

The United States and China: Strategic Rivalry in Africa

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ABSTRACT *This commentary underscores the strategic rivalry taking place in Africa between the United States and China, sparked by the latter's massive political, economic, and socio-cultural engagement with the continent. It argues that the reasons for the ongoing rivalry between the two is related to their clashing worldviews, and their focus on accessing Africa's energy/oil and other strategic natural resources. The strategies both global superpowers are utilizing have the effect of diluting each other's influence on the continent. Their rivalry has progressed from mild, to moderate, to intense, with both powers increasing their activities on the continent and decreasing Africa's erstwhile marginalization.*

Rivalry between the world's two most powerful economic entities has become a reality in Africa underlined largely by the two giants' clashing worldviews. China's extensive economic investments, intense political and cultural interactions, and ongoing peacekeeping and peace building activities in Africa have sparked insecurity for the U.S., while the U.S., still considered the world's hegemon, has naturally always had a "Missionary Complex" and is therefore trying to contain China's ongoing expansive and pervasive engagement in Africa.¹ One positive outcome, at least for Africa, is that the U.S.-China rivalry has diminished to some extent the marginalization that

the continent had suffered, especially during the immediate post-Cold War era of the early 1990s. The focus of this analysis is to examine U.S.-China rivalry in Africa by analyzing: (i) the differences in worldview between the two nations; (ii) their competition for energy sources in Africa; and (iii) the strategies utilized by both powers in their rivalry on the continent.

The competition between China and the U.S. in Africa began as mild rivalry during the Clinton Administration, progressed to moderate rivalry during the George W. Bush Administration and became intense during the Obama Administration. The question to examine is, what ignited

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insecurity on the part of the United States as a result of China's expansive and deepening engagement in Africa? The overall reason lies in the reality of competing worldviews between the two great nations, one a rising hegemon perceived as threatening the pre-eminent position of the United States. China's worldview, mostly based on non-adherence to universal human rights, its "communist capitalism" and refusal to embrace some key rules and regulations that guide aid, trade, investment, and political interactions in a largely neoliberal political economic international system led by the United States, stands in sharp contrast to the American worldview, based on respect for universal human rights, deliberate promotion of liberal democratic values, and support for the rules and regulations that uphold global economic governance embodied in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank institutions.

Many of China's activities are challenging to U.S. foreign policy interests in Africa: these include its extensive involvement in Africa's economies through aid, trade and investments, its deepening bilateral and multilat-

eral political ties with African states, and its vigorous introduction of Chinese culture through Confucius Institutes. While China may not be threatening to the U.S.' military defensive power, it is nonetheless using its enormous economic "soft" power of four trillion dollars in reserves to consolidate its influence and become politically attractive on the African continent. The Sino-American competition in Africa is largely based on the use of diplomatic and economic instruments of foreign policy towards Africa. China as the rising hegemon provokes the rivalry, while the United States tries to counterbalance it by giving a little more attention to the continent. With the transition to economic competition from Cold War ideological rivalry, China's economic power has enabled it to project its influence in partnership with Africa via the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), particularly with the BRICS nations of which South Africa, an anchor state in Africa, is a member. China has put the United States on the defensive, and has created both the perception and the reality of challenging U.S. dominance in Africa.

Strategic Resource Rivalry

The current dominant narrative explaining China's heavy engagement in Africa argues that it is there solely to extract Africa's oil and other strategic minerals found in resource-rich countries such as Angola, the Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Algeria, and Zimbabwe. The reality is that the scope of China's energy/oil engage-



China's new military base in Djibouti, a major step forward for the country's expansion of its military presence abroad.

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ment in Africa is so expansive and so deep that it has provoked insecurity in the West, in particular on the part of the United States. China's oil companies, many of which are state-owned and state-financed, are involved in the exploitation and production of oil and other strategic minerals and the construction of pipelines, ports, and infrastructure to facilitate the extraction and transportation of oil. Since oil is considered a geostrategic resource, in realist terms, China's extensive oil investments in Africa are perceived as a threat, especially by the United States. In 2005, China's determined efforts to control a larger share of access to African oil ignited an American national security debate; James Woolsey, then Director of the CIA, considered the move a "national security issue," arguing that China's goal and geostrategy is to dominate energy markets including those in

Africa.² In 2005 and 2006 this objective by China was considered such a key national security matter that then President George W. Bush discussed it with then Chinese President Hu Jintao during his April 2006 visit to the White House. The matter was also underscored in the U.S.' 2006 National Security Strategy.³ Since that time, the U.S. has remained concerned about China's aggressive competition for Africa's critical resources.

In addition to energy sources like oil and natural gas, Africa is home to critical and rare minerals like vanadium, uranium, and titanium that are useful in space and nuclear industries, a further source of rivalry between the U.S. and China. Strategic minerals ranging from aluminum to zirconium are essential to China; as a manufacturing power it needs these minerals to continue producing mil-

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itary jets and other high technology and luxury products. China accordingly endeavors to cement its ties with countries in Africa that are endowed with these strategic minerals.⁴ China has developed a “catch all” strategy to make sure it gets open access to the minerals of each African country, as the acquisition of strategic minerals and other resources is a priority in its foreign policy. To ensure access to these key resources, it offers “gifts” or economic incentives in the form of stadiums, new roads, and hospitals, etc., to generate appreciation in sealing economic deals.

While the Cold War ideological rivalry that prevailed between China and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s may have ended in countries like Angola, Guinea, and Zimbabwe, it has been replaced by a geo-economic and strategic mineral competition between the two great powers. In the area of energy/oil resources, Nigeria, Sao Thome and Principe are

major oil suppliers to the U.S. The current military presence of the U.S. on the continent and its engagement with the African states aims to help dampen the level of violence and to ensure the uninterrupted flow of oil and minerals of geostrategic value to the U.S.’ industrial development and national security. The extensive presence of China in Africa, along with U.S. concerns over this new strategic threat, has made the African continent –once considered non-strategic– now central in the geostrategic rivalry of the two largest economic powers in the world.

China poses both an economic and a security problem for the U.S. in Africa because its objective is not merely to extract oil and mineral resources; rather, it views the continent as a source of markets and investments. By 2012, trade volume between China and Africa had already increased 20-fold, amounting to \$200 billion, and outpacing that of any of Africa’s other major trading powers including Britain, France and the United States. In fact, as early as 2009, China had surged ahead of every other developed nation to become Africa’s largest trading partner, surpassing even the U.S., the EU, and other major trading blocs. Currently, there are now well over 2,000 Chinese companies, and more than a million Chinese citizens in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵

China’s expansive engagement with Africa has not only geo-economic objectives but geopolitical ones as well. China’s geo-economic objectives involve competing for Africa’s

resources and even monopolizing large sectors of them, whereas its geopolitical goals reflect its ambition to project its overall political, economic and cultural power in relation to other powers. China is using its newfound wealth to mould its relationship with African states into a new strategic partnership epitomized by the FOCAC. It maintains a robust economic agenda based on aid, trade, and investment in order to cement its relations with African states, thereby marginalizing or undermining Taiwan's relations with them and even trying to achieve hegemonic status on the continent. In order to strengthen its political and economic partnership with African nations, China deliberately reaches out to African states at the United Nations and other multilateral venues in order to align its diplomatic positions with theirs. To endear itself to African states, it makes sure it imposes few –or no– conditions on them in exchange for the foreign aid it donates. This policy means, among other things, that China ignores misrule, corruption and even gross violations of human rights, the cases of Sudan and Zimbabwe being the most glaring examples. China's influence among the power elite of Africa will increase as it continues its *laissez faire* attitude and its seeming generosity toward them. This strategy by China is bound to produce growing security concerns on the part of the United States. The U.S. policy posture of upholding IMF and World Bank stipulations based on economic austerity, a top-down relationship, and other types of measures as conditions for

aid transfer will continue to alienate many African nations from the West and pull them toward China.

China's Geostrategy in Africa: Dilute U.S. Hegemony

China utilizes diplomatic, institutional, and financial strategies to weaken U.S. hegemony, balance against the greater U.S. power and influence, and achieve a more symmetrical or even superior level of influence with African nations. Using its diplomatic style and aggressive economic power projection, China is challenging American goals and values, promoting its own political and economic interests, strengthening its African regional security goals, and enhancing its national development objectives.⁶ By pursuing its national interest in the areas of soft power, China does not appear to be openly challenging U.S. regional objectives, but rather merely conducting its traditional foreign policy by using its newly acquired economic and diplomatic power. Stated differently, the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry in Africa is one based on socio-economic and cultural competition in which the instruments utilized are aggressive diplomacy such as FOCAC for China, and Africa Command (AFRICOM) for the United States. China is intensifying its interactions with Africa through expansive investment activities, Confucius Institutes and the consolidation of bilateral and multilateral relations through political and financial institutions and summits. It is a rivalry based more on "soft

power” than on traditional military and ideological great power rivalry.

The scope and intensity of China’s economic and cultural power projection could be interpreted as a way to deconcentrate U.S. power in Africa and weaken what China views as unipolar power preponderance in Africa that favors the United States in particular, and the West in general. Indeed, the goal of creating a more multipolar world is one of China’s foreign policy goals. For instance in 2001, as Vice President of China, Hu Jintao declared that “Multipolarity composes an important base for achieving a durable peace on the planet. Such multipolarity is conducive to building a new just, and reasonable economic-political order, setting up a relatively stable international political framework, and promoting exchanges and cooperation.”⁷ First, China is convinced that a very effective way to undermine U.S. power preponderance is to employ its enormous and growing economic strength and forge cooperative strategic partnerships with the nation-states of Africa. Second, China prioritizes developing significant partnerships with the more strategic states in Africa such as South Africa and other members of the BRICS nations which are considered emerging great powers. In addition to South Africa, China has a significant presence in anchor states such as Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Egypt. China’s continuous wooing of both significant and non-strategic African states could be interpreted as a deliberate strategy by China to ensure U.S. power/influence dilution and offer an alternative great-

power ally to weaker nations instead of abandoning them to total dependence on the United States. African states such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, which have been the target of Western sanctions, have often turned to China as an alternative and an escape from dependence on the U.S. or the West in general.⁸ Indeed, during the recent Communist Party Congress, President Xi said that China’s socialist economy serves as an alternative to other systems.⁹ Third, China’s focus on creating a more symmetric/multipolar international system is seen in its establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as an alternative or competitor to the U.S. dominated World Bank. While the BRICS Development Bank is also a part of this strategy, the AIIB reflects the financial power of China, and is an instrument in promoting multipolarity, reawakening the “Bandung Spirit” aimed at uniting Asian, African, and other Third World regions. The Spirit of Bandung underscores the respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and equality of all races as originally articulated during the Bandung Conference of 1954-1955.¹⁰

China, it could be argued, is using Africa to pursue its deconcentration of U.S. power and influence and create a more symmetrical power relationship among great powers and African states. China’s efforts at weakening U.S. power have taken the form of establishing strategic partnerships with states and forging close cooperation with them in economic, political, cultural, educational, and security areas, among other things. Through

such partnerships, China hopes to achieve power and influence parity with the U.S. in Africa. These strategic partnerships are advantageous to China because it can count on friends in Africa should it someday have to confront global sanctions directed against it by the West or the UN. In the worst case scenario, it would also have support from African friends should it someday be caught up in a militarized dispute with the U.S. Second, China openly states that it is more focused on business than on military alliances, and in particular says that it does not mix business with politics. This means that its rivalry with the U.S. in Africa avoids direct confrontation of a military nature because in this era of economic competition, markets and the emphasis on soft power, aid, trade and investments are considered a legal, positive, and very acceptable form of competitive behavior. Moreover, China in terms of high diplomacy, outmaneuvers the U.S. in Africa because of the more frequent and regular visits by its heads of states compared to those of U.S. Presidents. Chinese Heads of State have been accustomed to visiting Africa on a regular basis since the 1960s. Stated differently, China's geostrategic power projection is located and played out at the highest levels of bilateral and multilateral relations. Furthermore, Chinese geostrategy against the U.S. in Africa involves using FOCAC to effectively communicate or announce enormous resource transfers to African states. Resource commitments and disbursements are made a part of summits along with the leitmotif of a win-win relationship between China

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and African states. While the process is real, it is also a form of propaganda about China's increasing diplomatic, economic, and cultural power and its ability to satisfy the demands of African states within a framework of what it describes as mutually beneficial relations.

The U.S. Response to China's Presence in Africa

The institutional response of the United States to China's multi-pronged strategy in Africa is AFRICOM which, although it is a military command, is also multipronged or multi-functional and includes a focus on development, health, education, democracy and economic growth. The U.S. reaction to China's aggressive and expansive geostrategy in Africa especially during the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations, could generally be described as concerns for the maintenance of international regimes governing the



The China-Africa Forum (FOCAC) is one of the main instruments used by China to build closer relations with African states.

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neoliberal international order and the promotion of U.S. and Western values. These U.S. concerns revolve around: (i) upholding and promoting democratic change and respect for human rights in Africa; (ii) ensuring continued support for international regimes in issue areas such as aid and debt cancellation; and (iii) concerns over China monopolizing Africa's strategic minerals and destroying the continent's environmental sustainability, among other things.

In its rivalry against China in Africa, the U.S. has utilized a narrative that has progressed from neutral or even positive to negative. For instance, in 2005 the narrative regarding China's engagement in Africa was more neutral and even positive as reflected in words by then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice when she stated that "America has reason to welcome

the rise of a confident, peaceful and prosperous China. We want China as a global partner, able and willing to match its growing capabilities to its international responsibilities.¹¹ By the time of the Obama Administration the neutral/positive narrative had transitioned to a negative one as evidenced in comments by then Assistant Secretary of State Jonny Carson's words in February 2010: "China is a very aggressive and pernicious economic competitor with no morals. China is not in Africa for altruistic reasons. China is in Africa for China primarily."¹² Similarly, during the Obama Administration there were more negative comments about China in Africa such as China being equated to a colonial power whose sole aim is to take away resources from Africa. Because of its policy of non-interference, China is accused of aiding and abetting authoritarian



regimes and African dictators who thrive on corruption and blatant violations of the rule of law. The consequence is that China is undermining and reversing all the progress that has been made by the U.S. in the areas of good governance, transparency, and promotion of neoliberal values based on free, fair, and regular elections. The benefit for China is that through its non-interference policy it is able to gain access to resources and markets, and strengthen its diplomatic ties with African states. Besides, because of its policy of non-interference in Africa and singular focus on economic interests, China expresses no concern for systemic corruption and environmental degradation related to its investments in the continent. These narratives are indicators of insecurity on the part of the U.S. as a result of China's engagement in a geographic location (Africa) largely perceived as

the "domain" of the West. China has adopted exactly the opposite policy posture towards Africa (non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations) of what it perceives as U.S. behavior in the international system reflected in the Washington Consensus and manifested in calls for good governance, respect for universal human rights, and other political and economic conditions, which for China are a form of interference.

The narrative about China being in Africa solely to acquire strategic minerals can especially be very negative. There is a great deal of that narrative from both public officials and private citizens in the West, as well in Africa. China is viewed either explicitly or implicitly as threatening to Western hegemony in Africa, and in particular to American goals on the continent. An example of such a narrative is that

American response to China's strategy in Africa is AFRICOM, which focuses on development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth as well as on military co-operation.

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Since the late 1990s, China has enhanced the geostrategic importance of Africa by according the continent both geo-economic and geopolitical significance

of U.S. Congressman Donald Payne, a member of the House Sub-Committee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations, which expresses concern about a U.S.-China rivalry on the continent in this way: “Engagement of China and the U.S. has begun to resemble a competition for resources and influence that has the potential to result in an ugly dynamic akin to that created by the Soviet Union and the U.S. during the Cold War.”¹³

With the establishment of AFRICOM by the U.S. in 2007, it could be argued that the U.S. launched its containment of China policy on the continent. It is doing so through enhanced diplomatic, military, economic, and other forms of engagement, all as part of a strategy of “offshore balancing.” This strategy involves an ever-increasing American presence within the region to counterbalance the rapid growth of China’s multipronged Africa engagement, which is becoming increasingly worrisome to the West. AFRICOM has two major objectives: to prevent the proliferation of terrorist groups in Africa through cooperation with local governments, and to

compete with China’s growing diplomatic, political, economic and cultural presence in Africa.¹⁴ The idea of U.S. offshore balancing in Africa is to maintain and enhance U.S. power and presence in the region in the most effective way without appearing belligerent or threatening, either to China or to any of the other major powers operating in the region. Accordingly, former President George W. Bush said in 2007 that: “The new command will strengthen our security cooperation with Africa and help to create new opportunities to bolster the capabilities of our partners in Africa. Africa Command will enhance our efforts to help bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote our common goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa.”¹⁵ Through AFRICOM, the U.S. has adopted a new set of policies regarding U.S.-Africa political, economic, and military relations, especially as they relate to U.S. national interests.

A second strategy of the U.S., aimed especially at counterbalancing China’s development program of “modernization without democratization,” is that of continuing to promote the Clinton Doctrine of enlarging market democracies in the region. Through AFRICOM, the U.S. encourages African nations to continue pursuing the democratic path that was launched during the early 1990s with the end of the Cold War. The U.S. has an advantage in this area, given the African Union’s intolerance for coups and illegal regime change. In West Africa in particular, Economic Community

of West African States (ECOWAS) has issued a warning against illegal overthrow of incumbent regimes.¹⁶ The U.S. also has a great deal of advantage over China because of Africa's mostly British and French colonial heritage, and one could argue, the continuing neo-colonial presence and influence of Western Europe and its tradition of democratic capitalism, which serves as a powerful example for African nations as former colonies. The efforts of AFRICOM are strongly buttressed by the role of Britain and France in political and cultural ties. The political, economic, and cultural/linguistic ties to the West are still very strong and solidly based on educational, political-economic, and even emotional/psychological affinities. Africa's very strong colonial and neo-colonial western heritage affords the U.S. and the West in general a strong advantage over China whose psychological hold on the minds of Africans is still very new, tenuous, and evolving slowly. Besides, African nations are to a very large extent led by western-educated power elite, fluent in English, French, or Portuguese with strong communication, educational, and religious ties to the West that are far stronger and deeper compared to those with China. In fact, the ambition of most Africans is to be educated or trained in the West. The reason is either because of the stronger emotional ties, or simply because of the scope, intensity, and even duration and frequency of cross-cultural interactions. For Africans, the West is often held in higher esteem among Africans than any other region of the world. In spite of this, the scope, in-

tensity and frequency of political, economic and cultural transactions with which China is engaging/interacting with Africa is becoming a source of concern for the West, especially the United States, which sees itself as the hegemonic power in the international system.

Both the United States and China have put in operation multipronged strategies that aim to enhance and promote their power and influence among the nation-states of Africa. During the Cold War, Africa was not considered as geopolitically important as other regions (Europe, Asia, the Middle East, etc.), but during the formation of AFRICOM, U.S. rhetoric about Africa elevated it from a non-geostrategic region to one that is both strategic and central to U.S. national security.¹⁷ Just as China regards its relationship with African states as a new partnership, AFRICOM as the strategic arm of the U.S. in Africa is considered a partnership with African states by the United States Department of Defense. As a partnership, one of AFRICOM's objectives is not to dominate leadership in Africa but rather to be a source of support for the local leadership and democratic endeavors that currently exist within the continent. Similar to China's reliance on high level diplomacy to cement its partnership with African nations, the U.S. via AFRICOM also relies on high level diplomatic missions to African nations to explain AFRICOM's role, functions, and rationale. The new unified command, it is hoped, will be seen by Africans as an effort by the U.S. to create a relationship of equality, mutual

respect, or as the Chinese would say, a “win-win” partnership.

Since the late 1990s, China has enhanced the geostrategic importance of Africa by according the continent both geo-economic and geopolitical significance. The geo-economic importance of Africa is reflected in the enormous levels of aid, trade, and investment by China, and its geopolitical importance is reflected in the increased political ties between specific African nations and China, which even involve inter-political party cooperation, and in particular the formation of FOCAC in 2000. In a similar fashion, and as a way to rival China’s attention to Africa, the U.S. has also accorded geo-economic and geopolitical significance to Africa by establishing AFRICOM. In fact, the U.S. has been trying to match China’s attention towards Africa starting with the Clinton Administration and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Bush Administration and the Emergency Plan for AIDS relief, and the more recent Obama U.S.-Africa summit, and the Power Africa whose goal is to provide electricity to 600 million Africans on the continent.¹⁸ The latter’s establishment is a result of several developments in the post-Cold War environment, as well as the expansion of China into Africa as a result of economic imperatives of globalization within China. However, in addition to China’s primary preoccupation with access to mineral resources, U.S. geopolitical and geo-economic interests in Africa have expanded to include containing terrorism, secur-

ing access to mineral resources, combating violent conflicts and responding to humanitarian crises, helping to combat pandemics like HIV/AIDS and Ebola, preventing the spread of illegal drugs from Africa to the West, and countering the very positive image that China is creating in Africa – that of a China that genuinely cares about Africa and is therefore locked in a relationship of “win-win,” mutual respect and equality with African nations. The U.S. through AFRICOM seeks to make up for its past record of having marginalized the continent as being of little geopolitical and strategic importance or as simply a supplier of raw materials and even a physical obstacle or barrier to travel and access to the more geostrategic regions of the Middle East and Asia.

In spite of American efforts to contain China in Africa, however, the evidence of China’s massive engagement with Africa is nonetheless often impressive and based on China’s political and economic will to cement its ties with African states. By 2014, over 50 percent of China’s foreign aid was being disbursed to Africa, with an emphasis that there were no strings attached. The vast amounts of foreign aid and investment activities by China may be seen in the construction of infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, schools, and hospitals, as well as the reopening of mines which employ some Africans. China is also steadily engaged in pockets of conspicuous industrialization –at no cost to Africa– such as the construction of the 20-story African Union building in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was a gift

to the African Union of a very modern \$200 million dollar building.

According to China's Ministry of Commerce, in 2015 China signed new contracts for infrastructure programs with Africa worth over five billion dollars. In 2016, the China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) reported additional contracts worth over five billion within Africa. In April 2016, China began constructing its first ever overseas military base on the coast of Djibouti, approximately nine miles away from the U.S.'s AF-RICOM, the largest American military base in Africa, raising questions about the possibility of a more open strategic military challenge to the United States in Africa.

In conclusion, the U.S.-China rivalry is likely to intensify in the future because of statements by incumbent Chinese President Xi Jinping during his more than three-hour speech during the recent October 16, 2017 Chinese Communist Party Congress. President Xi Jinping underscored the fact that China has entered a "new era," and stated that it was "Time for China to take center stage" in the world. He also emphasized that China's socialist model of development offers "a new choice for other countries" because it would fast-track their development without sacrificing their sovereignty to any nation with interventionist inclinations. He pointed to China's economy which he said was flourishing.¹⁹ Statements like these indicate confidence in China's worldview and socialist political economy, in contrast to the worldview of the West which is

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based on democratic governance but plagued with sluggish economies. In particular, such statements are likely to make the U.S. more insecure because China is already considered the rising hegemon in the international system, one that is deliberately projecting its power in many regions, especially in Africa. The two countries have fundamentally different ideologies and are therefore more likely to clash in the future, especially if China continues to rise and threaten U.S. hegemonic power. Under President Xi Jinping, the U.S. and China are ideologically further drifting apart. For President Xi democracy is seen as inimical to China's stability and growth. Accordingly, the idea of a free press, independent judiciary, a powerful and diverse civil society, and criticism of the socialist system, among other things, are illegal in China.

China is helping to intensify the rivalry through its policy of multipolarity manifested in a deliberate effort to diminish U.S. power preponder-

ance by relaunching the Bandung Spirit, establishing the BRICS bank, and the AIIB. All these efforts on the part of China are motivated by China's dislike of a world characterized by an overwhelmingly powerful nation that is prone to intervene and interfere in the affairs of other nations. In sum, a tactical geo-economic and geopolitical rivalry is actively taking place in Africa between the U.S. and China as the latter is perceived as rapidly gaining influence within the continent, and is determined to dilute U.S. power preponderance. The consequence is that the rivalry has developed into a geostrategic imperative on the part of both powers. ■

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