

*MSC 68th Student Conference on National Affairs
“Hanging in the Balance: American Leadership in Global Crises”*

Texas A&M University

***POLICY PROPOSAL:
Countering PRC Influence in Africa—A NATO Imperative***

Roundtable – Friends in Far Places: Maintaining US Alliance in NATO

TO: Under Secretary for Political Affairs AMB Victoria Nuland

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SPONSORING ORGANIZATION: U.S. Department of State

FACILITATOR: Brigadier General Russ “Dirk” Driggers, USAF

SUBJECT: Focusing and enhancing NATO partnership activities in Africa to counter rising Chinese influence in the region

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Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)

China’s growing influence in Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) undermines sovereignty, stability, and governance across the continent and the larger region. To counteract this influence, the U.S. should lead NATO to deepen its partnership, engagement, and cooperation with specific Horn of Africa (HOA) nations such as Kenya, Djibouti, and Ethiopia.

Discussion

Since 2000, China has grown as Africa’s largest trade partner, secured military expansion projects, and propped up authoritarian governments at the expense of human rights and the rules-based international order.¹ “Debt-trap diplomacy” economic policies force African nations to cede Chinese-made infrastructure, such as ports and railways, back to China when, predictably, they are unable to pay back Chinese investors.² Moreover, China has increased its

¹ Albert, Eleanor, “China in Africa,” Council on Foreign Relations, CFR, last modified July 12, 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-africa>.

² Adjnoti, Rahul, “The Complete Story of Debt-Trap Diplomacy”, The Geopolitics, TGP, last modified October 11, 2022. <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-complete-story-of-debt-trap-diplomacy>.

economic foothold in Africa to include funding for 31% of African infrastructure in 2020.³ Due to the lack of Western investment, African nations have had little choice but to embrace offers of Chinese trade and infrastructure, such as the BRI.⁴

New trade routes in Africa also showcase Beijing's political ambitions. The construction of "Smart Cities" expands Chinese surveillance capabilities and endangers the full sovereignty of nations.⁵ On the diplomatic front, the magnitude and frequency of visits Beijing receives from top-ranking African officials far outweighs the number of visits to NATO Allies.⁶ In addition, the construction of a Chinese naval base in Djibouti is one prime example of the militarization of the BRI. Left with no alternative competitive options from the West, African nations remain at risk of authoritarian influence. Chinese investment in Africa has led to 63% of Africans favorably viewing China's economic and political influence. Therefore, there is concern in losing African nations as potential allies in the Great Power competition with China, regardless of China's reputation of human rights abuses. The European Commission projects that the developing African continent is rapidly growing and will have the largest workforce of any continent by 2040. Africa is also home to 30% of mineral resources in the world.⁷ If China's influence remains unchecked, Chinese control of the world economy will metastasize from threat into reality.

For its part, NATO is engaged with Africa in numerous lines of effort, such as the Defence Education Enhancement, Military Training and Exercise, Mobile Education and Training Teams, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the AU, and annual African Lion exercises. However, these efforts are rather disaggregated, unfocused, and shallow, especially when compared to China. For example, NATO's AU liaison office in Addis Ababa has only three permanent personnel, combined yearly participation in MTEPs and METTs equate to only 50 students.⁸ In short, the breadth of programs is expansive, but program depth is a necessity for increased cooperation and success on the African continent. The US must lead NATO towards a more focused growth of military, political, economic, and social programs already established by NATO.

NATO has built positive relationships with Horn of Africa (HOA) nations such as Ethiopia and Kenya, namely through Operation Ocean Shield from 2009 to 2016.⁹ NATO can and must leverage these strategic relationships as a proof-of-concept for deepened NATO engagement with African partners. In other areas of the globe, NATO has pursued preferred partnership status with certain nations. For example, NATO utilizes its Global Partnership program to deepen relationships with strategically critical nations, such as Japan. HOA nations, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, represent critical locations in which NATO could leverage an

³ "How Chinese firms have dominated African infrastructure", The Economist, last modified February 19, 2022.

⁴ Signe, Landry, "US trade and investment in Africa" Brookings Institute, last modified July 28, 2021.

⁵ Yusuf, Mohammed. "China's Reach Into Africa's Digital Sector Worries Experts". VOA News, last modified October 22, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-reach-into-africa-digital-sector-worries-experts/6281543.html>

⁶ Scarfe, Jade and Cai, Jing. "Agency, Bargaining Power, and African Leadership Visits to China." The Diplomat, last modified May 24, 2021.

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/agency-bargaining-power-and-african-leadership-visits-to-china/>

⁷ European Commission. "Africa's growth potential". Last updated October 5, 2022.

https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/africas-growth-potential_en#:~:text=The%20African%20continent's%20population%20is,on%20inclusive%20and%20sustainable%20development.

⁸ Nato, "Cooperation with the African Union," NATO, October 18, 2022,

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8191.htm.

⁹ "Operation Ocean Shield," mc.nato.int, accessed February 11, 2023,

<https://mc.nato.int/missions/operation-ocean-shield>.

Individual Partnership Cooperation Program (IPCP), incentivizing military cooperation through training, education, counter terrorism and cyber defense. This will provide African nations with a strategic choice to lean into NATO ideals over the corrupting and sovereignty-impairing influence of China. The HOA nations can benefit immensely from deepened NATO investment and expertise including through more professionalized militaries, sovereign physical and telecommunications infrastructure, integrated economies, and the rule of law. Educational exchanges for military leaders can build competency and respect in laws of war and civilian control of the military. NATO investments in telecommunications infrastructure can decrease intelligence gains by Chinese corporations and promote data sovereignty and security. In short, a partnership effort with specific nations, namely Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti has the potential to focus and enhance NATO engagement in the region to counter Chinese influence.

Recommendation

The US should lead NATO in the development of an enhanced global partnership through IPCPs with key HOA nations of Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya based on existing relationships with the US. This partnership structure will expand on existing NATO cooperative defensive programs and military training exercises on the continent. Further, NATO should extend an invitation to these three nations to observe at the next NATO summit to enhance dialogue, encourage multilateralism and diplomacy, and ultimately further expansion of NATO efforts to nations outside the HOA. The US should introduce this policy proposal for further development by Allies and, ultimately, approval at the next NATO meeting of Foreign Ministers.