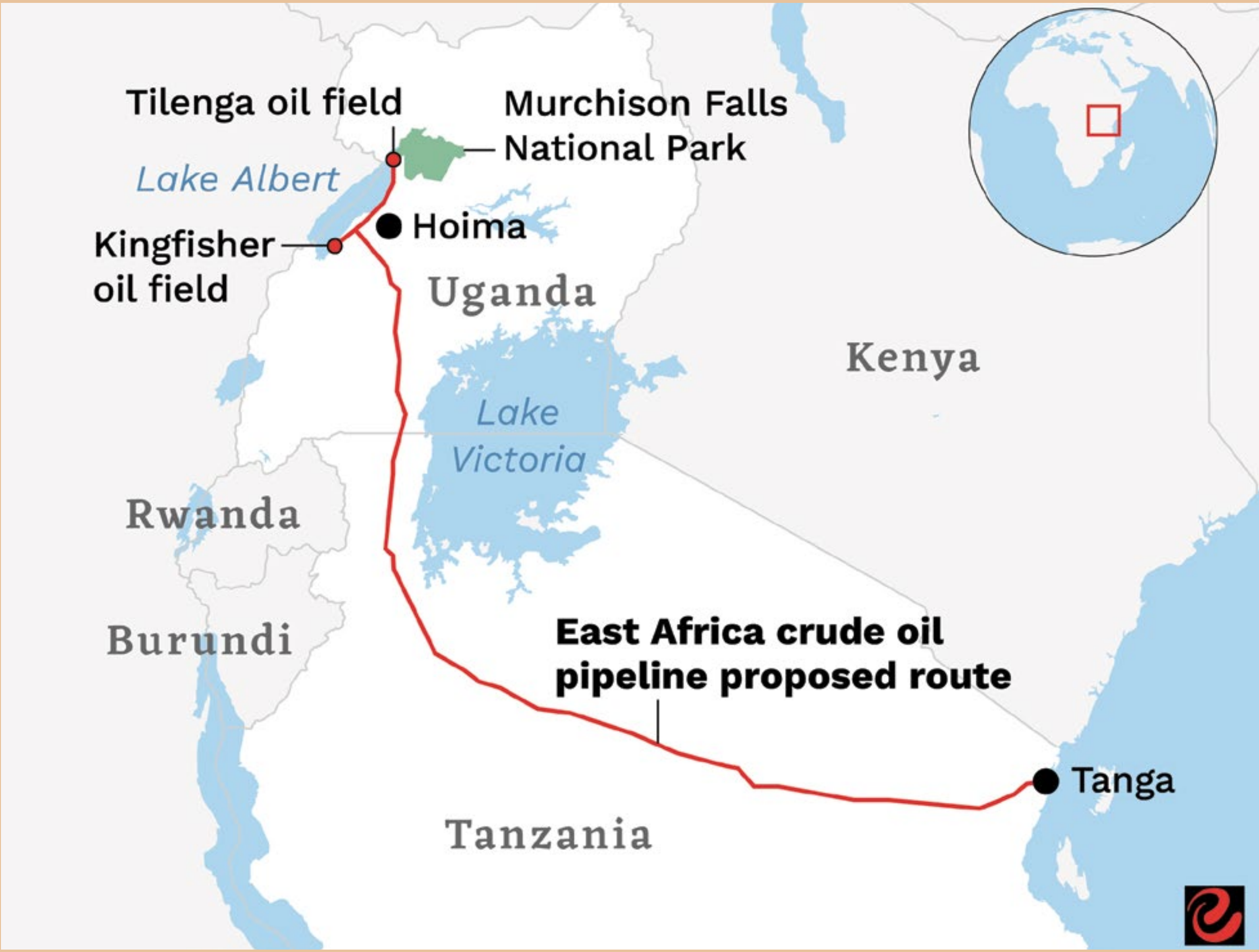

Proposed route of the East Africa crude oil pipeline. (Map by China Dialogue, adapted from Sputnik)

The East African Crude Oil Pipeline

The East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) is a 1,443 km oil pipeline project that has been under construction since 2013. TotalEnergies SE, a French multinational integrated energy and petroleum company, is the principal business enterprise that originated the project and owns a majority share. The purpose of the pipeline is to transport crude oil from Uganda's Tilenga and Kingfisher oil fields to the Port of Tanga, Tanzania, on the Indian Ocean.

However, issues related to land acquisition and organized opposition to the project on a global scale for diverse reasons have caused many delays in construction. The opponents of the project assert a range of adverse impacts including the massive displacement of local populations, ecological damage to sensitive natural regions, and probable contamination to two key water sources for Central Africa, Lakes Albert and Victoria. In September 2022, the European Parliament passed a

A mother holds a baby while laying out fish to dry near an oil exploration rig by the shore of Lake Albert in northern Uganda, East Africa. (Photo by GS International, Alamy)

resolution condemning the EACOP project, calling for "an end of the extractive activities in protected and sensitive ecosystems, including the shores of Lake Albert."[1] As a result, by 2022, most Western and Japanese financiers had withdrawn financial support from the $5 billion project, causing its near collapse due to a lack of financial backing. However, the Export-Import Bank of China, in league with some other national banks within Africa, stepped in to provide a commitment to provide the necessary funding to finish the project. As a key investor, China is leveraging its investment in the project by increasing its hold on the ancillary project contracts generated by the project. For example, TotalEnergies SE "signed a deal with China Petroleum Pipeline Engineering (CPP) for the construction and supply of line pipe, a development that tilts the trans-border project to Beijing."[2] Of note, "CPP is a subsidiary of state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and joins another state entity, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), which owns a 28.33 percent stake in the Uganda oil and eight percent of EACOP."[3] When completed, the pipeline is expected to deliver 216,000 barrels per day, much of which will be sent to China. ■

Notes

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States, including employing "clean and zero-emission vehicles for Federal, State, local, and Tribal government fleets," and above all "driv[ing] innovation and deployment of clean energy technologies" to meet net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.[25] As the United States pursues a transition to clean energy sources, access to the materials needed for this development will become increasingly important. Here lies the major point of concern regarding China's expansion in Africa.

Presence in Africa gives China an advantage primarily because of two types of materials needed for renewable energy production: rare minerals and rare earth elements. As the second largest continent, Africa is home to significant deposits of rare minerals, including 40 percent of global gold, 90 percent of platinum, and critically, 70 percent of global cobalt.[26] Cobalt is used for a variety of military and industrial purposes, "many of which are strategic and critical," according to the U.S. Geological Survey, including rechargeable battery electrodes in electric vehicles and superalloys in gas turbine engines for military fighter aircraft.[27] In 2021, 70 percent of mined cobalt was produced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but the majority of global refined cobalt was produced in China—most of this was originally mined in the DRC. Unsurprisingly, China was also the largest cobalt consumer, 80 percent of which was used for development of rechargeable batteries.[28] It is also the largest global consumer and distributor of rechargeable batteries and the leading producer of renewable energy, overtaking the United States in 2019.[29]

How did China ascend to a global leader in renewable energy technology? The answer relates to the same economic expansion strategies discussed earlier. U.S. Geological Survey researcher Andrew Gulley explains that the "'minerals for infrastructure' deal between China and the DRC … provided favorable loans to the DRC government for infrastructure, purportedly in exchange for access to copper and cobalt mineral development rights."[30] This has enabled China to develop a near-monopoly on global cobalt production; it currently owns or has significant financial stake in fifteen of DRC's nineteen mines.[31] Thus, from start to finish in the production cycle, China has established control over the rechargeable battery industry, a necessary piece of technology for hybrid and electric vehicles, not to mention everyday items like cell phones, laptops, and many appliances.

Although China regularly exports its finished product to buyers around the globe, this gives China a national advantage in domestic clean energy modernization and significant leverage against other countries. In the case of a conflict or even as a tool of diplomatic pressure, China's ability to withhold these goods from entering the global supply could significantly constrain other nations' ability to access such resources. Currently, the United States buys 87 percent of its lithium-ion batteries from China, a number that has been rapidly increasing in recent years.[32] International dependence on China for access to this technology is a massive point of vulnerability for both the United States and the world.

Unlike rare minerals like cobalt, whose deposits are only present in certain areas, rare earth elements are called such because they are not typically found in concentrated deposits but instead are distributed across the world, making them less practical to mine.[33] These elements are critical for various consumer and defense technology and renewable energy systems. Currently, China is a leading rare earth elements producer due to domestic mining; in 2021 it accounted for approximately two-thirds of global rare earth element production, mining over four times as much as the United States.[34] However, the Center for Strategic and International Studies' China Power Project indicates that due to rapid domestic consumption of rare earth elements, China may soon become a net importer, opening the door for other nations to compete. Yet if China continues to exert unchecked influence over African countries, it will not be hindered by the exhaustion of rare earth elements on its own soil. In pattern with cobalt and oil production, China can continue exchanging infrastructure funding for mining advantages in nations across the world's second-largest continent.

This is yet another instance in which Chinese dominance in this field should concern the United States. China's ability to withhold these goods from the market is not simply a possibility, it has already become a reality. In 2021, Chinese government advisors announced their consideration of a rare earth minerals export ban, saying they were curious "if the U.S. might have trouble making F-35 fighter jets" if the ban was imposed.[35] Some critics, including political scientist

Indra Overland, suggest that access to these materials is not as critical as some claim, since technology will develop and find alternative methods to achieve the same result.[36] However, Biden's emphasis on timely accomplishment of U.S. energy goals is unambiguous. If the United States government seeks to decrease national contributions to climate change, it must immediately integrate existing technologies, and this underscores the importance of securing those critical materials without reliance on a primary competitor to do so.

Approaching the Problem

The United States needs a multipronged approach to the problem of China in Africa. As Chau noted, China's influence campaign across the continent takes many forms, and to counter it, the United States must be engaged in a similar manner. Energy strategy must be tied into political and cultural strategy as much as it is to economic strategy.

The United States should be taking proactive measures to ensure that it appropriately positions itself for involvement in Africa's rare earth element markets. As long as it remains unengaged in this critical market, the United States effectively allows China to build a stronger foothold on the continent. While the Biden administration has expressed interest in building relationships with African mining partners, little concrete action has been taken. Especially because of the ambitious climate goals that the administration has laid out, time is critically important to get the United States on track to securing the resources necessary to build a climate-conscious energy infrastructure.

This is a massive challenge, especially when developing strategy for a continent with fifty-four unique countries. As China has done, the United States should focus on working with key regional leaders across the continent (Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ethiopia) as well as key resource producers like the DRC. In doing so, the United States must demonstrate that it can contribute something that China does not—local empowerment and development. American companies should partner with and buy from African companies rather than following China's habitual assertion of control over local mining and energy production companies. Leaders and citizens across the continent are increasingly wary of neocolonial powers, and a resurgence of postcolonial Panafricanist ideology has drawn attention to the efforts of external influences attempting to gain influence on their soil.[37] Unfortunately for many countries, it is too late to prevent financial bondage to China, but awareness of further encroachment is at an all-time high. The United States must approach African countries as partners, not patrons.

Another key action the United States can take is providing financial assistance and support paths to financial stability in key countries. Though not an attractive solution during the current period of economic downturn, this is the most important step in building a viable response to China's leverage on the continent. Financial instability and recurring failures to repay loans on schedule is the primary leverage China yields against these nations. The United States cannot undo loans that have already been taken, but it can provide guidance and targeted short-term support to address fragile economies at risk of being taken advantage of even further. This is a preferable alternative to attempting to take China's place as global lender, and the careful reallocation of funds that are already distributed to these countries in the form of aid packages could become significantly more effective in mitigating Chinese power in Africa.

These efforts go hand in hand with building a more effective U.S. presence in Africa to combat China's attempts to shift cultural attitudes and values closer to its own. U.S. presence comes in many forms, but extending the hand of diplomacy through official state visits has been a powerful tool for building bilateral relationships. Biden has yet to visit the continent since taking office, but such an effort could contribute to building partnerships with African countries. It would also indicate that the United States considers them equal partners, like the nine European countries that Biden has visited. Chau recommends "using official U.S. government organizations but also non-official organizations as well."[38] His vision of integrated U.S. presence in Africa mirrors that of the State Partnership Program, with a "three-tiered approach to relationship building (military-military, military-civil, and civil-civil)."[39] Chau emphasizes that building ties between governments and civilians is critical to an integrated relationship. A more effective presence does not necessarily mean a larger one, but it must use a targeted approach to adequately address the needs of the country in question. While focused on building partnerships and political alignment, the

Idriss Déby, president of Chad (*third from right*), with officials from Chad and China, celebrates the beginning of crude oil exports by the China National Petroleum Corporation from the Great Baobab oil field in Chari-Baguirmi, southern Chad, 22 December 2014. (Photo courtesy of Imagine China)

United States is bolstering its international image and regional support nodes to continue pushing against overarching Chinese influence.

National security must not be sacrificed on the altar of energy strategy—the two go hand in hand. Currently, the United States cannot achieve its climate and clean energy goals without heavy reliance on China, its primary geopolitical competitor, and this risk is far too significant to accept. To build a more resilient national energy strategy, the United States must shift focus to Africa, where China has been building an energy empire for nearly two decades. Challenges to address China's mounting power in the region are numerous—entrenched cultural, political, and critically, economic influence are at an all-time high. Above all, the United States faces the staggering challenge of developing and adopting strategies to fit dozens of countries on the world's most diverse continent. This is a daunting task, but one that is strategically essential if the United States intends to maintain its position as a global leader. ■

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