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Making sense of the new episode of great power rivalry in Africa through neorealist lenses: the Sino-US competition

Compreendendo o novo episódio da grande rivalidade do poder na África através de lentes neorrealistas: a competição sino-americana

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Abstract

This study reveals the implications for US interests of China's extensive engagement with Africa. Making sense of international system through neorealist lenses, China's strengthening ties with African countries constitute a systemic threat US interests in several ways. The first is China's quest for African oil. The second concerns China's non-interference policy in African countries' domestic affairs. The third is the implications of China's extensive engagement with Africa for US position international system. These three challenges together have potential for upsetting the existing distribution of power in international system favouring the US.

Resumo

Este estudo revela as implicações para os interesses dos EUA do extenso envolvimento da China com a África. Entendendo o sistema internacional através de lentes neorrealistas, o fortalecimento dos laços com os países africanos constitui uma ameaça sistêmica aos interesses norte-americanos de várias maneiras. O primeiro é a busca da China por petróleo africano. O segundo diz respeito à política de não-interferência da China nos assuntos domésticos dos países africanos. A terceira são as implicações do amplo envolvimento da China com a África no sistema internacional de posições dos EUA. Esses três desafios juntos têm potencial para perturbar a distribuição de poder existente no sistema internacional que favorece os EUA.

Keywords: Africa; China; China-US Rivalry, US Foreign Policy; China Foreign Policy.

Palavras-chave: África; China; Rivalidade sino-americana; Política Externa dos Estados Unidos; Política Externa da China.

Introduction

Africa lies at the intersection of key routes of global commerce. Northern Africa is adjacent to Mediterranean trade between

Europe and Asia; southern Africa is a gateway for trade between the Atlantic and Indian oceans; eastern Africa dominates trade passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits in the Gulf of Aden; and western Africa is one of the hubs of the Atlantic trade basin. In addition to its strategic location, the African continent has abundant natural resources, particularly valuable metals and minerals. Moreover, Africa, in line with recent discoveries, possesses a considerable share of the world's proven oil reserves.

Because Africa's geographical location and resources have always drawn the attention of outside powers, the continent has been subjected to their imperialist designs throughout history. The earliest great power rivalry in Africa dates back to the 16th century, when Portuguese activities challenged Ottoman sovereignty in Abyssinia. The second half of the 19th century witnessed a competition between European powers in the brutal partition of Africa by acquiring colonial territories, called the "scramble for Africa". During the Cold War, the continent became one of the battlefields of the global East-West confrontation between the United States (the US) and the Soviet Union (USSR).

The current great power rivalry in Africa is between China and the US. Since the 2000s, China has increasingly been engaging with Africa in parallel with its own economic boom and thirst for oil, making it Africa's biggest trading partner, and source of aid and investment for African countries. Having such economic leverage, China is also intensifying its diplomatic and military ties with the continent. Following a neorealist logic to make sense of the international system, China's extensive involvement in the continent constitutes a systemic threat to US hegemony. As a result, great power rivalry in the continent has entered a new stage in the 21st century.

This study investigates the different strategies of China and the US for achieving their objectives in Africa through neorealist lenses. In doing so, it reveals the implications for US interests of China's extensive engagement with the continent. Given the characteristics of Chinese involvement in the continent, China's strengthening ties with African countries challenge US interests in several ways. The first is China's quest for African oil. The second concerns China's non-interference policy in African countries' domestic affairs. The third is the implications of China's extensive engagement with Africa for US hegemony. These three challenges together have potential for upsetting the existing distribution of power in the international system favouring the US.

Making Sense of the New Episode of Great Power Rivalry in Africa

After the dissolution of the USSR ended a worldwide ideological confrontation, the US, as the victor of the Cold War, appeared to be the sole great power in world politics. Since US interest in Africa was mainly a response to USSR involvement during the Cold War, Africa inevitably lost its place in the US strategic projections for the post-Cold era, thereby weakening the global power rivalry. This is evident in a US Department of Defense (DOD) report of August 1995, "U.S. Security Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa":

America's security interests in Africa are very limited. At present we have no permanent or significant military presence anywhere in Africa: We have no bases; we station no combat forces; and we homeport no ships. We do desire access to facilities and material, which have been and might be especially important in the event of contingencies or evacuations. But ultimately we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa (DOD, 1995).

However, this lack of interest soon changed following China's emergence as a rival to US hegemony and its extensive involvement in Africa in parallel with oil discoveries in the continent. Indeed, China's economy has been remarkably successful since the implementation of free-market reforms in 1979 (Yueh, 2007: 35), with Chinese GDP growing over 9 percent annually. With such momentum, China is now the world's second largest economy after the US, with the highest GDP on a purchasing power parity basis (World Bank, 2018).¹ Having risen to such a status, China constantly needs to expand its markets and secure reliable supplies of resources to sustain its rapid economic growth. Africa has thus appeared as probably the most important area of operations for China. Hence its involvement with the continent has dramatically diversified and deepened since the 1990s.

China currently has the upper hand in Africa despite US efforts to contain its presence. Its massive trade with the continent surpassed the US in 2008 and was estimated to be four times larger in 2018. In parallel, cementing its ties with African states, Chinese aid and investment activities have eclipsed US activities. As Tibor Nagy, US assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, acknowledges, "For too long when investors have knocked on the door, and the Africans opened the door, the only person standing there was the Chinese" (BBC, 2019).

China is also now challenging the US militarily in Africa. It has acquired a military base in Djibouti, located on one of the most important chokepoints between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and only a few miles from a critical US base, Camp Lemonnier. There have already been reports of rising tensions between the Chinese and US militaries in the continent. According to US officials, for example, China used military-grade lasers from its base in Djibouti to distract US pilots on ten different occasions, causing eye injuries in two pilots (Dahir, 2018).

Following neorealist lenses to explain state behaviours, China's extensive economic investments, intense educational, cultural and political interactions, and growing military ties in Africa constitute a systemic threat to US hegemony. Neorealist assumptions suggests that the ordering principle of international system is anarchy, which means that the system consists of sovereign states without any central authority above them to regulate their interactions (Waltz, 1979: 103; Mearsheimer, 2001: 30). This is to say, states operate in an environment in which there is no authority to prevent them from hurting and even destroying each other (Waltz, 1979: 103-104; Grieco, 1988: 497-498; Mearsheimer, 2001: 30-31). Such environment fuels suspicion and fear since states and especially great powers, possessing offensive capabilities, are potentially dangerous to each other. Therefore, states rationally incline to ensure their survival on their own rather than depend on others, called as self-help behaviour (Waltz, 1979: 105, 107; Mearsheimer, 2001: 30-31). Given the inclination

¹ While Chinese GDP (ppp) was US\$25,361,74.19, US GDP (ppp) was US\$20,494,099.85.

towards self-help behaviour, states, as the optimal way to secure their survival, are concerned with the distribution of power in the system and seek to maximize their relative power vis à vis other states (Grieco, 1988: 498; Mearsheimer, 2001: 3, 21 and 34). In doing so, states not only strive to gain more power for themselves but also endeavour to prevent others from amplifying their capabilities (Gilpin, 1981: 87-88; Grieco, 1998: 498; Mearsheimer, 2001: 3, 35).

Mearsheimer (2001: 34-35) states that the pursuit of power for great powers stops only when they achieve global hegemony. This is seen as the best way to eliminate any possibility of challenge by other great powers. Global hegemon here is defined as a state that is far more powerful capable of dominating all others, thus is in a commanding position to build and sustain an order in international system (Gilpin, 1981: 29; Wollforth, 1993: 12-14; Mearsheimer, 2001: 40). In modern era, Mearsheimer (2001: 41, 84, 140-141) argues, it is difficult (if not impossible) to achieve global hegemony due to the nuclear balance and presence of insuperable oceans. Hence, great powers can best hope to be regional hegemons, which dominate only a distinct geographical area. The US, dominating the Western Hemisphere, constitutes the only regional hegemon in today's world.

Neorealist assumptions regarding the nature of international system suggest that regional hegemons aims to prevent other great powers from dominating other areas. This is because if other great powers achieve regional hegemony, they might upset the existing distribution of power favouring the existing regional hegemon, thus diminish its security and jeopardize its interests (Mearsheimer, 2001: 41-42, 141). Building upon this logic, Chinese involvement and gaining upper hand in Africa serve only its interest in maximizing its relative power and achieving hegemony to balance the US power in international system. The US, on the other hand, seeks to block China's further progress in the continent since it present a systemic threat to US hegemony. The threat even grows since Africa has become world's one of the most wealth-generating areas thanks to oil discoveries. Hence, Sino-US rivalry in Africa is thus likely to intensify in the future. On the one hand, it is obvious that China is going to deepen its engagement with the continent to maintain economic growth. More importantly, it seems that China has been preparing to play a more assertive role in world politics, evident in President Xi Jinping's speech to the Chinese Communist Party Congress on October 16, 2017. Identifying China's rise as a "new era", Jinping stated that "It is time for us [China] to take centre stage in the world" (BBC, 2017). On the other hand, the US is determined to curb China's rise both globally and in Africa specifically.

China's Engagement with Africa

As mentioned, China's active engagement is also closely related to Africa's proven energy reserves. While the continent was of only minor economic interest in the 1970s and 1980s due to its diamond and strategic minerals reserves, its importance in energy markets has been growing following the latest oil explorations, such that Africa's proven oil reserves were estimated at 7.2 percent of world reserves in 2017 (British Petroleum, 2019). While this still lags far behind the Middle East, discoveries

of proven reserves in Africa have been accelerating. These rose from an estimated 77.2 thousand million barrels in 1998 to 125.3 thousand million barrels in 2017. US Department of Energy (DOE) estimates predict that the combined oil output of African producers will rise by 91 percent between 2002 and 2025 (DOE, 2005; see also Klare and Volman, 2006/b: 611).

In line with this increase in Africa's proven oil reserves, great power interest has grown rapidly. For example, the US National Energy Policy Development Group's (NEPD Group) report of 2001, "National Energy Policy", also known as the "Cheney Report", highlighted Africa's potential to supply the US's increasing energy needs in the 21st century. The report also underlined that the high quality of Africa's low-sulphur oil makes it suitable for the stringent requirements of refined products. The report calls for a vigorous approach by the US government towards Africa to promote a more receptive environment for oil and gas trade, investment and the operations of US companies (NEPD Group, 2001: chapter 8, 11). In parallel, Harry Longwell, Exxon's then vice-president stated in 1999 that "we expect that future operations in Africa will account for a significant portion of Exxon's worldwide production" (quoted in Klare and Volman, 2006/b: 611).

Meanwhile, China was also becoming aware during the 1990s of Africa's increasing importance in global energy markets. Given its growing need for reliable supplies of resources, China's interest in the continent intensified enormously as it was no longer self-sufficient in oil. For a time, it was self-sufficient after the Daqing oil field began production in 1963. However, its oil consumption has exceeded production since 1993, when it produced 2.8 million barrels of oil per day (mbpd) but consumed an estimated 3 mbpd. Since then, the growth in the gap between China's oil production and consumption has accelerated, with demand for oil doubling within a decade between 1995 and 2005, from 3.3 to 6.6 mbpd, while oil production only rose from 2.9 mbpd to 3.6 mbpd. By 2018, China consumed 13.5 mbpd while oil production only reached 3.7 mbpd (British Petroleum, 2019). Consequently, China is now the world's largest crude oil importer.

This widening gap raised concerns in Chinese decision-making circles, who realized that the increasing dependence on imported oil meant that China had to participate in the global oil market. Accordingly, Chinese leaders adopted a "going out" strategy to secure and diversify oil supplies. Africa soon emerged as the most important part of China's efforts to diversify foreign oil sources. Hence, China's state-owned oil companies entered African oil fields in the second half of the 1990s, when they began prospecting in Sudan. Since then, China has participated in exploiting and producing African oil, and constructing infrastructure like pipelines and ports to facilitate oil flows to China.

In addition to China's thirst for oil and the continent's rising proven oil reserves, Hong (2008: 101-102) rightly suggests two other factors influential in China's oil rush in Africa. The first factor is China's concerns about further destabilization of the oil producing regions of the Middle East and Central Asia due to the US war on terror in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq exacerbated China's sense of vulnerability regarding oil imports, given that the Middle East provided about 40 percent of Chinese oil imports in the 2000s (see also Servant, 2005). The second factor was that US, Japanese and European oil companies dominated all key oil producing regions except for Africa, making it difficult for Chinese companies

to compete with traditional actors in upstream oil markets other than Africa. Unlike other regions, however, Africa was open to companies from many countries since it had not yet been monopolized by US and European companies. Indeed, because some African countries, such as Libya and Sudan, had political tensions with Western countries, China had a unique opportunity to establish its own sphere of influence in the continent.

To seize the opportunity that Africa presented and consolidate its influence in the continent since the end of the 1990s, China has extensively engaged with African countries, diplomatically, economically, militarily and culturally means. China's strategy is mainly moulded by the "Five Points Proposal", presented by then President Jiang Zemin during his tour of Africa in 1996. The new China-Africa relationship was to be established on reliable friendship, sovereign equality, non-intervention, mutually beneficial development and international cooperation (Alden, 2005: 147). The framework established by the proposal was subsequently advanced through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), initiated at the Ministerial Conference in Beijing in 2000. FOCAC has cemented relations with African countries through a robust economic agenda. China has thus combined three main elements in its economic engagement with Africa: aid, investment and trade.

Regarding aid to Africa, Beijing has provided many African nations with debt relief. For instance, China agreed to grant \$1.2 billion debt relief to 31 African countries at FOCAC's first annual summit in 2000. It then wrote off another \$750 million at the second FOCAC summit in 2003 (Gill, Huang and Morrison, 2007: 8; Broadman, 2007: 275) and \$1.3 billion for 33 African countries in 2006 (Hofstedt, 2009: 80). China also granted loans to African nations. Between 2001 and 2005, its Export-Import Bank approved hundreds of infrastructure projects in Africa, valued at \$12.5 billion (Gill, Huang and Morrison, 2007, p. 8; Broadman, 2007: 275). Since 2005, China's overall loans to African countries have also been gradually increasing, from \$4.5 billion in 2006 to \$30.4 billion in 2016 (SAIS China Africa Research Initiative, 2019). These loans are mainly distributed to resource-rich countries, such as Angola, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Zimbabwe and South Africa. In 2008, President Xi Jinping announced at the seventh FOCAC summit that China would provide \$60 billion in financial support to African continent in the coming years (AfricaNews, 2018).

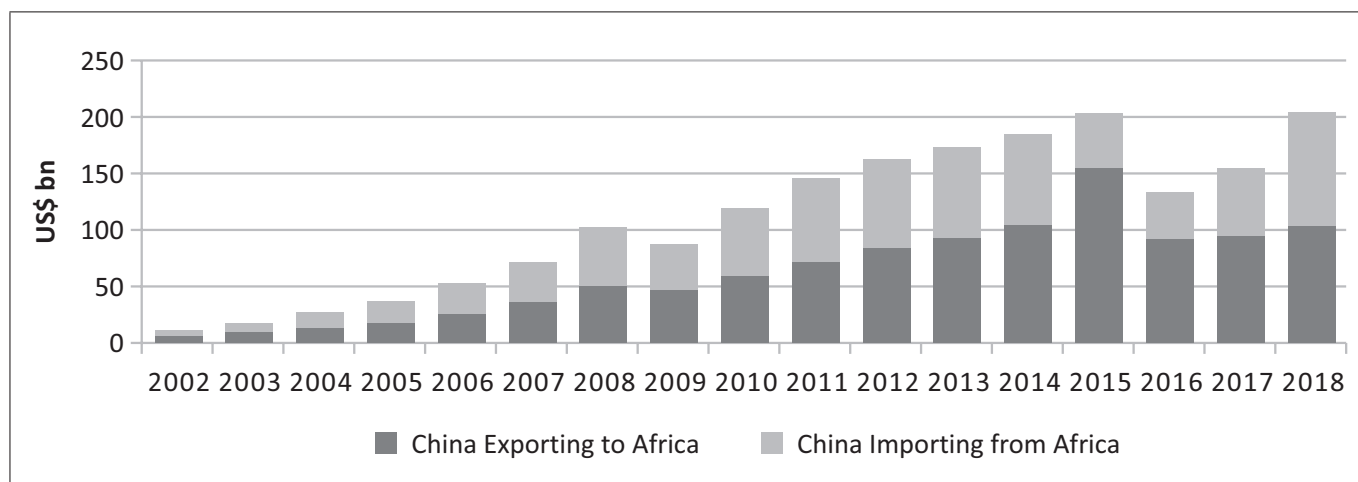
The striking feature of Chinese aid to Africa is that there are no strings attached. That is, Chinese aid is based on the principle of non-interference in the recipient countries' domestic affairs. As then deputy foreign minister, Zhou Wenzhong, put it in 2004, regarding accusations against Sudan's government of massive and systematic human rights violations, "Business is business ... We try to separate politics from business ... Secondly, I think the internal situation in the Sudan is an internal affair, and we are not in a position to impose upon them" (French, 2004). The principle of non-interference gives China an advantage over the US, whose aid is tied to structural reforms as conditions imposed by Western values, such as democracy, human rights and a liberal economy. Consequently, African countries see Chinese aid as a valuable alternative to the US (Alden, 2005: 156; Taylor, 2006: 939-94; Pant, 2008: 36-37).

China's foreign direct investment (FDI), mostly to resource-rich countries, has also been growing rapidly, from about \$491 million in 2003 to \$9.3 billion in 2009, \$34.6 billion in 2015 and \$ 43.2

billion in 2017 (SAIS China Africa Research Initiative, 2019). However, China's trade with Africa provides the most powerful indicator of its emerging interest in the continent. In the 1990s, prior to the implementation of the "going out" strategy, China-Africa trade was worth less than \$10 billion annually. Since then, it has grown dramatically, from \$10 billion in 2001 to \$71.2 billion in 2007, when China overtook Britain and France to become Africa's second largest trading partner after the US (Hofstedt, 2009: 80; SAIS China Africa Research Initiative, 2019). In 2010, it reached \$120 billion to surpass the US at \$113.3 billion (SAIS China Africa Research Initiative, 2019; The US Census Bureau, 2019). By 2015, China-Africa annual trade volume exceeded \$200 billion, and was estimated to be \$204 billion in 2018 (SAIS China Africa Research Initiative, 2019; Ministry of Commerce, Peoples Republic of China, 2019).

As Wang and Bio-Tchané (2008) point out, it is particularly noteworthy that Africa's exports to and imports from China have risen by more than 40 percent and 35 percent, respectively, which is significantly higher than growth in world trade at 14 percent and commodity prices at 18 percent. Unlike US trade, China's trade with Africa reflects the comparative advantages of each partner rather than serving any unilateral Chinese interest in exploiting natural resources. Evidence of this is the fairly even import-export balance (see Figure 1). While China mainly imports oil, other energy sources (about 60 percent)², and strategic minerals and metals (about 15 percent), Africa mainly imports manufactured products, machinery and transport equipment (about 75 percent).

Figure 1: China-Africa Trade Volume (SAIS China Africa Research Initiative, 2019)



China's has skilfully used these economic engagement tools of aid, investment and trade to ensure access to African oil. A typical example of this is China's dealings with Angola. China began to forge cooperation with Angola in oil through a \$2-billion oil-backed loan in 2005 for improving its inadequate infrastructure. In 2006, China provided another \$1-billion loan to Angola. Two months later, Angola's state-owned oil company relinquished 40 percent of its offshore oil share to a Chinese state-owned oil company for a \$1.4-billion investment, with Angola repaying the loan with 10,000 barrels of oil per

2 Energy related products constitute 90 percent of US imports from Africa.

day (Parenti, 2009: 121). China thereby secured both a \$3 billion infrastructure contract and oil flows from Africa. Through similar strategies across the continent, Africa's share in China's crude oil imports rose from 11 percent to 32 percent between 1995 and 2006 (Hong, 2008: 101).

Meanwhile, China has supplemented its extensive economic engagement with activities in media, education, culture and medicine to strengthen its presence. For example, it has invested in the media sector to establish Chinese-based media outlets in the continent, with China's state news agency, *Xinhua*, which broadcasts in English and French, expanding to 33 African offices by 2010 (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012: 198). According to Hansen (2016: 2), these *Xinhua* offices have become a primary news source, competing with Western news agencies, such as Associated Press and Reuters. To a lesser degree than *Xinhua*, *China Radio International* and *China Central Television* are also active in Africa (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012: 198), and are used to promote a positive image of China in Africa.

China is also interested in presenting itself as a friendly power to African countries in education and culture. It claims to have provided 20,000 scholarships for African students, trained more than 30,000 African professionals, and sent 350,000 technicians and experts to Africa by 2012 (Ongodia, 2017: 40). Confucius Institutes are critical in China's cultural dissemination strategy, with around 38 Confucius Institutes and Confucius classrooms in 27 African countries. These are designed to orient Africans increasingly towards China by creating awareness of Chinese way of life, language and culture (Ongodia, 2017: 41).

China is also conducting health diplomacy to improve relations, such as an anti-malaria campaign and construction of medical facilities in many parts of the continent. It regularly sends medical teams to Africa and has intensified cooperation in the prevention, treatment and research of diseases and the application of medicines. It also provides training programs for HIV/AIDS, hospital management and health reform (Cooke, 2008: 7-8).

Finally, China has an increasing military presence in Africa. In the 2000s, its military and security goals were limited to United Nations Peacekeeping missions and anti-piracy activities. However, its military presence in Africa has clearly progressed to acquiring its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. According to a report by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (2017: 171-172), the Djibouti base will be an important strategic asset for China as it is located on "a key chokepoint for sea lines of communications between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, through which travels a large portion of hundreds of billions of dollars in trade between China and the Middle East and Europe." In addition, the base's location is particularly sensitive for the US because it is several miles away from Camp Lemonnier, one of the largest and most critical US military installations abroad, and the base of US African Command (AFRICOM) facilities. US officials are also concerned that the Chinese military could spy on US military activities.

China also seems to have deepened military ties with African countries along the lines of the China-Africa Defence and Security Forum, launched in 2018 when top military officials from China and 50 African countries met in Beijing. The forum demonstrates China's determination to engage with Africa militarily (Conteh-Morgan, 2019: 85-86).

US Engagement with Africa

Facing these challenges, the US realized that it needed to engage with the continent more seriously. Increasing US engagement is thus clearly a response to China's enormous interest in Africa. While there was only a mild or moderate rivalry during the Clinton and Bush Administrations, it became intense during the Obama Administration (Conteh-Morgan, 2018: 39). For instance, during an 11-day trip to the continent, Obama's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, publicly criticized China's presence in Africa, warning African countries about cooperation with powers that exploit the continent's resources. Clinton also praised the US stance: "America will stand up for democracy and universal human rights even when it might be easier or more profitable to look the other way, to keep the resources flowing" (Smith, 2012; Ghosh, 2012). Describing Clinton's remarks as a "U.S. plot to sow discord between China [and] Africa", *Xinhua* news agency replied that "Whether Clinton was ignorant of the facts on the ground or chose to disregard them, her implication that China has been extracting Africa's wealth for itself is utterly wide of the truth" (Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Kenya, 2012).

Sino-US rivalry in Africa became even more evident in the Trump administration's new Africa strategy, announced on December 13, 2018 by national security advisor John R. Bolton. Ironically, according to Tremann (2018), "the new US Africa strategy is not about Africa. It's about China." Indeed, Bolton emphasized that the activities of China (and to a lesser extent Russia) in Africa were a national security issue for the US (the White House, 2018). He claimed that China was deliberately and aggressively increasing its influence against US national security interests while China's predatory actions were actually parts of its goal of advancing Chinese global dominance.

The US first clearly reversed its post-Cold War neglect of Africa after the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US. Its concern was that if extremist terrorism spread into Africa, it might block oil flows and thereby threaten US national security. Hence, China's strengthening pursuit of oil assets in Africa since the 2000s intensified the existing US concerns in the continent (Klare and Volman, 2006/a: 303). In response, the US has stepped up its military, humanitarian and economic activities.

Military activities constitute the backbone of the US presence in Africa through the military bases it has established throughout the continent and the various security assistance programs for African countries overseen by AFRICOM. The creation of AFRICOM as a stand-alone command in 2008 demonstrated Africa's changing position from peripheral to central in US strategic projections in parallel with rising US security interests in the continent. According to the AFRICOM Posture Statement (2019: 6), AFRICOM has approximately 7,000 personnel conducting tasks, although the total number of US personnel reaches 75,000 after including contractors (Conteh-Morgan, 2019: 81). AFRICOM's major base is Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, with about 4,000 military and civilian personnel, and fighter jets, cargo aircraft and drones.

AFRICOM was not designed as a typical military command as its focus is multi-functional rather than only serving security and defence purposes. On February 6, 2007, when AFRICOM was announced, the then US President, George W. Bush, stated that "Africa Command will enhance

our efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote our common goals of development, health, education, democracy and economic growth in Africa”. Although Bush’s statement did not mention it, many experts concluded that AFRICOM’s creation was also closely related with securing Africa’s natural resources in response to growing Chinese influence (McFate, 2008: 113). Going even further, Conteh-Morgan (2018: 48) asserted that the US had launched a new containment policy with the establishment of AFRICOM – but this time against China and on a continental scale.

In line with its multi-functional framework, AFRICOM has various functions, including military activities, development programmes and humanitarian assistance. Its military activities mainly concentrate on promoting regional security and stability to create a secure environment for US companies operating in the continent and ensure oil flows to the US. The main tools are the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), the Africa Deployment Assistance Partnership Team (ADAPT), the Africa Partnership Station (APS) and the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). CJTF-HOA conducts operations to counter violent extremist groups in East Africa in Djibouti, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, the Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. CJTF-HOA Headquarters states that its “operations prevent violent extremist organizations from threatening America, ensuring the protection of the homeland, American citizens, and American interests” (Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, 2019). The ADAPT, funded by the DOS, is basically a Theater Logistics Engagement activity that aims to enhance the projection capabilities of African partner nations to support requirements in missions such as peacekeeping, counterterrorism and humanitarian relief operations. APS, focusing on maritime security, seeks to improve the maritime capabilities of African partner naval forces while GPOI is another DOS security assistance programme that focuses on making partner nations’ self-sufficient to conduct peace operations under UN and regional organizational mandates.

Regarding AFRICOM’s humanitarian missions, the US provides assistance to prevent HIV/AIDS, combat pandemics, improve disaster preparedness, and strengthen medical and veterinary capabilities. The main tools are the DOD HIV/AIDS Prevention Program (DHAPP), Foreign Humanitarian Assistance, the Pandemic Response Program, the Medical Civil Action Program (MEDCAP) and the Veterinary Civil Action Program (VETCAP). AFRICOM also assists African countries during emergency disease situations. During the 2014-2015 Ebola crisis in Liberia, for example, AFRICOM deployed 3,000 troops to prevent the spread of the disease (Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis, 2016: 11-12).

The main economic instrument to deepen US trade and investment ties is the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), adopted by the Clinton Administration in 2000, the same year that China established FOCAC. AGOA is a trade preference programme to lift tariff barriers to sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. Its most striking feature is that SSA countries must meet specific economic and political conditions for eligibility. As of June 2019, there were 49 candidate SSA countries with 39 currently eligible (AGOA, 2019/a). AGOA’s economic conditions demand full economic liberalization and structural reforms, such as cutting government spending and removing price controls and subsidies, even in key sectors selected for industrial development. The political

conditions include respect for internationally recognized human rights and workers' rights. More importantly, SSA countries must refrain from activities that would undermine US national security and foreign policy interests. This has several times impinged on the sovereignty of African countries. For instance, the US used AGOA conditions to apply intense pressure on Angola, Guinea and Cameroon in the United Nations Security Council to support the US invasion of Iraq (Thompson, 2004: 465).

AGOAs introduction accelerated trade between the US and SSA countries from \$28 billion in 2000 to \$100 billion in 2008 (AGOAs, 2019/b) while US-all Africa trade volume reached \$141.8 billion by 2018 (The US Census Bureau, 2019). However, it should be noted that while the volume of US-AGOAs countries trade stood at \$39.2 billion in 2018, its rate of increase has slowed since 2008 (AGOAs, 2019/b). US-all Africa trade volume was also only \$51.8 billion in 2018, a quarter of China-Africa trade volume (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The import-export balance for US-AGOAs beneficiary countries favours US imports from Africa. While US exports to AGOAs countries was worth about \$18 billion in 2008, imports were worth \$82 billion (AGOAs, 2019/b). Similarly, for US-all Africa trade, US exports totalled \$28.3 billion whereas US imports totalled \$113.4 billion (The US Census Bureau, 2019). Demonstrating the US's exploitative approach to African energy resources 90 percent of US imports were energy related products (Ongodia, 2017: 33).

Finally, increasing US interest is also evident in its aid policies. Total US disbursements to Africa from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the DOD, the US Department of State (DOS) and other agencies were worth about \$3.4 billion in 2001. However, these rose to about \$8.1 billion in 2009 and \$11 billion in 2017. According to USAID (2019), the main beneficiaries in 2017 were resource-rich countries, specifically Ethiopia (\$943 million), South Sudan (\$922 million), Kenya (\$899 million), Nigeria (\$644 million), Uganda (\$608 million), South Africa (\$598 million), Tanzania (\$575 million), Mozambique (\$481 million), Zambia (\$474 million), Somalia (\$451 million), Malawi (\$449 million) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (\$411 million).

Conclusion

Making sense of the international system through neorealist lenses, the US, dominating the Western Hemisphere, constitutes the only regional hegemon in international system. Main interest of the US, in this respect, is to preserve existing distribution of power in international power, thus prevent other great powers from achieving regional hegemony in other areas. On the other hand, China, as a great power, seeks to maximize its relative power at the expense of the US. Accordingly, the Chinese involvement in Africa serves its interest in achieving regional hegemony as it is ideal way to ensure security in self-help behaviour driven international system. From this point, this study asserts that China's strengthening ties with African countries through aid, investment, trade and the vigorous introduction of the Chinese way of life present a systemic threat to US interests. Looking at the details of China's engagement with the continent, the Chinese threat to the US regarding Africa contains three specific challenges.

The first challenge is that China's quest for African oil is a deliberate attempt to block supplies to other importing countries and keep the US out of Africa's energy market (Brookes and Shin, 2006: 2-4; Klare and Volman, 2006/a: 303-306; Conteh-Morgan, 2018: 40-41). Some western analysts even predict that China could ultimately be able to become able to threaten US and global energy security by locking up Africa's oil supplies (Hanauer and Morris, 2014: 105). Indeed, the 2006 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (2006: 95) emphasized that "China's strategy of securing ownership and control of oil and natural gas assets abroad could substantially affect U.S. energy security – reducing the ability of the global petroleum market to ameliorate temporary and limited petroleum supply disruptions in the United States and elsewhere". Understood in this way, China's quest for oil constitutes a systemic challenge to US hegemony because, as Mearsheimer (2001: 103-104) suggests, great powers aim to maximize their share in the world's wealth in order to maximize their relative power vis à vis others. Hence, great powers not only strive to dominate wealth-generating areas, but also endeavour to ensure that none of those areas falls under domination of rival great powers. From this point, the US, as the sole regional hegemon in the system, seeks to prevent China from dominating Africa, one of the oil rich, thus wealth-generating areas of the world, as it did in the past against the Soviet Union regarding Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf.

The second challenge is the implications of China's "no strings attached" policy in its engagement with African governments. This is said to encourage misrule, corruption and human rights violations by supporting oppressive and destitute African regimes (Hilsum, 2005: 421; Brookes and Shin, 2006: 1-5; Pham, 2006: 249-250; Carmody and Owusu, 2007: 512-515; Sun, 2014: 6-7 Conteh-Morgan, 2018: 40, 43). It therefore undermines the US vision of Africa governed by democratic regimes that respect human rights and embrace liberal free market principles embodied by the IMF and World Bank. A hearing report in the US House of Representatives (2018: 1) claims that "While a number of African nations have welcomed Chinese engagement and investment, it often comes at a very high cost, with a tendency to adopt the worst practices that prop up kleptocrats and autocrats". From this point, China's "no strings attached" policy jeopardizes the commanding position of the US in international system, sustained through an order governed by principles that serve the interests of the US. Accordingly, the Chinese way of engagement with Africa constitutes a systemic challenge to US interests.

The third challenge for US hegemony is China's extensive engagement with the continent (Gill, Huang and Morrison, 2007: 5; U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2008: 4; Conteh-Morgan, 2018: 44). Chinese expansion in Africa appears to be part of its overall strategy to confront the US globally. It can be argued that in response to US efforts to rebalance the Asia-Pacific region to contain Chinese influence there, China has shifted its attention westward to Africa to escape from this new US containment (Rotberg, 2008: 2; Sun, 2014: 7). Understood in this way, China's extensive involvement in Africa serves the aim of maximizing its relative power. Hence, it is a deliberate attempt to change the existing distribution of power in international system, a systemic challenge to US hegemony.

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