

An illustration of a person in a dark green suit with large buttons, shown from the chest down. Their right hand is reaching down to move a light brown, cylindrical game piece on a green grid board. The board is partially covered by a red, semi-transparent map of the African continent. Several other similar game pieces are scattered on the board. The overall style is graphic and modern.

A NEW GREAT GAME?

SITUATING AFRICA IN CHINA'S STRATEGIC THINKING

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For further information about NBR, contact:

The National Bureau of Asian Research
1414 NE 42nd Street, Suite 300
Seattle, Washington 98105

206-632-7370 Phone
nbr@nbr.org E-mail
<http://www.nbr.org>

A NEW GREAT GAME?

Situating Africa in China's Strategic Thinking

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— FOREWORD —

In the last five years alone, the world has witnessed China's increasing engagement within Africa. In parallel with its massive economic presence throughout the continent, China's political influence and growing military footprint have also become impossible to ignore. Although this emerging phenomenon has attracted enormous international attention, little of the available scholarship addresses the question of whether China's increasing engagement with African states reflects its strategic ambitions, and where the continent fits into Chinese strategic thinking. What are Beijing's preferred options to achieve its strategic ambitions in Africa? What are the international implications for China's engagement with the continent?

With the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) has launched a two-year project to assess China's strategic inroads on the African continent and explore those questions in detail. This report constitutes the first phase of the project. It examines where the continent fits in relation to China's overall strategic vision. It will be followed by additional research focusing on the main instruments used by Beijing to achieve its objectives. Upon completion, the project will offer a comprehensive assessment of Africa's strategic importance for China and the implications for the United States and its allies and partners.

Both the author and NBR would like to express their immense gratitude to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for its continuing support and dedication to original, policy-relevant research. The author would like to sincerely acknowledge Jacqueline Deal, Rich Ellings, Aaron Friedberg, Roy Kamphausen, Andrew May, Chad Sbragia, David Shullman, Julian Snelder, and Jennifer Staats for their insightful comments on an earlier draft and for their unrelenting encouragement. She would also like to thank Rachel Bernstein, Benjamin Lee, Jeremy Rausch, and Eliza Young for their valuable assistance in tracking, compiling, and translating research materials. The author alone is responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation that persist.

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A New Great Game?

Situating Africa in China's Strategic Thinking

Nadège Rolland

NADÈGE ROLLAND is Senior Fellow for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research. She is the author of the report “China’s Vision for a New World Order” (2020) and the monograph *China’s Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (2017). She is also editor of the report “An Emerging China-Centric Order: China’s Vision for a New World Order in Practice” (2020). She can be reached at <nrolland@nbr.org>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the place of Africa in Chinese strategic thinking in Xi Jinping's "new era."

MAIN ARGUMENT

Absent from the abundant available scholarship dedicated to China's growing role and presence on the African continent is a study of whether and how Africa fits into Beijing's grand strategy, as seen by Chinese strategic thinkers. This report fills this gap. Serious strategic discussions about Africa only began in China after the Chinese leadership adopted a global outlook. Beyond economic engagement and development assistance, Chinese strategists evidently envisage the continent as an essential piece in an escalating geostrategic contest for global influence between China and the U.S.-led West. Beijing's emerging strategy aims at making the continent fit into a new subsystem comprising much of the "global South" that China aspires to dominate. China's "new great game" seeks to outflank the U.S. by mobilizing African endorsement of China's distinctive institutions and governing ideology. To that end, China aims to persuade African countries to adopt aspects of its political and economic system. Contrary to Beijing's protestations, and despite the skepticism of many Western observers, China is in fact preparing to export its model to Africa and perhaps to other parts of the developing world as well.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- China's competition against the U.S. is not just unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region but at a global level throughout the developing world and specifically on the African continent. As Beijing is preparing to deploy strategies to enhance its influence and presence in African countries, the U.S. strategic community should consider devoting intelligence and analytical resources to deepening its understanding of China's actions, beyond economic assistance and development aid, in light of Beijing's strategic objectives.
- While foreign observers are debating whether China is exporting its model overseas, Beijing is evidently striving to encourage African countries to adopt its governance practices in an effort to make them better client states. Robust democratic societies are seen as a major challenge to China's ability to reach this goal. As part of their response, the U.S. and other liberal democracies should work with African governments and civil society groups to bolster their efforts to build resilient, effective institutions and open societies.
- Although absent from current discussions among Chinese Africanists, military strategists may well be studying the possibility of gaining access to facilities or building new bases on both the eastern and western coasts of Africa. This would improve the People's Liberation Army's capacity to project power into the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and could seriously complicate the ability of the U.S. and its allies to maneuver freely in these areas. Such scenarios deserve further study by U.S. military planners and their allied counterparts.

Over the past decade, China's role and presence on the African continent have grown to such an extraordinary level that some depict Africa as "China's second continent."¹ The People's Republic of China (PRC) surpassed the United States as Africa's biggest trading partner in 2009 and biggest investor in 2014. In 2019 the value of China-Africa trade was \$192 billion, up from \$91 billion ten years earlier.² China has also become Africa's largest creditor and the single largest financier of African infrastructure, supporting one in five projects and constructing one in three.³ Over 182,700 Chinese workers and some 10,000 Chinese-owned companies are now present across the continent.⁴ In order to support its growing interests in Africa, China has also begun to expand its security and military engagement, with the launch of new programs offering military and law-enforcement assistance and the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti.⁵

In attempting to explain the reasons behind China's growing interest in Africa, academics and journalists have focused on the various observable manifestations of the rapidly evolving China-Africa dynamic. China's trade, investment, infrastructure building, aid, and development assistance are measured, quantified, and scrutinized; the local impact of China's growing engagement with African countries is assessed, analyzed, and debated; the extent of China's diplomatic and military activities on the continent is dissected and unpacked.⁶ In addition to Western assessments, African voices are also emerging, bringing a much-needed novel perspective different from tired narratives that tend to portray African countries as passive recipients to the whims of outside powers.⁷

Despite the wealth of available research, however, the question of whether and how Africa fits into Beijing's strategy has not been adequately addressed. When it is raised, the answer is usually inferred from observable activities or official Chinese pronouncements translated into foreign languages. Such assessments are rarely, if ever, based on the study of Chinese-language documents, nor do they take into account the ideas and perspectives of the people in China who are responsible for thinking about this precise issue.

¹ Howard W. French, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

² China Africa Research Initiative, "Data: China-Africa Trade," <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

³ Hannah Marais and Jean-Pierre Labuschagne, "If You Want to Prosper, Consider Building Roads," Deloitte, March 22, 2019, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/china-investment-africa-infrastructure-development.html>.

⁴ China Africa Research Initiative, "Data: Chinese Workers in Africa," <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa>.

⁵ Paul Nantulya, "Chinese Hard Power Supports Its Growing Strategic Interests in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 17, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinese-hard-power-supports-its-growing-strategic-interests-in-africa>; and Michael Kovrig, "China Expands Its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa," International Crisis Group, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/china-expands-its-peace-and-security-footprint-africa>.

⁶ A nonexhaustive list includes Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Yun Sun, "Africa in China's Foreign Policy," Brookings Institution, April 2014; Jérôme Henry, "China's Military Deployments in the Gulf of Aden: Anti-piracy and Beyond," French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), November 2016; Mathieu Duchâtel, Richard Gowan, and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, "Into Africa: China's Global Security Shift," European Council on Foreign Relations, June 14, 2016; Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Irene Yuan Sun, *The Next Factory of the World: How Chinese Investment Is Reshaping Africa* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017); Joshua Eisenman and David H. Shinn, "China's Strategy in Africa," in *China Steps Out: Beijing's Major Power Engagement with the Developing World*, ed. Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham (New York: Routledge, 2018), 134–69; Andrew Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018); Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Will Green, Leyton Nelson, and Brittney Washington, "China's Engagement with Africa: Foundations for an Alternative Governance Regime," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 1, 2020; and James Barnett, "The 'China Dream' and the African Reality: The Role of Ideology in PRC-Africa Relations," Hudson Institute, October 2020. In addition to books and publications, there are some programs dedicated exclusively to the study of China-Africa relations, such as the China-Africa Project and the Johns Hopkins SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative.

⁷ Obert Hodzi, "African Political Elites and the Making(s) of the China Model in Africa," *Politics and Policy* 48, no. 5 (2020): 887–907; and Cobus van Staden, "Unpacking African Agency," China-Africa Project, April 13, 2021, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/analysis/unpacking-african-agency>.

This report aims to situate Africa in China's strategic thinking. The core question builds on the findings of previous National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) projects, which revealed the geostrategic importance of the developing world in China's vision for itself as a dominant power on the world stage.⁸ In particular, NBR's "China's Vision for a New World Order" report showed that the Chinese leadership's grand strategic objective is to establish a "partial, loose, and malleable hegemony": "partial," rather than regional or global; "loose," rather than exerted via absolute control over foreign territories or governments; and "malleable," because the delineations of China's envisioned sphere of influence would not be strictly defined along geographic, cultural, or even ideological lines, but rather based on whether countries recognize China's primacy.⁹ The subsystem that Beijing aspires to dominate appears mainly to include countries of the "global South." Logically, Africa should therefore emerge as an important strategic focus for the Chinese party-state.

The fact that the China-Africa relationship has, over a long period of time, encompassed multiple domains of activity—from aid to trade and, more recently, security—does not necessarily imply that China does in fact have an Africa strategy. Even if the term is used liberally, and more often than not conflated with policy or tactics, strategy has specific connotations. Official policy documents and white papers may include elements of a strategy, but they are not in themselves a strategy.¹⁰ Similarly, the action plans adopted by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the main platform used to frame the scope and scale of the China-Africa relationship, are not a strategy.

A strategy is a plan of action designed by a sovereign state to achieve national goals through the use of various instruments of national power. It is based on the primacy of national interests rather than the dynamics of bilateral relations. A strategy is comprehensive and systematic, but also sets priorities, especially in the allocation of resources to support it. It is not a description of what is happening but an attempt to set a forward-looking and long-term direction. If the Chinese party-state has devised such a strategy for Africa, it likely has not been publicly disclosed. And since it is impossible for foreign observers to directly access the inner circles of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decision-making, there seems to be no way that we will ever know if such a strategy even exists. Yet, despite its opacity, the Chinese party-state system emits information that is worth paying attention to, especially when it emanates from establishment intellectuals orbiting around the political leadership. Although their views are by no means as authoritative as official pronouncements or documents, they do perform services for the government and are often called to provide expertise in support of the decision-making process. Examining their thoughts can offer a valuable glimpse, in near real time, of the existence, focus, and direction taken by some of the internal discussions related to China's Africa strategy.

Serious strategic discussions about Africa only began after the central leadership adopted a globally oriented "great-power diplomacy" outlook better fitting China's international status at the

⁸ Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research [NBR], 2017); and Nadège Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 83, January 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order>.

⁹ Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order."

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's African Policy* (Beijing, September 2006), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/zgdfzcc/t481748.htm>; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "Full Text: China's Second Africa Policy Paper," December 5, 2015, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2015-12/05/content_37241677.htm.

18th Party Congress in 2012.¹¹ In the last several years, growing awareness of the need to formulate a coherent Africa strategy led to a sustained intellectual effort inside the Chinese system. As will be described below, the focus of these deliberations regarding Africa goes well beyond economic engagement and development assistance. In fact, Chinese strategists evidently envisage the continent as an essential piece in an escalating geostrategic contest for global influence between their country and the U.S.-led West. The ultimate purpose of Beijing's emerging strategy is not to encourage or support Africa's development for its own sake but rather to make the continent fit into a new subsystem comprising much of the global South that China aspires to dominate. Some analysts believe that the key to achieving this objective is to spread the China model to African countries. If these countries can be persuaded to adopt aspects of China's political and economic systems, they may be more inclined to join voluntarily in an emerging Sinocentric order. These findings suggest that, contrary to Beijing's protestations and despite the skepticism of many Western observers, China is in fact preparing to export its model to Africa and perhaps to other parts of the developing world as well.

This report is divided into four sections. It first looks back at Africa's place in earlier Chinese grand strategies, before situating Africa in Xi Jinping's grand vision. The third section then describes the instruments envisioned to serve Beijing's new strategic objectives, followed by an examination of the challenges that Chinese planners expect that the new strategy will face in the years ahead.

Africa in China's Earlier Grand Strategies

The history of China-Africa relations is usually told by contemporary Chinese Africanists as an inexorable progression that includes the recitation of a series of obligatory milestones.¹² This can be read as an effort to position the current relationship as the natural outcome of years of solidarity in the face of adversity imposed by external powers. Liu Hongwu, a leading Africa scholar, situates the "real starting point" of relations between the new China and Africa at the April 1955 Bandung Conference.¹³ This event gave the Chinese diplomatic delegation, led by Premier Zhou Enlai, the opportunity to meet directly with representatives from various African countries and opened the door to subsequent fruitful exchanges. The post-Korean War period was marked by hardship for the PRC. The "continuous opposition" of Western countries and the looming Sino-Soviet split, putting China effectively under both "Western blockade and Soviet repression," compelled Chinese leaders to find ways to break their severe diplomatic isolation.¹⁴ African countries helped

¹¹ Chen Xiangyang, "Zhongguo tese daguo wajiao' lizheng guoji zhixu zhigaodian" [Great-Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics: Striving for the Commanding Heights of the International Order], Cfsnet, February 14, 2016, <http://comment.cfsnet.com/2016/0214/1303948.html>; and Feng Weijiang, "Xin shidai Zhongguo tese daguo wajiao: Kexue neihan, zhanlue buju yu shijian yaoqiu" [Great-Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era: Scientific Connotation, Strategic Layout, and Practical Requirements], *Guoji Zhanwang*, no. 3 (2018): 13–28.

¹² This section does not intend to be exhaustive but aims at underlining the major themes usually presented in Chinese-language scholarly documents related to China-Africa relations. For a comprehensive English-language study of China-Africa relations, including from a historical perspective, see Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa*.

¹³ Liu Hongwu and Lin Chen, "Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo wajiao de chengzhang" [70 Years of China-Africa Relations and the Growth of Chinese Diplomacy], *Xinhua Wenzhai*, no. 19 (2019): 33–50. See **Appendix 1** for Liu Hongwu's short biography.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

make this possible, with Egypt becoming the first newly independent nation on the continent to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC in May 1956; others soon followed.¹⁵

While on an official visit to ten African countries from December 13, 1963, to February 4, 1964, Zhou formally established the basic principles of China's Africa policy and affirmed Beijing's support for Arab and African national liberation movements.¹⁶ The construction of the Tanzania-Zambia railway, officially agreed to in September 1967 and completed in 1976, is another noteworthy milestone, usually referred to as the "railway of freedom for Africa's liberation and the railway of friendship for China-Africa cooperation."¹⁷ For former diplomat and vice president of the China Institute of International Studies Liu Youfa, the railway's significance in breaking China's diplomatic isolation and in consolidating the future of China-Africa relations cannot be overstated.¹⁸ The votes from African countries in support of the PRC's permanent seat at the UN Security Council in October 1971 paved the way for China's subsequent integration into international institutions. This moment marks another important milestone that Mao Zedong is supposed to have acknowledged with this apocryphal phrase: "It is our Black African brothers who have carried us into the UN."¹⁹

With Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening beginning in 1979, Beijing started shifting the focus of its relationship with the African continent away from joint anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism to economic development. In the aftermath of Tiananmen, African countries once again "played a key role in breaking Western containment."²⁰ Amid the Western sanctions imposed on China, President Yang Shangkun and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen were still able to pay official visits to their African counterparts, and the first state leaders and high-level government representatives visiting Beijing came from African countries.²¹ For this reason, starting in 1991, it has become an unwritten rule that the first visit of Chinese foreign ministers should be to Africa.²²

The next and most recent milestone in the history of Sino-African relations is the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000. It is usually portrayed as a constructive

¹⁵ Egypt was followed by Algeria (signed with the pre-independence provisional government in August 1958), Morocco (November 1958), Sudan (February 1959), Guinea (October 1959), Ghana (July 1960), Mali (October 1960), and Somalia (December 1960).

¹⁶ Zhou Enlai visited Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "Premier Zhou Enlai's Three Tours of Asian and African Countries," https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18001.shtml. The "Eight Principles for Foreign Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries" (January 15, 1964) can be found at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121560>.

¹⁷ Liu and Lin, "Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo waijiao de chengzhang."

¹⁸ "Feizhou zhuanjia jiedu Zhong Fei guanxi 55 nian" [African Expert Interprets 55 years of China-Africa Relations], *Zhongguo Fangtan*, February 23, 2011, http://fangtan.china.com.cn/2011-02/21/content_21965753.htm. In this interview, Liu Youfa recounts in detail the story of the Tanzania-Zambia railway, describing how China, despite being poor at the time, provided nearly one billion yuan in foreign exchange for the project. Sixty-nine Chinese experts and workers who died during the railway's construction and on other cooperation projects are buried in Tanzania. They are honored as martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the great cause of the China-Africa friendship. Xi Jinping made a special trip to the cemetery on March 25, 2013, during his state visit to Tanzania. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "President Xi Jinping Visits the Cemetery for Memorable Deceased Chinese Experts Assisting Tanzania," March 26, 2013, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpcfl_665694/t1025805.shtml.

¹⁹ Wang Taiping, a career diplomat, reports that Mao pronounced this phrase on the evening of the PRC's admission to the United Nations. Xiong Xianghui, a master spy who in 1971 was Zhou Enlai's special assistant and was present at the time, called this version into question in an article published in 2000. See Wang Taiping, *Xin Zhongguo waijiao 50 nian* [50 Years of New China Diplomacy] (Beijing: Beijing Press, 1999); and Xiong Xianghui, "Mao Zedong shuoguo zhe ju hua ma? Zhiyi xin Zhongguo waijiao 50 nian bianzhe" [Did Mao Zedong Say This? Questioning the Editor of 50 Years of New China Diplomacy], *Bainian Chao*, no. 2 (2000): 60–61, <https://pairault.fr/sinaf/doc/mo1971/Mao%20Onu.pdf>.

²⁰ Liu and Lin, "Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo waijiao de chengzhang"; and Luo Jianbo, "Ruhe renshi 21 shiji shang ban ye Feizhou zai Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue zhong de zhongyao diwei" [How to Consider Africa's Important Position in China's Diplomatic Strategy in the First Half of the 21st Century], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 2 (2011): 68. Luo Jianbo's short biography can be found in Appendix 1.

²¹ In August 1989, Qian visited Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Angola, Zambia, and Mozambique; in December 1989, Yang visited Egypt.

²² Liu and Lin, "Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo waijiao de chengzhang"; and Xue Li, "Xinshidai Zhongguo waijiao zhong de Feizhou" [Africa in China's Diplomacy in the New Era], in "10 wei zhuanjia tan Zhong Fei guanxi yu Zhong Fei hezuo" [Ten Experts Discuss China-Africa Relations and China-Africa Cooperation], *Daguoce Zhiku*, September 1, 2018, <http://www.daguoce.org/article/12/334.html>.

instrument and an “effective institutional platform for the long-term development” of the relationship.²³ Thanks to FOCAC, the scope of cooperation has greatly expanded over the past two decades, from dealing mainly with trade and investment issues (2000–2009), to actively developing people-to-people exchanges (2009–15), and eventually, since 2015, progressing to security cooperation as well as governance matters.²⁴ These interactions, it is anticipated, will pave the way for the formation of a “community of shared destiny” between China and Africa.²⁵

China’s relations with Africa are represented as being built on solid ground, with great potential for further progress in a large variety of domains.²⁶ For Chinese elites, Africa is not important simply because of pragmatic interests, however. In the past, the continent has been viewed as a keystone of strategic constructs designed to enhance and improve China’s position relative to its most menacing adversaries. Mao Zedong’s Theory of the Three Worlds, whose content evolved over a period of three decades,²⁷ was based on strategic calculations that had little to do with a genuine interest in the fate of developing nations.²⁸ In Mao’s mind, Africa, together with Asia and Latin America, formed a protective buffer, the “rear areas of imperialism,” and the primary center of the unfolding anti-imperialist struggle.²⁹ He envisioned an international united front strategy, “derived from China’s own revolutionary experience, that [had] been extrapolated to the global setting to pit the nations of the Third World against those of the First in an unfolding struggle to transform the postwar international system.”³⁰ In its battle against China’s primary enemies—imperialist superpowers of all ideological colors, comprising the so-called “first world”—Beijing would rally the “third world” (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) as the main force, while cajoling and neutralizing the “second world” (Europe, Canada, Japan,

²³ Liu and Lin, “Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo waijiao de chengzhang.”

²⁴ Shen Xiaolei, deputy director of the West Asia and Africa Research Institute Political Research Office at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), provides a detailed examination of each of these three phases in “Lun Zhong Fei hezuo luntan de qiyuan, fazhan yu gongxian” [On the Origin, Development, and Contribution of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum], *Taipingyang Xuebao*, no. 3 (2020).

²⁵ “Building a community of destiny between China and Africa” was the main theme of the September 2018 FOCAC summit that took place in Beijing, but Xi Jinping first expressed the idea of a “common destiny” between China and Africa while meeting with African leaders in Durban in March 2013. On the “China-Africa community of destiny,” see Xu Yanzhuo, “Goujian Zhong Fei liyi gongtongti linian yu fangshi” [Concepts and Methods for Building a China-Africa Community of Interests], *Dangdai Shijie*, November 2011; Zhang Zongxiang, “Goujian Zhong Fei minyun gongtongti: Tiaozhan yu yingdui” [Building a China-Africa Community of Destiny: Challenges and Responses], *Tansuo Yu Zhengming*, no. 12 (2017); and Li Si, “Zhong Fei: Cong ‘tianran’ dao ‘biran’” [China-Africa: From “Natural” to “Necessary”], *People’s Daily*, September 7, 2018.

²⁶ Xi Jinping, “Trustworthy Friends and Sincere Partners Forever,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), March 25, 2013, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1027951.shtml.

²⁷ In an interview with American journalist Anna Louise Strong in August 1946, Mao first identified an “extremely vast area between the United States and the Soviet Union,” comprising countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. After the 1960 Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese leader perfected his conception of an “intermediate zone” between the two hegemonic powers, which he expounded at a September 1963 Central Committee Working Conference and later described to a Japanese visitor: the first “intermediate zone” comprised Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while the second included Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia. In February 1974, in a meeting with Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda, Mao finally laid out his Theory of the Three Worlds in full, placing the United States and the Soviet Union in the first; Japan, Europe, Australia, and Canada in the second; and Africa, Latin America, and Asia, including China, in the third. In April 1974, Deng Xiaoping presented Mao’s vision to the world from the United Nation’s lectern. See Deng Xiaoping, “Speech by Chairman of the Delegation of the People’s Republic of China, Deng Xiaoping, at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly,” April 10, 1974, available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1974/04/10.htm>.

²⁸ For in-depth discussions of the “three worlds” concept and its enduring significance, see Jiang An, “Mao Zedong’s ‘Three Worlds’ Theory: Political Considerations and Value for the Times,” *Social Sciences in China* 34, no. 1 (2013): 35–57; “Zhengzhi guanjian ci, Sange Shijie, Mao Zedong tichu de ‘Sange Shijie’ jiu jing zhi shenme” [Political Keywords: Three Worlds—What Does Mao Zedong’s “Three Worlds” Refer To?], September 27, 2019, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20210218201419/https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_4522313; and Hong Yuan, “Sange Shijie huafen shi Mao zhuxi dui guoji guanxi lilun de jiechu gongxian” [The Three Worlds Division Is Chairman Mao’s Outstanding Contribution to International Relations Theory], Charhar Institute, January 3, 2020, <http://www.charhar.org.cn/newsinfo.aspx?newsid=15666>.

²⁹ Sandra Gillespie, “Diplomacy on a South-South Dimension: The Legacy of Mao’s Three Worlds Theory and the Evolution of Sino-African Relations,” in *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy*, ed. Hannah Slavik, (Geneva: DiploFoundation, 2004), 109–130.

³⁰ Samuel S. Kim, “China and the Third World: In Search of a Neorealist World Policy,” in *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 184.

and Australia) in between.³¹ By the early 1970s, and throughout the following decade, based both on their assessment of Soviet military power and on the perceived weakening of the U.S. position resulting from the Vietnam War, Chinese leaders believed that the Soviet Union was the country's most immediate and direct threat.³² The struggle to contain and suppress this primary enemy necessitated "befriending distant enemies while attacking the enemy near home" and, thus, shaping the conditions for a détente with the lesser of two evils—the United States.³³ Stripped to its core, the Theory of the Three Worlds that Mao envisioned was a classic "great game," a balance-of-power strategy that required China to assert its position as the leader of the developing world.

After Mao's death, Beijing abandoned the shackles of such anti-imperialist rhetoric. Deng Xiaoping radically changed the direction of China's grand strategy, setting the priority of China building "comprehensive national power" while biding its time. This first and foremost required improving China's economic situation. In this context, the position of Africa remained important, but in a different and more concrete way than under Mao. The continent was relevant because of what it had to offer to support China's economic development, specifically energy and raw materials.³⁴ Africa was also included in a broader framework delineating China's foreign policy priorities. From the 16th Party Congress in 2002 to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, the central government had a well-defined, four-pronged approach to diplomacy that included developing countries as one important axis: "Great powers are the key, China's periphery is the priority, developing countries are the foundation, multilateralism is the stage."³⁵ Within this overall framework, Africa is often referred to as the "foundation of China's diplomatic foundation" or the "core part" of this foundation.³⁶

Since Xi Jinping's accession to power in 2012, China's grand strategy has been undergoing a new change of direction. Its shape has not yet fully emerged, and it is therefore subject to a great deal of speculation and debate both within and outside China. Nonetheless, Xi announced his main objective just a few days after becoming general secretary of the CCP: realizing the "China dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and China's emergence as a power second to none. Asserting China's primacy may not necessarily translate into global dominance, at least not in the medium term. Rather, what Chinese elites seem to envision is a partial hegemony that is loosely exerted over the global South through the creation of dependencies that could be used either as incentives or as coercive tools rather than via absolute control over foreign territories or governments. This takes the form of a "non-contact imperialism" of sorts that encompasses

³¹ Jiang, "Mao Zedong's 'Three Worlds' Theory," 48. See also John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 327.

³² Chi Aiping, "Mao Zedong guoji zhanlue sixiang de yanbian" [The Evolution of Mao Zedong's International Strategic Thought], *Dang De Wenxian*, no. 3 (1994): 46–52.

³³ Jiang, "Mao Zedong's 'Three Worlds' Theory," 48.

³⁴ Xue, "Xinshidai Zhongguo waijiao zhong de Feizhou."

³⁵ Feng, "Xin shidai Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao: Kexue neihan, zhanlue buju yu shijian yaoqiu."

³⁶ "Feizhou zhuanjia jiedu Zhong Fei guanxi 55 nian"; Luo Jianbo, "Zhong Fei guanxi weishenme ruci zhongyao" [Why Are China-Africa Relations So Important], *Study Times*, April 1, 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0401/c136457-20983606.html>; "Wang Yi: Feizhou shi Zhongguo waijiao 'jichu zhong de jichu'" [Africa Is the Foundation of China's Diplomacy], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), November 26, 2015, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/t1318585.shtml>; and Dai Bing, "Jicheng youhao chuantong, zhuzhu shidai jiyu, goujian gengjia jinmi de Zhong Fei mingyun gongtongti" [Inherit the Friendly Tradition, Seize the Opportunity of the Times, and Build a Closer China-Africa Community of Destiny], *Waijiao Likan*, no. 131 (2019), <http://www.cpfia.org/cms/book/144>.

countries that recognize, respect, and serve China's interests rather than being defined strictly along geographic or ideological lines.³⁷ In this vision, Africa appears, once again, as a keystone.

Africa in Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy

The formation of grand strategy in any country is difficult to follow, but even more so in the context of an opaque system such as the Chinese party-state. Examining China's grand strategy is like looking at a train in motion, one that travels through long tunnels and occasionally reappears to the public eye. The early stages of decision-making, which set the broad idea and general direction, take place behind closed doors, rendering it impossible to determine with great certainty the names of those who develop the initial strategic vision. But the strategy's elaboration process becomes more visible to outside eyes as scholars and experts add their input in support of the next decision-making phase, which aims at developing the strategy's finer details. Although Xi Jinping has given up the pretense of collective leadership and concentrated powers in his own hands, he still relies on an inner circle of trusted advisers, supplemented by party and state bureaucracies and a select number of establishment intellectuals to help devise and articulate national strategies. Observing the process from the outside only gives a patchy and incomplete image of the reality, but the train generally moves on the tracks initially set by the central leadership and hardly ever gets derailed on to a radically different course.

Chinese Africanists and strategic thinkers who have been called to help devise an Africa strategy are not engaged in mere academic speculation. Their work reveals the likely position of Africa within China's maturing global strategy.

"Advancing Westward"

In the early months after Xi's accession to power, Chinese scholars were busily discussing the foreign policy component of the new leader's "China dream." A country dreaming of asserting itself as a great power had to rethink its role and place in the world and formulate a global strategy worthy of the name. A temporary placeholder had been chosen to name it: *xijin*, or "advancing westward," a phrase that Wang Jisi, the dean of Peking University's School of International Studies, had used in an October 2012 article.³⁸ On March 1, 2013, over 50 top-level scholars, strategists, and academic regional experts were invited to a symposium under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) to collectively cogitate on the directions the new strategy should take.³⁹ Wang Jisi, who was abroad at the time of the meeting, had entrusted an associate research fellow from the CCP's International Liaison Department's in-house think tank, the China Center for Contemporary World Studies, to represent him and deliver his remarks in his absence. This apparently trivial tidbit gives an important clue about the conduits linking central party organs with scholars who work in close association with them.

Some of the symposium's participants argued that the assertive undertone of the term "advance" would arouse foreign alarm if used publicly. A couple of others questioned the proposed

³⁷ Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order."

³⁸ Wang Jisi, "'Xijin,' Zhongguo diyuan zhanlüe de zai pingheng" ["March Westward," the Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy], *Huanqiu Shibao*, October 17, 2012, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJxoLS>.

³⁹ A report detailing the names of the participants and the substance of their individual contributions was subsequently published: Zhan Shiming, "Zhongguo de 'xijin' wenti: Yanpan yu sikao" [China's "Marching Westward" Topic: Assessment and Analysis], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 2 (2013).

strategy's ability to achieve its ultimate objectives. But the majority of scholars present that day acknowledged it as a necessary step in China's transformation from a regional to a global power. The discussions focused in particular on defining the strategy's geographic expanse and whether it should only include areas in China's close periphery or encompass a wider zone, as far west as the Atlantic Ocean. Li Shaoxian, vice president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and an expert on the Middle East, suggested that the scope should not be defined in strict geographic terms but left open to include the entire developing world.

Overall, the scholars seemed to favor the broadest definition possible. Through his designated representative, Wang Jisi supported the idea of a "further broadening of our horizons." China, he argued, needs to hold a strategic vision worthy of a global power, to consider itself from a global perspective, and to formulate a global strategy consisting of several regional or subregional strategies.⁴⁰ In agreement with Wang, Zhang Hongming, deputy director of CASS's West Asia and Africa Institute, vigorously defended the special position and role that Africa should have in China's overall strategic layout. He advocated for renewed thinking about Africa and for China to "jump out of the narrow loop of Africa or China-Africa relations and really consider integrating it within the great game of China's diplomacy, security and development strategy."⁴¹

The discussions about "advancing westward" provided the seeds from which the Belt and Road strategy, launched in fall 2013, has grown. The open-ended geographic scope allowed the inclusion of Africa in China's new strategic outlook. The next step was to craft a regional strategy for Africa.

The 2015 Research Project

Including specific regions within the fold of China's new global strategy demanded further study, a task that Chinese academics were soon asked to perform for the political leadership. Each year, following an intense competition, the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences (NPOPSS) awards grants to up to two thousand research projects. The NPOPSS is institutionally located within the party's Central Propaganda Department and traditionally chaired by its head.⁴² The NPOPSS answers directly to the Leading Group for National Planning of Philosophy and Social Sciences, which is overseen by the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work, chaired since October 2017 by Wang Huning.⁴³ The leading group specifies its priority research requests to the NPOPSS, which then coordinates the narrower formulation of topics for research projects, manages applications, distributes grants (via the National Social Sciences Fund), and helps promote the projects' results.⁴⁴ The most prestigious, important, and well-funded of these projects (around a few dozen) are deemed national "major projects."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Zhan, "Zhongguo de 'xijin' wenti: Yanpan yu sikao."

⁴¹ Cited in *ibid.*

⁴² From 2012 to 2017, the NPOPSS was chaired by Liu Qibao, a member of the 18th Politburo and head of the Central Propaganda Department. Since October 2017, Liu's successor to both positions has been Huang Kunming.

⁴³ The Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work overlaps in composition and duties with the Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilization. Both are some of the most important steering CCP bodies in control of propaganda and ideological dissemination. Wang Huning's predecessor was Liu Yunshan, who between 2012 and 2017 was at the same time first secretary of the CCP's central secretariat, president of the Central Party School, and chair of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work.

⁴⁴ See Heike Holbig, "Shifting Ideologies of Research Funding: The CPC's National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2014): 13–32.

⁴⁵ Cary Huang, "Studies of Xi Jinping Thought or Ideology Grab Lion's Share of Funding for Research," *South China Morning Post*, October 5, 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1609734/studies-xi-jinping-thought-or-ideology-grab-lions-share-funding-research>.

Only full professors or “top professional experts” from party- or government-affiliated research institutions can apply for them.⁴⁶

In 2015, eleven research projects were dedicated to Africa-related topics specifically. One of them, studying “China’s international strategy [applied] to Africa relations,” was granted the coveted status of both “major project” (with Liu Hongwu, dean of Zhejiang Normal University’s Institute of African Studies, as principal investigator) and “key project” (with CASS’s Zhang Hongming as principal investigator). Other Africanists and international relations scholars, such as He Wenping (CASS), Liu Qingjian (Renmin University, School of International Studies), and Huang Meibo (Xiamen University, School of Economics) joined the group of experts led by Liu Hongwu as sub-project leaders.⁴⁷

The assignment, as described by the team leader, was to offer answers and recommendations to a critical inquiry to support government decision-making: what kind of Africa strategy does China need, and how should it be implemented?⁴⁸ The project was completed in four years and generated an impressive list of deliverables, including 13 policy-relevant reports, 10 of which were formally endorsed by national and provincial state and party organs; 32 academic papers; a series of academic conferences and think tank workshops held in both China and Africa; and over 20 additional reports published and disseminated internationally.⁴⁹

Portions of this work are publicly accessible and form the basis of this report. These documents are not ordinary academic articles but officially sanctioned and funded attempts to discuss Africa’s role and position within China’s strategy in response to questions passed down from the upper echelons of the decision-making system. As such, the project’s findings give the best available insights to date into the place of Africa in China’s emerging grand strategic vision.

Interests, Potential, and Opportunities

Over the course of the four years that the 2015 national research project lasted, Zhang Hongming, the senior Africanist from CASS, published a series of at least four long papers. In the first of this series, published in 2016, Zhang attempts to establish a hierarchy of China’s interests in Africa. For him, this is an essential step to formulating a sound strategy:

China’s interests in Africa can be defined as the sum of the material and immaterial needs of the Chinese government, corporations and citizens in Africa. Such needs do not include only what China already has in Africa but also what it does not yet have and must obtain. The reason why “latent desires” are particularly emphasized here is that they are the basis both for the formulation of China’s strategy for Africa and for the policy goals pursued by this strategy.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Holbig, “Shifting Ideologies of Research Funding,” 21.

⁴⁷ “Liu Hongwu jiaoshou zhuchi de guojia sheke zhongda xiangmu ‘Zongguo dui Feizhou guanxi de guoji zhanlue yanjiu’ mian jiangding jie xiang” [Major National Social Science Project, “Research on China’s International Strategy Related to African Relations,” Directed by Professor Liu Hongwu Exempted from Evaluation, Gets Certificate of Completion], Institute of African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University, December 30, 2019, <http://ias.zjnu.cn/2020/0402/c6141a318289/page.htm>.

⁴⁸ “Guojia sheke jijin zhongda xiangmu ‘Zhongguo dui Feizhou guanxi de guoji zhanlue yanjiu’ kaiti” [Inauguration of the National Social Science Fund Major Project “Research on China’s International Strategy for African Relations”], Sinoss, December 30, 2015, <https://www.sinoss.net/2015/1230/68144.html>.

⁴⁹ “Liu Hongwu jiaoshou zhuchi de guojia sheke zhongda xiangmu ‘Zongguo dui Feizhou guanxi de guoji zhanlue yanjiu’ mian jiangding jie xiang.”

⁵⁰ Zhang Hongming, “Zhongguo zai Feizhou liyi cengci fenxi” [A Layered Analysis of China’s Interests in Africa], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 4 (2016). See Appendix 1 for Zhang Hongming’s short biography.

Zhang divides China's interests in Africa into three main categories: "core" (*hexin*), "important" (*zhongyao*), and "general" (*yiban*) interests. Core interests are a matter of "life and death" for the nation, pertaining to national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national unity, and the stability of China's political, economic, and social systems. They are nonnegotiable. In Africa, China's core interests are mainly related to the "one China" issue, which, for almost 60 years, has transformed Africa into the "main battlefield for diplomatic competition between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait."⁵¹ As China's power has grown, the situation has tilted in favor of Beijing.⁵² Zhang cautions, however, that "as long as the two sides have not been reunified, the sovereignty issue caused by the Taiwan issue will remain China's core interest in Africa."⁵³ Second, China's "important" interests in Africa are related to the country's general development, which allows some latitude for compromise and negotiation. Zhang divides these into two subcategories. The first is China's "explicit" material interests in Africa, such as safeguarding Chinese citizens' rights and interests, protecting Chinese assets, ensuring Africa's effective supply of energy and other natural resources to China, and expanding China's share of the African market. The second subcategory is "latent" immaterial interests related to the defense of China's "national dignity and international image." The latter includes, for example, having to fight the "international human rights struggle" during the post-Tiananmen decade. Zhang uses this to illustrate how, under certain circumstances, Africa can become an essential piece of the political game between China and the West even on issues that have nothing to do with Africa per se. Finally, China's "general" interests in Africa include everything that has not been mentioned above. Since these are only marginally related to China's national interests, they can be negotiated or even conceded in order to maintain or expand more important interests.

Other Chinese Africanists and international relations experts also consider Africa as important, mostly because of how it serves China's pragmatic needs. Strikingly, the overwhelming majority of their writings in the context of strategic considerations use the term "Africa" or "African continent." The absence of granularity or attention to the diversity of African countries suggests that Chinese theorists, including some prominent Africanists, view the continent as a monolithic entity, at least when considered through the prism of China's strategic imperatives.⁵⁴ Africa's people and resources are generally seen as basic means to help China achieve its quest for wealth, power, and influence. China's engagement with Africa in the pursuit of these objectives might end up benefiting African countries, but this is not usually described as its primary purpose.

Among the continent's many desirable assets, Chinese experts focus on Africa as offering a vast pool of labor and potential customers for Chinese companies and products. By 2040, the labor force will be close to 1.1 billion, surpassing China and India, and by 2030, 60% of the world's population under 30 will be concentrated on the African continent: "In the next 20 years, the invisible hand of globalization will transfer job opportunities to countries with cost advantages and Africa will replace China as the next world factory in low-end industries,"

⁵¹ Zhang, "Zhongguo zai Feizhou liyi cengci fenxi."

⁵² Today, Eswatini is the only one of the 54 African countries that maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan. After Gambia and São Tomé and Príncipe severed their ties in 2016, Burkina Faso broke its diplomatic engagement with Taiwan in May 2018.

⁵³ Zhang, "Zhongguo zai Feizhou liyi cengci fenxi."

⁵⁴ They are not different, in that sense, from U.S. planners who talk of the Indo-Pacific region as a strategic construct, without systematically referring to its political, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity.

predicts Liu Hongwu.⁵⁵ This presents an opportunity for a “win-win” situation: Africa needs to create labor-intensive industries just as China’s declining advantages as a low-cost manufacturer are leading the country to look for opportunities to relocate some of its manufacturing capacity: “The only place in the world that can undertake such a large-scale transfer of labor-intensive industries is Africa.”⁵⁶ According to Xue Li, the industrial transfer process will also help Chinese companies bypass the trade and nontariff barriers imposed by Western countries.⁵⁷ The African continent’s rate of economic growth will continue to rise, thanks in part to the acceleration of regional integration, cross-regional infrastructure construction, and increased economic ties with emerging countries such as China.⁵⁸ With an urbanized middle class that is expected to grow by up to 800 million people over the next fifteen years, Africa represents a huge potential opportunity for Chinese firms eager to expand their markets.⁵⁹

As they settle on the continent, Chinese companies will at the same time be able to accumulate valuable experience in “overseas market expansion, enterprise management, capital operation, risk avoidance, and how to handle relations with local governments, people, and the international community.”⁶⁰ Seizing this opportunity could help reduce China’s dependence on European and U.S. markets, notes Luo Jianbo, director of the Chinese Diplomatic Research Division of the Institute of International Strategic Studies at the CCP Central Party School, and “reduce the risks brought by economic and financial crises and trade frictions” with those advanced economies.⁶¹ These relatively “mature” markets tend to be “saturated,”⁶² and the time of China’s trade boom with Europe and the United States “may have passed.”⁶³ As a consequence, Xue Li reckons that China’s development momentum will “gradually become dominated by domestic demand, while externally it will probably be greatly advanced via Africa, Latin America, and other regions.”⁶⁴ Xue’s description, expressed in 2014, foreshadows both China’s growing trade disputes with the United States and Beijing’s “dual circulation” concept officially put forward in 2020.

The African continent’s natural resources are also alluring, given its 2.5 million square miles of arable land, only a quarter of which has been exploited, as well as the presence of various rare minerals such as gold, chromium, and platinum.⁶⁵ The continent’s oil and gas reserves are particularly important for China’s energy security and the diversification of its supply.⁶⁶ Zhang Hongming recommends that in the short term China take advantage of the global price drop in commodities to increase its energy and mineral imports from Africa and buttress

⁵⁵ Liu Hongwu, “Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze” [Africa’s Development Trends and China’s Strategic Choices], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, no. 2 (2013): 72–87.

⁵⁶ Justin Yifu Lin, “Yidai Yilu’ xuyao jiashang ‘Yizhou’” [“One Belt, One Road” Needs to Add “One Continent”], *Aisixiang*, January 18, 2015, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/82747.html>.

⁵⁷ “Fazhanzhong guojia shi Zhongguo waijiao de jichu, Feizhou weilai fazhan bukehushi” [Developing Countries Are the Foundation of China’s Diplomacy, and the Future Development of Africa Cannot Be Ignored], CASS, June 27, 2014, http://www.cssn.cn/zxx/dhds_zzx/201406/t20140627_1230860.shtml.

⁵⁸ Liu, “Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.; and Zhang, “Zhongguo zai Feizhou liyi cengci fenxi.”

⁶⁰ Luo, “Ruhe renshi 21 shiji shang ban ye Feizhou zai Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue zhong de zhongyao diwei,” 69; and Luo, “Zhong Fei guanxi weishenme ruci zhongyao.”

⁶¹ Luo, “Ruhe renshi 21 shiji shang ban ye Feizhou zai Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue zhong de zhongyao diwei.”

⁶² Zhang, “Zhongguo zai Feizhou liyi cengci fenxi.”

⁶³ “Fazhanzhong guojia shi Zhongguo waijiao de jichu, Feizhou weilai fazhan bukehushi.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Liu, “Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze.”

⁶⁶ Luo, “Zhong Fei guanxi weishenme ruci zhongyao.”

its strategic reserves. In the long run, he suggests an overall intensification of China's investment in African energy and mineral resources "in a planned and gradual manner."⁶⁷

African opportunities do not stop at material considerations. For many Chinese experts, engagement in Africa on issues such as aid, poverty reduction, and peacekeeping gives China the occasion to display its willingness and ability to act as a responsible great power on the global stage. Demonstrating and practicing "mutual respect in China-Africa relations" will help expose "China's great-power demeanor and unique diplomatic temperament" and enhance the country's moral stature and soft power.⁶⁸ Positioning itself as a rising power that promotes "common, harmonious and cooperative development for all mankind, and as a constructive force that brings development opportunities and hopes for the future of the world, especially for developing countries," is the way to demonstrate China's maturation into a modern developed power, according to Liu Hongwu. Doing otherwise would create "increasing external resistance and containment" as China continues to develop and rise.⁶⁹

A Strategy in Transition

Zhang Hongming's second installment to the 2015 project focuses on its core assignment: helping design a strategy for Africa.⁷⁰ Zhang's paper was first submitted to the party-state as an internal document in August 2016, while the public version was published in 2017 after being edited. Zhang notes the lack of consensus among Chinese experts and practitioners on whether China actually has an Africa strategy. On the one hand, officials from relevant government departments harbor no doubts: without a strategy, how would China-Africa relations have developed since the 1960s and achieved such remarkable results over the last decade? Former diplomats "who have long served in front-line top positions in diplomatic work with Africa and have rich practical experience" explain that the apparent absence of a strategy toward Africa actually reflects skill, subtlety, and deliberate obfuscation. As they put it, "Chinese people are unwilling to put their strategic intentions too bluntly or write them in black and white on paper." But in practice, throughout the past decades, China has maintained clear strategic objectives in its relationship with the African continent. The retired officials also caution that China's words and deeds in Africa may be two different things: "Compared with Westerners, Chinese people are more subtle and intelligent." Thus, the Chinese government will "not disclose its true strategic intentions to the public" and may instead use "gentle," "carefully packaged" diplomatic rhetoric for external consumption, while at the same time keeping China's national interest as its first and foremost priority.⁷¹ Chinese academic circles, for their part, also seem to believe that China has an Africa strategy, as reflected in the liberal use of the term "strategy" in article titles, even though in Zhang's view the content of their research is "often specious."⁷² As he explains, other scholars

⁶⁷ Zhang, "Zhongguo zai Feizhou liyi cengci fenxi."

⁶⁸ Luo, "Zhong Fei guanxi weishenme ruci zhongyao." Luo's paper expands on similar ideas developed earlier in Luo, "Ruhe renshi 21 shiji shang ban ye Feizhou zai Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue zhong de zhongyao diwei." See also Liu Guijin, "Zhongguo yu Feizhou cong 'qiong bang qiong' zouxiang huli gongying" [China and Africa Have Moved from "Poor Helping Poor" to Mutual Benefit and Win-Win], Sohu, March 31, 2013, <http://news.sohu.com/20130331/n371205150.shtml>.

⁶⁹ Liu, "Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze"; and Liu and Lin, "Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo waijiao de chengzhang."

⁷⁰ Zhang Hongming, "Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhanlue yunchou yanjiu" [A Study of China's Strategic Operations in Africa], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 5 (2017).

⁷¹ Ibid., 86–89.

⁷² Ibid., 97.

typically confuse strategy with policy or action plans, especially when it comes to FOCAC, or question the existence of a strategy because of the frequent “incidents of disorderly competition” among various Chinese actors in Africa.⁷³

For his part, Zhang believes that elements of a Chinese Africa strategy have been present all along, but mostly as by-products or “companions” of other strategies. These elements are now undergoing a “transition” toward becoming a genuine “regional strategy.” For the new strategy to be worthy of the name, it should bear the following specific attributes. It should establish goals and guiding principles and provide a directional, comprehensive, systematic, long-term, and forward-looking framework, with matching resource allocation, implementation steps, and appropriate policy tools. It should also be based exclusively on China’s current and future needs and interests. Here, Zhang laments that some of his academic colleagues have an “idealistic or romantic” perspective and tend to approach China’s Africa strategy from a “China-Africa common interests, or even mankind’s common interests,” standpoint. This is fine as far as public diplomacy and communication are concerned but “definitely not suitable” when devising China’s actual operational strategy for Africa.⁷⁴ Last, Zhang appears to be concerned about the “embarrassing” limitations of China’s academic Africa specialists in support of national strategic decision-making. He concedes that not all the blame falls on his colleagues, but some is shared by government policy itself. He criticizes their inability to think in strategic terms—a skill “impossible to cultivate in academic institutions or study rooms”—and their tendency to be enraptured by theories but detached from the real world. He concedes, however, that not all the blame falls on his colleagues, but some is shared by government policy itself. Compared with great powers and China’s periphery, African issues that end up “entering the strategic vision of the decision-making level are very rare.”⁷⁵

Zhang’s report strongly advocates for the formulation of an Africa strategy, a task that he thinks should be given high priority for three main reasons. First, a strategy is needed to take into account the rapid expansion of China’s interests in Africa over the last two decades and to outline how best to protect them as they continue to grow. Second, against the backdrop of increasingly complex cooperation with various African countries, a strategy is needed to help reduce some imbalances and weaknesses in certain domains such as security and intellectual exchanges while maintaining a degree of coordination across domains to prevent the dispersion of efforts and resources. Third, a strategy is essential to provide solutions to increased challenges and potential conflicts among the various stakeholders involved in China-Africa relations. These include tensions among various Chinese bureaucracies, between the interests of China and of African countries, and between the interests of China and of Western powers present in Africa. As they formulate this strategy, Chinese planners should remember that national interests are paramount. This, Zhang argues, is not antinomic to concepts promoted by the Chinese government such as “mutual benefit and win-win,” nor does it prevent China from taking into account Africa’s interests. Yet “taking into account” does not mean that African interests are equivalent or should take precedence over Chinese national interests. Planners should be scrupulous about setting a hierarchy of priorities and allocating resources in accordance with those priorities.

Zhang ends his recommendation section about the alignment of strategic goals with adequate means with words of caution borrowed from Walter Lippman: “in 1947, when the United States

⁷³ Zhang, “Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhanlüe yunchou yanjiu,” 89–91.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 99–100.

became the global hegemon, Lippman...warned the American government to remember to maintain a balance between purpose and power. Unfortunately, his admonitions are often ignored by countries whose national power is rapidly rising. The relative 'decline' of American hegemony in the 21st century, to a large extent, is also due to the fact that it is overreaching."⁷⁶

Zhang's report reads like a strategy manual for neophytes, starting with establishing the characteristics that make strategy different from policy, and then listing the indispensable elements and core principles that any strategy should include. When it comes to defining the goals of China's Africa strategy, Zhang is strikingly forthright. He argues that these should not be narrowly focused on the African continent per se but integrated within the "great game of China's diplomacy, security and development strategy." Africa's strategic importance to China is not emerging "out of thin air" but against the backdrop of an increasingly complex international environment for China, centered on competition, power shifts, and de-globalization trends. Therefore, Zhang defines the strategy's objectives as threefold: "Strive to make Africa a strategic exterior line for China to geopolitically contain the United States, a strategic support for China's sustainable economic development, and a strategic ally for China to be involved in global governance."⁷⁷ The second and third objectives are self-explanatory. One points to the present and future importance of Africa to China's economic development, as previously described. The other, regarding the potential role of Africa as an "ally" in supporting China's ambitions for global governance, relates to the dissemination of a governance model, which will be addressed in a later section. The objective aligns with Xi Jinping's 2016 call to reform the global governance system according to Beijing's preference by building "consensus" with the help of developing countries.⁷⁸ The first objective, which explicitly affirms how Africa can help China contain the United States, requires some further elucidation.

Fulcrum and Exterior Lines in a Great Geostrategic Game

In academic discussions examining Africa from a strategic standpoint, two concepts appear regularly—Africa as a "strategic fulcrum" and the idea of "exterior lines." These concepts overlap and share a common underlying theme: they are methods for countering the threat from a stronger adversary with minimal expense and damage, and without engaging in head-on confrontation.

The concept of Africa as the strategic fulcrum of China's diplomacy refers to the historical role played by African countries in helping China escape international isolation. Every time China has been cut off because of Western countries' efforts to "contain" or "put pressure" on it (such as after Tiananmen), African countries have helped improve China's external strategic environment and expand its external strategic space.⁷⁹ Thanks to the help of developing countries in general, China was able to break past external "blockades" and restore its "rightful international dignity."⁸⁰ In short, China has regularly used Africa as a key element of counter-containment strategies.

⁷⁶ Zhang, "Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhanlue yunchou yanjiu," 108.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁸ Xi made this call at a Politburo study session a few weeks after the Hangzhou G-20 Summit. See "Xi Jinping: Jiaqiang hezuo tuidong quanqiu zhili tixi bianqie gongtong cujin renlei heping yu fazhan chonggao shiye" [Xi Jinping: Strengthen Cooperation to Promote Changes in the Global Governance System and Jointly Promote the Noble Cause of Peace and Development of Mankind], Xinhua, September 28, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-09/28/c_1119641652.htm.

⁷⁹ Liu Hongwu, "Zhong Fei guanxi 30 nian: Qiaodong Zhongguo yu waibu shijie guanxi jiegou de zhidian" [30 Years of China-Africa Relations: Leveraging the Fulcrum of the Structure of China's Relations with the Outside World], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi*, no. 11 (2008): 80–88; Liu, "Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze"; and Liu and Lin, "Zhong Fei guanxi 70 nian yu Zhongguo waijiao de chengzhang."

⁸⁰ Luo Jianbo, "Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia waijiao" [Correct Concept of Public Goods and Interests and China's Diplomacy toward Developing Countries], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 5 (2018).

Whereas the “fulcrum” is mostly a defensive concept, “exterior lines operations” are a form of “offensive defense.” This idea was initially articulated by Mao in the context of the guerilla warfare that the Chinese Red Army waged against more powerful and better-equipped adversaries.⁸¹ When surrounded by a stronger opponent, it is impossible for the weak army to defeat the enemy only by staying inside the “interior lines.” In order to turn the situation to its advantage, the weaker force must engage in multiple small campaigns along exterior lines, attacking and harassing the enemy in areas where it is weaker in order to distract and disperse the enemy’s attention and loosen its grip on the main battlefield. The exterior lines concept has survived the 1940s Maoist guerilla warfare period and found some new applicability in contemporary military discussions, specifically pertaining to anti-access and area denial. It was included in the form of “active strategic counterattacks on exterior lines” in the 2001 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy*, an authoritative volume published by the Academy of Military Sciences. This concept has the same defining characteristics as Mao’s older idea of exterior lines—that is, allowing an inferior force to defeat a superior one, and striving to strike the enemy far from the main battlefield.⁸²

The concept of exterior lines is not limited to military engagement but also can be applied at the grand strategic level. Chinese theorists believe that today the greatest threat to China’s survival is the West, led by the United States. Their main mission is to find ways to counter, balance, and push back against U.S. strategic pressure, which they believe has been intensifying in recent years. Events such as the 2011 Arab Spring, read as “color revolutions” fomented by the United States to force political change in the Middle East, and the U.S. decision to “pivot to the Asia-Pacific” and focus its efforts on the growing challenges posed by China’s newfound assertiveness, were regarded as manifestations of Washington’s desire to subdue, encircle, and contain China. These developments triggered a wave of anxiety and reinforced Beijing’s determination to step up its game and take the initiative. In the face of what they considered to be an intensified struggle for survival, Chinese theorists advocated for the “rebalancing of China’s geostrategy,” setting in motion its own “pivot.”⁸³ In essence, they proposed that, instead of engaging in a head-on confrontation with an overwhelmingly strong adversary such as the United States, China should expand its presence westward to balance against U.S. pressure on its eastern flank and deploy along exterior lines, far from China’s mainland, including on the African continent.⁸⁴ The Chinese leadership’s pivot westward soon took the shape of One Belt, One Road, later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁸⁵

In the context of increased U.S. strategic pressure and the “strategic predicament set out by the West,” one eminent Africanist suggests that China “besiege Wei to rescue Zhao” (*wei Wei jiu Zhao*). This is a reference to one of the winning tactics described in the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, which urges attacking the enemy where it is weak instead of engaging the enemy where it is strong, thereby ultimately regaining the initiative.⁸⁶ In the great game set out by the West to “contain

⁸¹ Mao Zedong, “Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War,” December 1936, available at https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_12.htm.

⁸² Anton Lee Wishik II, “An Anti-access Approximation: The PLA’s Active Strategic Counterattacks on Exterior Lines,” *China Security* 19 (2011): 37–48.

⁸³ Wang Jisi, “‘Marching Westward’: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy,” in *The World in 2020 According to China: Chinese Foreign Policy Elites Discuss Emerging Trends in International Politics*, ed. Shao Binhong (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 129–36.

⁸⁴ Zhan, “Zhongguo de ‘xijin’ wenti: Yanpan yu sikao”; and Wang, “‘Xijin,’ Zhongguo diyuan zhanlue de zai pingheng.” In particular, note Li Weijian’s description of “advancing westward” as “a way to contain the eastward shift of the U.S. strategic center of gravity.”

⁸⁵ Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century?* 116–19.

⁸⁶ Liu, “Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze.”

and squeeze” China’s strategic space, Beijing should look for opportunities to strike the enemy in places where it is more vulnerable, suggests Zhang Hongming. He considers Africa as a crucial part of the competition because it is “the weak link in the U.S. global strategic layout.”⁸⁷ Operating on the African exterior line, by “vigorously” enhancing relations with Africa or even by “taking the initiative to provoke conflicts among great powers in Africa,” would allow China to open up an additional “battlefield.” The objective would be to alleviate pressure on China by “disturbing or diverting the attention of the United States and containing its ‘Indo-Pacific strategy.’”⁸⁸ Ultimately, a “seemingly minor piece may play a role in influencing the whole game at a certain point in time.”⁸⁹

In short, whenever perceived external pressures and threats on China increase, the strategic importance of the developing world, including, specifically, of the African continent, also rises. The current discussion of Africa as a strategic fulcrum or a new exterior line that China could use to counter foreign encirclement maneuvers echoes Mao’s Theory of the Three Worlds. As Luo Jianbo explains, China understands “developing countries” not according to their level of economic development but according to their geopolitical usefulness and alignment with Beijing’s strategic aims. In the past, they served Beijing’s desire to build an international united front based on anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-hegemonic considerations. Today, however, the interests and needs of countries of the global South that may have “once marched hand in hand in the pursuit of national independence” have evolved. These countries are now confronted with the “task of realizing economic development and national modernization and face...political and diplomatic needs in international affairs” similar to China’s.⁹⁰ Therefore, rather than gathering international support via the promotion of outdated principles with unsavory Cold War undertones, Beijing’s rallying cry should now be focused on economic development and on presenting the developing world with the opportunity of becoming “the real beneficiaries of China’s rise.”⁹¹ If China can achieve this, writes Zhang Chun, the director of the Foreign Policy Institute at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, developing countries will be not just a means to some larger end but China’s “true allies.”⁹² China, as the “vanguard of developing countries,” would thus be able to emulate the concept of “encircling the cities from the countryside” (a reference to a Maoist “people’s warfare” tactic) at the strategic level, isolating the West owing to the assertion of its power and influence over the global South.⁹³

The discussion of grand strategy stays at a fairly high level of abstraction. It never really spells out in detail what using Africa as a new exterior line would mean concretely. This term poses the question of whether Chinese strategists might go as far as using proxy wars in Africa to pull the United States away from the Asia-Pacific theater. Even if proxy wars of the kind waged by the Soviet Union on the African continent in the 1960s and 1970s may not be what Chinese strategists have in mind, there are other options, such as establishing military bases on Africa’s Atlantic coast,

⁸⁷ Zhang Hongming, “Zhongguo zai Feizhou jinglüe daguo guanxi de zhanlüe gouxiang” [Strategic Conception of China’s Management of Relations with Great Powers in Africa], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 5 (2018).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Zhan, “Zhongguo de ‘xijin’ wenti: Yanpan yu sikao.”

⁹⁰ Luo, “Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia waijiao”; and Luo Jianbo, “Zhongguo yu fazhanzhong guojia de zhiguo lizheng jingyan jiaoliu: Lishi, lilun yu shijie yiyi” [China’s Governance Experience Exchanges with Developing Countries: History, Theory and Global Significance], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 4 (2019).

⁹¹ Zhang Chun, “Zhongguo ‘qiang qilai’ le, Xifang ye bu hui rang women ‘ruhuo’” [China Has “Become Strong,” and the West Will Not Let Us “Integrate”], *Guangcha*, February 9, 2019, https://www.guancha.cn/ZhangChun/2019_02_12_489790.shtml; and Luo, “Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia waijiao.”

⁹² Zhang, “Zhongguo ‘qiang qilai’ le, Xifang ye bu hui rang women ‘ruhuo.’”

⁹³ Ibid.

that could be considered as useful to deflect U.S. attention away from the Chinese mainland's immediate periphery. Short of a reenactment of Cold War-style military adventures, however, Chinese theorists appear to envision a competition on the African continent against their U.S. foe that primarily takes the form of a political and discursive struggle. Beijing may hope to "outflank" the United States not necessarily by opening new military fronts but by mobilizing support for its positions in international institutions and gaining endorsements for its distinctive institutions and governing ideology.

Adjusting Tools to Serve China's New Strategic Goals

As they started thinking about Africa, Chinese strategists did not confront a blank slate. They had to carefully assess not only China's interests in light of the central government's new and broadened strategic objectives but also the array of options at China's disposal—both the already available ones and those that would need to be further developed—in order to better serve these new goals.

Including Hard and Soft Instruments

In his 2017 report dedicated to China's strategy in Africa, Zhang Hongming notes that for the past two decades, China's interactions with Africa have been more effective and smooth than those with any other continent. But Beijing cannot rest on its laurels. If it is to maintain this "strong momentum" and "leap to a new level," China needs "new ideas and new measures" that fit its new objectives. It used to be the case, Zhang notes, that "economic cooperation (mainly aid to Africa) served our diplomacy, and since [the turn of the 21st century], diplomacy served our development and economic interests. At present, economic and trade cooperation has become the foundation and driving force of China-Africa relations." However, the expansion of Chinese economic interests in Africa has created a "structural imbalance" that could hinder China's future prospects on the continent. Compared with the country's rapidly developing economic and trade relations, China's cooperation with Africa in the fields of security and "human exchange" still lags behind, depriving China of both a "hard guarantee" in the security domain and a "soft support" in the noneconomic realm.⁹⁴ Strengthening security cooperation with African countries will help them build a safe and stable political environment conducive to their socioeconomic development. At the same time, this will help China improve its ability to protect its overseas assets and citizens and accumulate experience and skills in overseas operations.⁹⁵ In parallel, deepening human exchanges is necessary to create a positive environment and enhance trust, at both the business and political levels.

The September 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing included the areas that Zhang had identified as lagging behind in China's engagement with Africa: peace and security, people-to-people exchanges, and capacity-building activities (vocational and technical training for African youth)

⁹⁴ Zhang, "Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhanlue yunchou yanjiu." Imbalances in the structure of China-Africa cooperation, with people-to-people exchanges and Chinese research on Africa lagging behind, are also underlined by Zhang Zhongxiang, deputy director of the Center for African Studies at Shanghai Normal University. See "'Yidai Yilu jianshe yu Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhanlue' yantaohui zongshu" [Summary of the Seminar on "BRI Construction and China's Africa Strategy"], Sinoss, October 12, 2015, <https://www.sinoss.net/2015/1012/65051.html>.

⁹⁵ Luo, "Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia wajiao"; and Shen, "Lun Zhong Fei hezuo luntan de qi yuan, fazhan yu gongxian."

were added as part of “Eight Major Initiatives” that are meant to further strengthen bilateral cooperation in the near term.⁹⁶

Beyond mentioning security as a domain where China needs to expand its cooperation with African countries, Chinese scholars do not elaborate further on what they think should be done concretely. Considering Beijing’s traditional aversion to appearing to harbor militaristic, expansionist ambitions, it is possible that if such discussions are taking place, they are occurring discreetly among People’s Liberation Army specialists rather than Africanists.

By contrast, there is a wider array of opinions about how to deepen human exchanges with Africa. Human exchanges (*renwen jiaoliu*) differ from people-to-people exchanges (*minxin xiangtong*—BRI’s fifth “connectivity”), cultural exchanges (*wenhua jiaoliu*), and talent exchanges (*rencai jiaoliu*). What this term encompasses goes beyond the connection “of the hearts” that individuals originating from different countries may experience when they travel abroad or nurture a deep appreciation for foreign cultures. The term implies a level of connection “of the minds” more akin to political influence work. Such exchanges are not “limited to cultural visits and tourism but should be expanded and deepened in the field of ideological exchanges and joint research,” notes He Wenping.⁹⁷ They include propaganda efforts, supplemented by united front work, to “minimize” the “misunderstandings and resistance” that China could encounter locally.⁹⁸ For example, they are used to help “strongly refute the fallacies spread by the West, such as China’s ‘neo-colonialism,’ ‘plundering of African resources,’ and ‘debt trap diplomacy.’”⁹⁹ From this perspective, academic exchanges, media interactions, and connections among youths should be widely encouraged in order to gradually bring African countries to accept China as a positive force and build a solid “public opinion base for the China-Africa community of destiny.”¹⁰⁰ As it develops this undertaking, China should make “full use of the strength of overseas Chinese and overseas Chinese organizations” to engage with local communities in African countries—an explicit nod to the need to strengthen united front work on the continent.¹⁰¹ This could be done, in particular, through the “vigorous promotion” of Chinese education programs in Africa (i.e., the expansion of Confucius Institutes and incorporation of Chinese-language teaching into the curriculum of African primary and secondary schools) in parallel with the development of African-languages programs in China, as well as increased exchanges between Chinese and African think tanks.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ The 2018 “Eight Major Initiatives” expanded on the 2015 “Five Major Pillars” as defined by Xi Jinping during the FOCAC summit in Johannesburg (mutual political trust, solidarity and coordination in international affairs, economic cooperation, sustained growth of China-Africa friendship from generation to generation, and mutual assistance in security). In 2018, China’s eight priority axes for cooperation within the FOCAC framework included industrial promotion, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, green development, capacity-building activities, healthcare, people-to-people exchanges, and peace and security. Note that “people-to-people exchanges” may be the English translation chosen for “renwen jiaoliu” instead of “minxin xiangtong.” See Ministry of Commerce (PRC), “Elaboration on the Eight Major Initiatives of the FOCAC Beijing Summit,” September 19, 2018, <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/policyrelease/Cocoon/201809/20180902788698.shtml>. See also Dai, “Jicheng youhao chuantong, zhuzhu shidai jiyu, goujian gengjia jinmi de Zhong Fei mingyun gongtongti”; and He Wenping, “Yidai Yilu yu Zhong Fei hezuo: Jingzhun duijie yu gao zhiliang fazhan” [BRI and China-Africa Cooperation: Precise Docking and High-Quality Development], *Dangdai Shijie*, no. 451 (2019).

⁹⁷ He, “Yidai Yilu yu Zhong Fei hezuo: Jingzhun duijie yu gao zhiliang fazhan.”

⁹⁸ Shen, “Lun Zhong Fei hezuo luntan de qiyuan, fazhan yu gongxian”; and Zhang Zhongxiang and Tao Tao, “Zhong Fei hezuo luntan 20 nian: Huigu yu fazhan” [Twenty Years of FOCAC: Retrospect and Prospect], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 6 (2020).

⁹⁹ He, “Yidai Yilu yu Zhong Fei hezuo: Jingzhun duijie yu gao zhiliang fazhan.”

¹⁰⁰ Zhang and Tao, “Zhong Fei hezuo luntan 20 nian: Huigu yu fazhan.” A similar argument was put forward by Liu Guijin, China’s first special representative for African affairs, during a 2015 meeting in Pretoria. See “Zhong wai xuezhe tan Zhong Fei hezuo: ‘Sanwangyihua’ shi Feizhou ban Yidai Yilu” [Chinese and Foreign Scholars Discuss China-Africa Cooperation: “Three Networks One Industrialization” Is the African Version of BRI], *People’s Daily*, September 11, 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/0911/c1002-27569764.html>.

¹⁰¹ Shen, “Lun Zhong Fei hezuo luntan de qiyuan, fazhan yu gongxian.”

¹⁰² Zhang and Tao, “Zhong Fei hezuo luntan 20 nian: Huigu yu fazhan.”

According to a high-level propaganda specialist, China's "strategic communications" work specifically targeting Africa has brought positive results so far, as shown by public opinion surveys conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center and Afrobarometer.¹⁰³ There is still a lot of work to be done, however, especially in "political communication," in terms of content, geographic coverage (namely in Central and West Africa), and the domestic coordination of all the actors participating in relaying "the voice of China" on the African continent.¹⁰⁴

Disseminating the China Model

The purpose of intensifying human exchanges extends well beyond creating favorable African perceptions of China. Chinese planners are seriously considering how to disseminate the China model to African countries. Regular cultural exchanges that are part of the ongoing development of China-Africa relations are not sufficient to "fully penetrate into the core levels of the promotion of China's soft power, such as ideas and values."¹⁰⁵ And intellectual exchanges are no longer limited to the transfer of technical knowledge or manual skills and crafts. Their content has gradually been expanded from economic development to give greater attention to issues pertaining to national governance.¹⁰⁶

Competition with the Western liberal democratic model is clearly what is envisioned here. As former senior vice president of the World Bank Justin Yifu Lin writes, Western "mainstream theories" about development "are not the 'universal' truth." Indeed, the application of these theories has led to Africa becoming the poorest continent in the world. Therefore, African countries are "the best places to test whether the theories summarized from China's experience have some general applicability."¹⁰⁷ The development of China's human exchange programs should ultimately encourage developing countries to "explore a more self-determining, independent, and distinctive development path,"¹⁰⁸ incrementally bringing African countries to pay "more attention to [China's] development path and development model," while sowing doubts about the "Western road" they have so far followed.¹⁰⁹

As part of the 2015 Africa strategy national research project, He Wenping, the director of CASS's Africa Research Division and head of the Chinese Society of African Studies, published a report in 2017 that carefully examines how "China's experience" (which, she notes, has been called the "Beijing consensus," "China model," or "China road/path" by various Western scholars) can

¹⁰³ Yu Yunchuan, "Zhongguo zai Feizhou guojia xingxiang ji yingxiang li chuanbo yanjiu" [Study of China's Propaganda Impact and Image in African Countries], Sohu, March 5, 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/224878501_610911. Yu is the deputy director of the Chinese Foreign Languages Bureau's Center for External Propaganda. For discussions about the survey findings, see Folashade Soule and Edem E. Selormey, "How Popular Is China in Africa? New Survey Sheds Light on What Ordinary People Think," Conversation, November 17, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-popular-is-china-in-africa-new-survey-sheds-light-on-what-ordinary-people-think-149552>; and Jacob Poushter, "In Three African Nations, U.S. and China Seen as Best Examples of a Developed Economy," Pew Research Center, November 15, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/15/in-three-african-nations-u-s-and-china-seen-as-best-examples-of-a-developed-economy>.

¹⁰⁴ Yu, "Zhongguo zai Feizhou guojia xingxiang ji yingxiang li chuanbo yanjiu."

¹⁰⁵ Long Jing, "Zhongguo yu fazhanzhong diqu zhengti waijiao: Xianzhuang pinggu yu weilai zhanwang" [China's Comprehensive Diplomacy with Developing Regions: Current Assessment and Future Prospects], *Guoji Zhanwang*, no. 2 (2017): 40–60.

¹⁰⁶ Luo, "Zhongguo yu fazhanzhong guojia de zhiguo lizheng jingyan jiaoliu: Lishi, lilun yu shijie yiyi." On the same topic, see Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power*; and "A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response," International Republican Institute, February 2021, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/bridge-ii_fullreport-r7-021221.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ Justin Yifu Lin, "Feizhou guojia shi jianyan Zhongguo jingyan de zui hao difang," [African Countries Are the Best Places to Test China's Experience], *Global Times*, December 11, 2014, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJFXH9>.

¹⁰⁸ Luo, "Zhongguo yu fazhanzhong guojia de zhiguo lizheng jingyan jiaoliu: Lishi, lilun yu shijie yiyi."

¹⁰⁹ Yu, "Zhongguo zai Feizhou guojia xingxiang ji yingxiang li chuanbo yanjiu."

be transferred to African countries.¹¹⁰ Her detailed report deserves special attention because it may shed important new light on debates that are currently occurring in Western countries about whether China is “exporting its model.”¹¹¹ Some of He’s ideas build on Liu Hongwu’s. In a paper published in 2011, the leader of the 2015 national project team to which He also belonged advocates, for example, the “internationalization of China’s domestic development experience” throughout the developing world via the proactive use of intellectual networks. The West has been “linking economic assistance with the export of ideology,” “spreading its special ideas and values in a latent and hidden way” via its “support of various academic institutions, think tanks, publishing networks, and media organizations in developing countries.” It ultimately “widely infiltrated the developing countries’ thought and ideology realm, affecting the thoughts and consciousness of social elites, intellectuals, and even ordinary people in developing countries.” But in the long run, “non-Western countries,” through “self-confidence and persistent hard work in the ideological field,” will be able to establish their own “discourse system.” China therefore needs to “actively support academic institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and think tanks” and “gradually transform Chinese knowledge and wisdom into a discourse form that can be understood and felt by the outside world.” These efforts are “of lasting and crucial significance to the implementation of China’s strategic goal of peaceful rise and the uninterrupted advancement of China-Africa cooperation strategy.”¹¹²

Before getting into how the “China experience” can be “integrated” locally, He Wenping spends some time describing the main features of the China model. She contends that over the past five years, the China model has attracted worldwide attention not only for its economic prowess but also increasingly for its political governance skills. Such keen international interest is essentially due to the two most notable achievements of the model. First, it has preserved stability in times of economic transformation: “Generally speaking,” throughout three decades of reform China has managed to maintain social stability, economic development, and a peaceful environment without any “major civil war or social conflict.” Second, the one-party state has maintained continuity and ruled with authority and efficiency: “The development of human history has long proved that economic development cannot just be achieved through Western political democracy.” Economic reforms have been implemented in parallel with political and social reforms that have focused on “good governance” (party-state efficiency) instead of a “blind pursuit of electoral democratization.” He concludes that this is “probably why the development-oriented ‘Beijing consensus’ can compete with the liberalization-oriented ‘Washington consensus’ and is increasingly sought after by more and more developing countries.”¹¹³

At the same time as China was embarking on its “reform and opening” program, African countries started implementing economic restructuring and multiparty political

¹¹⁰ He Wenping, “Zhongguo jingyan yu Feizhou fazhan: Jiejian, ronghe yu chuangxin,” [China’s Experience and Africa’s Development: Reference, Integration, and Innovation], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 4 (2017). See Appendix 1 for He Wenping’s short biography. Luo Jianbo develops arguments very similar to He’s in Luo, “Zhongguo yu fazhanzhong guojia de zhiguo lizheng jingyan jiaoliu: Lishi, lilun yu shijie yiyi.” Luo believes that through the transfer of its model, China will bring “enlightenment” to developing countries. Similarly, Wang Xinsong, a professor at the Beijing Normal University’s School of Social Development, considers the improvement of African countries’ national governance capacity as an important task for China’s Africa policy. See Wang Xinsong, “Jiaqiang neibu zhili nengli shi tisheng Zhong Fei guanxi de jichu” [Strengthening Domestic Governance Is the Basis for Enhanced China-Africa Relations], in “10 wei zhuanjia tan Zhong Fei guanxi yu Zhong Fei hezuo.”

¹¹¹ See, for example, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission’s hearing, “A ‘China Model’? Beijing’s Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards,” April 27, 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/hearings/roundtable-china-model-beijings-promotion-alternative-global-norms-and-standards>.

¹¹² Liu Hongwu, “Zhongguo Feizhou yanjiu zhishi tixi yu huayu xingtai goujian” [Knowledge System and Discourse Construction of China’s Africa Studies], *Renmin Luntan*, no. 346 (2011).

¹¹³ He, “Zhongguo jingyan yu Feizhou fazhan: Jiejian, ronghe yu chuangxin.”

democratization under the guidance of international financial institutions and Western donor countries. These developments eventually “naturally caused turbulence and social unrest” and stalled the reform process. African countries are now “looking east”: they want to “explore the road that suits their own development” and learn from China’s example. They are not all equally eager, however. Although African countries generally admire China’s economic achievements and hope to emulate its economic success and attract Chinese investors, African leaders’ dispositions toward China’s political system and its “experience in national governance” differ greatly, depending on their own political affinities. African leaders who graduated from Western universities (the report cites as examples Alassane Ouattara of Côte d’Ivoire and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia) “mostly agree with the promotion of Western values such as ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘human rights.’” Botswana’s leaders “boast” about their country’s democracy and “even think they are ahead of China in democratic development, civil society construction, and legal system construction.” On the other hand, leaders of countries that cherish “African traditional values” (South Africa, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe, for example) and are “wary or even opposed to Western intervention in African affairs” are more amenable to China’s example and have begun to “practice relevant experiences in country and party governance,” such as opening party schools and implementing anticorruption campaigns.¹¹⁴

It is “normal” for some African nongovernmental organizations and groups that “have long been influenced by Western thoughts” to harbor some “misunderstanding and doubts” about China’s political model. Mindful of possible African resistance, China needs to “refrain from a condescending ‘preaching’ style” and opt instead for an attitude of “equality and attentive listening,” especially as it might also learn something in the process.¹¹⁵ Just as China chose solutions for its own politico-economic development path that fit its “unique historical and cultural conditions,” so too it should understand the necessity for African countries to “combine and adapt China’s experience” with their local realities and conditions; “a ‘one size fits all’ blind copying method” should be “avoided by all means.” This illustrates how the “malleable and loose” form of hegemony that Beijing envisions might materialize.¹¹⁶

What does this mean in concrete terms? He Wenping points to two Chinese “innovations” that are worth transferring to African countries. The first is an essential piece of China’s economic model: the combined development of labor-intensive industries, special economic zones (SEZs) and industrial parks, infrastructure construction, and human resources training that China adopted in the early stages of its national development in the reform and opening-up period.¹¹⁷ In addition to Ethiopia, whose Eastern Industrial Zone was originally built by Jiangsu Yongyuan Investment in 2007, five African countries (Zambia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Egypt, and Congo) have built large-scale industrial zones in partnership with Chinese companies. With the Pointe-Noire project, there is now an “‘astonishing’ African SEZ with Chinese ‘elements’ on the

¹¹⁴ He, “Zhongguo jingyan yu Feizhou fazhan: Jiejian, ronghe yu chuangxin.”

¹¹⁵ He Wenping mentions, in particular, Rwanda’s legislation against plastic bags. She also underlines African “remarkable” qualities (collectivism, respect for elders, and tolerance) and cultural “dazzling treasures” (dance, painting, music, and sculpture). He, “Zhongguo jingyan yu Feizhou fazhan: Jiejian, ronghe yu chuangxin.”

¹¹⁶ Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order.”

¹¹⁷ The same idea is promoted by Justin Yifu Lin, former vice president of the World Bank, who believes that the creation of industrial parks and special economic zones in African countries can effectively promote the development of infrastructure and kick-start Africa’s industrialization process. See Justin Yifu Lin, “Feizhou ying cong Zhongguo gongyehua jincheng xuexi shenme” [What Africa Should Learn from China’s Industrialization Process], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), January 6, 2016, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zft/chn/zfgx/zfgxjmhzt/t1329671.htm>. During his time at the World Bank, Lin “began to introduce China’s experience to African countries” and helped establish a pilot project in Ethiopia. See Lin, “Feizhou guojia shi jianyan Zhongguo jingyan de zui hao defang.”

Atlantic coast of Africa.” The second innovation is China’s proven capacity in “anticorruption, party building, and country ruling.” Political training has become a “new platform for strengthening the exchanges of experience” on matters related to national governance. The China-Africa Young Leaders Program trained over two hundred young African political leaders between 2011 and 2015 and has planned to invite over a thousand more to China for the period 2018–21. The program aims at “cultivating a new force” for the further dissemination of China’s governance model.¹¹⁸

The Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021) that was adopted at the September 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing mentions that “the two sides will enhance experience-sharing on state governance.”¹¹⁹ The banal phrasing has not attracted much attention. Yet it stands out as a significant element of Beijing’s strategy for Africa. This language clearly relates to China’s broader ambition to assert itself as an alternative to the Western liberal democratic model—not just for its own sake, in Beijing’s telling, but also for the benefit of developing countries around the world. Spreading the China model to African countries is an integral part of China’s strategy toward the continent.

Challenges Facing China’s Africa Strategy

When Chinese scholars cited in this report write on China’s Africa strategy, they frequently use the image of a “great game” (*da qiju*) and its related metaphors of “chess pieces” (*qizi*) or “game rounds” (*boyi*). It is impossible to know whether their mental image is one of a chess board or of a Go or Chinese chess (*xiangqi*) game. Either way, the metaphor is revealing. Chinese strategists clearly see African countries as crucial pieces in an intensifying contest with China’s archrival, the United States. However, as even the authors cited here seem to acknowledge at times, the countries are anything but pawns that can be manipulated, moved, and bent to China’s will. Chinese planners are cognizant of potential obstacles facing their country’s growing role in Africa, whether emanating from China, Africa, or external powers.

The expansion of China’s presence and interests in Africa is the source of various practical challenges for Beijing. One of them, notes Zhang Haibing, director of the Global Governance Institute at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, is how to balance China’s long-standing principle of noninterference in other countries’ internal affairs with the protection of its assets and interests overseas.¹²⁰ There is also the reputational cost that Chinese companies impose on China because of their lack of awareness of international corporate social responsibility. Regulating their activities should become a priority for the Chinese government, but this would mean tackling a complex issue that has domestic roots: corporate behavior overseas “is actually a natural reflection of the ideas, understandings, behaviors, and experiences they have at home.”¹²¹ A business representative complains about the “disconnect” between government rhetoric and companies’ needs—in particular the lack of support that both Chinese embassies in Africa and Chinese financial institutions provide to Chinese private companies.¹²²

¹¹⁸ He, “Zhongguo jingyan yu Feizhou fazhan: Jiejian, ronghe yu chuangxin.”

¹¹⁹ FOCAC, “Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021),” September 12, 2018, http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/t1594297.htm.

¹²⁰ Zhang Haibing, “Zhongguo dui Feizhou yuanzhu de ‘zhanlue pingheng’ wenti” [The “Strategic Balance” of China’s Aid to Africa], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 3 (2012): 39–52.

¹²¹ Luo, “Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia waijiao.”

¹²² “Yidai Yilu jianshe yu Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhanlue’ yantaohui zongshu.”

Moreover, there is the important issue of how to find a balance between increased Chinese international contributions on par with China's status as a "responsible great power" and its actual capacities and means. Luo Jianbo cautions that "China is a great power in the world, but it is also a developing country in terms of economic and social development."¹²³ This is related, in particular, to the sensitive question of China's transparency about foreign aid data. While publicly disclosing the amount of its donations to the developing world would help enhance China's image as an altruistic, generous power, it would also create a severe domestic conundrum for the party-state: how to justify spending so much money in Africa when China's own central and western regions are "backward" and home to a "large number of poor people."¹²⁴ Finally, China's growing proactiveness may encourage higher African expectations that will ultimately "test China's diplomatic ability."¹²⁵ Together with providing more "public goods" to Africa, China therefore needs to invest in its own "knowledge reserves, intelligence gathering, and diplomatic contacts."¹²⁶

Other challenges to the smooth deployment of China's strategy emanate from Africa. As much as they are enthusiastic about Africa's future potential, Chinese scholars are equally concerned about the problems that could continue to hinder the continent's development, including poverty, inequality, traditional and nontraditional security issues, overdependence on a resource-led growth model, lack of robust government structures and institutions, traditional mentalities, and debt risk.¹²⁷ On the list of problems that Chinese scholars have identified as potentially harmful to China's advances in Africa appear, rather unexpectedly, two additional items.

The first is Africa's agency. After half a century of independence, African countries "emphasize independent development more than ever before." They now "pay more attention to their own interests" and have adopted a "pragmatic" diplomacy that leverages and plays external powers—China, other emerging powers, and "traditional big powers"—against each other to African countries' own benefit. They will not be satisfied anymore with simply "exchanging their own resources for foreign industrial products," and they have imposed higher demands on Chinese companies regarding environmental protection, labor rights, and the promotion of local economic development.¹²⁸

The second problem is Africa's democratization. Multiparty democracy has "eroded the political trust between China and Africa," widening the ideological gap, especially on issues such as human rights and sovereignty. The new generation of African leaders does not nurture the same "feelings for China," and traditional friendships "tend to fade" with the passing of the old guard. Election cycles prevent "the continuity of government policies and the continuity of

¹²³ Luo, "Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia wajiao," 141.

¹²⁴ Zhang, "Zhongguo dui Feizhou yuanzhu de 'zhanlue pingheng' wenti." See also Yun Sun, "The Domestic Controversy over China's Foreign Aid and the Implications for Africa," Brookings Institution, October 8, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2015/10/08/the-domestic-controversy-over-chinas-foreign-aid-and-the-implications-for-africa>.

¹²⁵ Li Wentao, "Xin shiqi Zhong Fei hezuo de yinling he shifan zuoyong budan tisheng" [The Leading and Exemplary Role of China-Africa Cooperation in the New Era Continues to Increase], in "10 wei zhuanjia tan Zhong Fei guanxi yu Zhong Fei hezuo."

¹²⁶ Li, "Xin shiqi Zhong Fei hezuo de yinling he shifan zuoyong budan tisheng." On the building of a Chinese intellectual infrastructure related to Africa, see **Appendix 2**.

¹²⁷ Liu, "Feizhou fazhan dashi yu Zhongguo de zhanlue xuanze"; and Bi Jiankang, "Yidai Yilu yu Feizhou gongyehua" [BRI and Africa's Industrialization], *Sichoulu Xuekan* (2018).

¹²⁸ Zhang, "Goujian Zhong Fei minyun gongtongti: Tiaozhan yu yingdui." Xue Li makes a similar point about how African countries leverage China to promote their own development. See Xue Li, "Yidai Yilu jianshe xuyao 'Feizhou fanglüe'" [The Construction of BRI Requires an Africa Grand Plan], Institute of World Economics and Politics, Working Paper, May 10, 2017.

China-Africa cooperation.”¹²⁹ China should therefore aim to “stop all kinds of ‘color revolutions’” in Africa in order to prevent “political turbulence and social instability caused by the ‘advancement of democracy’ from impacting economic construction.”¹³⁰

One final issue raised by Chinese Africanists is that by “inadvertently reach[ing] the center of the African stage,” China is finding itself in the midst of an “increasingly fierce” international competition that is multidimensional, with commercial interests, values, and geopolitics sometimes overlapping.¹³¹ Former colonial powers that consider Africa as their “forbidden garden”¹³² and other countries influential on the continent, such as the United States and Japan, are not only nurturing a “sour grapes” mentality but also actively interfering with and trying to foil China’s plans.¹³³ The West, which is experiencing difficulty in grasping its decline and the rapid erosion of “Western Centralism,” is wrongly accusing China of “neocolonialism.” Such rhetoric and “distorted” views of China-Africa cooperation are the result not of any of China’s actions in Africa but of the fact that Western powers are worried that their “absolute control over African resources will be challenged, [and] their political, cultural, and ideological influence in Africa will be impacted by China’s coming in.”¹³⁴ More importantly, frictions are objectively inevitable because China is a “latecomer” in an already crowded space. Its “African advance” will naturally face obstacles, and there is no way to avoid this. Rather, Chinese planners should “think and prepare for the worst while striving for the best.”¹³⁵ Zhang Hongming and some of his colleagues have carefully examined each external power’s interests and strategies in Africa and suggested some paths for China to navigate the challenges posed by those “forerunners” to Beijing’s interests and objectives in Africa. Space does not permit a detailed examination of these exhaustive discussions, but they certainly warrant closer study.

A New Great Game

Africa appears as an essential piece of the grand strategic redesign that occurred in China around 2012–13 with the aim of achieving the China dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation—a vision in which China’s rise has been successfully completed and China has become the predominant power without provoking a war with the United States. Xi’s grand strategy includes three main components: China’s self-strengthening (economic, political, diplomatic, and military), concomitant with China’s pushing back against the perceived increased U.S. pressure on its immediate periphery, while at the same time consolidating its position on the global stage and especially in the developing world, ultimately creating the equivalent of a sphere of influence over which China dominates. Xi’s grand strategy essentially involves a counter-encirclement maneuver deployed at the global level. It is conceived from the perspective of a still relatively weak party confronted with a stronger enemy, looking for ways to avoid a direct confrontation that could

¹²⁹ Zhang, “Goujian Zhong Fei minyun gongtongti: Tiaozhan yu yingdu.”

¹³⁰ Bi, “Yidai Yilu yu Feizhou gongyehua.”

¹³¹ Zhang, “Zhongguo zai Feizhou jinglüe daguo guanxi de zhanlüe gouxiang,” 144.

¹³² Ibid., 148–49.

¹³³ Bi, “Yidai Yilu yu Feizhou gongyehua”; and Zhao Chengguang, “Zhong Fei gongjian Yidai Yilu: Xin jieduan, xin tiaozhan yu xin lujing” [China and Africa’s Co-Building of BRI: New Stage, New Challenges, and New Path], *Dangdai Shijie*, no. 5 (2020): 71–76.

¹³⁴ Zhou Wen, “Yidai Yilu changyi xia de Zhong Fei hezuo: Xifang xuyao jiaozheng shijiao” [China-Africa Cooperation under BRI: The West Needs to Correct Its Perspective], CASS, September 4, 2018, http://www.cssn.cn/jjx_lljx_1/sjjjyggjx/201809/t20180904_4554583.shtml.

¹³⁵ Zhang, “Zhongguo zai Feizhou jinglüe daguo guanxi de zhanlüe gouxiang,” 148–49.

prove fatal. Circumventing encirclement necessitates the creation of a sphere of influence that not only acts as a buffer zone, blunting the adversary's moves, but eventually constricts and collapses the opponent's strategic space.

This conception strongly echoes Mao's Theory of the Three Worlds. This time, however, China's main tools for creating an international united front against the superpower are not revolutionary slogans of solidarity among victims of imperialist oppressors but an alignment with China's development model—a model at odds with the liberal democratic model—gradually established via the exercise of economic statecraft and political influence.¹³⁶ The expressed desire to proactively “share China's experience,” not only in economic development but also in national governance, is a new element that demands attention. Success will be measured not by how many African countries replicate China's ideology but by how they help enhance China's power. Beijing needs these countries in order to cross the final threshold to great-power status:

Looking back on the past 500 years of world history, the reason why world powers have had global influence and appeal lies not only in their economic power and the development opportunities offered for the rest of world, but also in their ability to provide solutions and wisdom for the reform of the global governance system, and in their ability to provide the world with values and ethics that lead the development trend of the times.¹³⁷

Little thought, if any, is given to how to accompany African countries on the road to achieving their own objectives, unless they align with Beijing's.

For Africa to properly fit into China's grand vision and play an appropriate role within the subsystem that Beijing aspires to create and dominate, the continent needs to go through a series of transformations, both economic and political. If Africa is to fulfill its potential as a cheap labor manufacturing center and a vibrant market for high-end Chinese products, African countries need to adopt the combination of SEZs, infrastructure building, and investment in labor skills that kicked off China's economic boom. If African countries are to be reliably acquiescent to China's priorities, their elites need to adopt authoritarian rather than democratic governance, ensuring their enduring rule and guaranteeing long-term stability to their pliant relationships with Beijing.

Finally, China's vision does not stop with the African continent. Chinese strategists clearly envisage Africa as a testing ground, a proof of concept, and the “first step leading to a greater community of common destiny” that will link “the China dream with the African dream, the Arab dream, and even the world dream.”¹³⁸ Africa is a laboratory in which Chinese strategists think they can test and perfect techniques that, if successful, can then be applied and adopted elsewhere. If they can demonstrate the efficacy of China's model in Africa, Chinese strategists hope that this model can be spread across the global South, eventually reshaping the world.

¹³⁶ China's exercise of economic statecraft and political influence will be deployed in large part through BRI, via its docking with local development strategies, the co-optation of local elites, and the penetration of the local informational space. In the case of Africa, BRI's deployment is a complex story. As part of NBR's “Into Africa: China's Emerging Strategy” project, specific dimensions of China's economic statecraft and political influence in Africa will be examined in subsequent reports. More information on the project is available at <https://www.nbr.org/program/into-africa-chinas-emerging-strategy>.

¹³⁷ Luo, “Zhengque yiliguan yu Zhongguo dui fazhanzhong guojia waijiao.”

¹³⁸ Ibid.

APPENDIX 1: PROFILES OF PROMINENT CHINESE EXPERTS CITED IN THE REPORT

The launch of China's national research project on Africa strategy was a formal affair. On December 24, 2015, several prominent scholars and high-level government representatives gathered at the China Institute of International Studies, the think tank affiliated with China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Earlier that month, at the 6th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation held in Johannesburg, Xi Jinping had announced a \$60 billion fund for economic cooperation with African countries and China's intention to focus its cooperation efforts with Africa on ten major areas (industrialization, agriculture, infrastructure, financial services, green development, trade and investment facilitation, poverty reduction and public welfare, public health, people-to-people exchanges, and peace and security).¹³⁹ Core members of the research team that was about to work on defining China's new strategy for Africa had been involved in the preparation of the Johannesburg summit.¹⁴⁰ The project's principal investigator, Liu Hongwu, was to be assisted by three sub-project leaders: Liu Qingjian (Renmin University), Huang Meibo (Shanghai University of International Business and Economics), and He Wenping (Institute of West Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or CASS).¹⁴¹

The full list of attendees is as follows:

- Zhong Jianhua, special representative of the Chinese government for African affairs
- Qin Yaqing, dean, Foreign Affairs University
- Guo Xiangang, vice president, China Institute of International Studies
- Liu Guijin, first special representative of the Chinese government for African affairs
- Gong Jianzhong, vice president, Chinese Society of Public Diplomacy
- Shu Zhuan, senior researcher, African Research Institute (former ambassador to Rwanda)
- Jiang Jie, counselor, Africa Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Li Xinfeng, deputy editor-in-chief, *China Social Sciences Magazine*
- Li Zhibiao, researcher, CASS
- Yao Guimei, researcher, CASS
- Wang Hongyi, researcher, CASS
- Xu Weizhong, researcher, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations
- Zhang Yonghong, professor, Yunnan University
- Luo Jianbo, professor, Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP
- Pan Huaqiong, professor, Peking University
- Xu Huixia, director, Social Science Department, Zhejiang Normal University
- Hu Wei, researcher, International Cooperation Center, National Development and Reform Commission

¹³⁹ "Xi Announces 10 Major Programs to Boost China-Africa Cooperation in Coming 3 Years," *China Daily*, December 4, 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/04/content_22631225.htm.

¹⁴⁰ "Guojia sheke jijin zhongda xiangmu 'Zhongguo dui Feizhou guanxi de guoji zhanlue yanjiu' kaiti."

¹⁴¹ "Liu Hongwu jiaoshou zhuchi de guojia sheke zhongda xiangmu 'Zongguo dui Feizhou guanxi de guoji zhanlue yanjiu' mian jiangding jie xiang."

The main Chinese experts who are cited in this report are as follows:

- Liu Hongwu is dean of the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University. Established in 2007, the institute is the first specifically dedicated to African studies in Chinese higher education institutions. Liu is also a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' steering committee on China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Programs, vice president of the China African Studies Association, and a member of the China-African People's Friendship Association. A prolific writer who has dedicated his distinguished scholarly career to African studies, he was recognized as one of "ten Chinese who deeply moved the African people" with the "China-Africa Friendship Award" by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in 2009. He is the founder of the China-Africa Think Tank Forum, inaugurated in Hangzhou in October 2011. The forum has been incorporated by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs into the Forum on Africa-China Cooperation framework. Liu's work for the central political leadership has been personally commended by Wen Jiabao, Xi Jinping, and Yang Jiechi.
- Zhang Hongming joined the West Asia and Africa Institute at CASS in 1982 and has been its deputy director since 2003. He is also the executive vice president of the Chinese Society of Asian and African Studies and a member of the China-African People's Friendship Association. As a junior researcher, Zhang focused on the relations between France and Africa. He spent a year at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar's School of Economics and Law (1988–89) before joining the Research Office of the Chinese Embassy in Guinea. He was seconded to the Research Office of the Chinese Embassy in Benin from 1995 to 1998. In 2000, he was a visiting scholar at the Centre d'Étude d'Afrique Noire. Zhang began to redirect his research focus to contemporary African economics and politics and to China-Africa relations after he was promoted to deputy director of CASS's Africa Research Division.
- He Wenping is director of the Africa Research Division of the Institute of West Asian and African Studies at CASS, where she began working in 1989. She is secretary-general of the Chinese Asian and African Research Society, a member of the Expert Committee of the China-Africa Industrial Forum, a member of the Chinese People's Friendship Association with Foreign Countries, and a senior fellow at the Chahar Institute. She is an associate researcher with the Stellenbosch University's Center for Chinese Studies in South Africa and served as a council member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the Future of Africa from 2009 to 2011. She was a visiting scholar at Yale University (1993–94), the University of London (1997), the Nordic Africa Institute in Sweden (2008), the German Development Institute (2010), and the BRICS Policy Center of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. She was hosted by the U.S. State Department program for visiting international scholars. Her research focuses on African democratic transitions, China-Africa relations, and South-South cooperation.
- Luo Jianbo is the director of the Chinese Diplomatic Research Division of the Institute of International Strategic Studies at the CCP Central Party School. He is sometimes referred to as director of the African Studies Department of the Central Party School. He teaches classes for provincial and ministerial-level cadres related to China's diplomacy (Xi Jinping's diplomatic thought, great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, the Belt and Road Initiative, and national security strategy). He was a visiting scholar at Yale University (2006) and Yonsei University (2009–10) and a fellow at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (2014–15). He was hosted twice by the U.S. State Department program for visiting international scholars. Luo's research focuses on China's diplomatic strategy, foreign aid, soft power, and relations with developing countries, especially those in Africa. In 2011, he published *Sino-African Development Cooperation: Studies on Theories, Strategies and Policies*, co-authored with Liu Hongwu.

APPENDIX 2: DEVELOPING AN AFRICA-FOCUSED KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE

Rachel Bernstein and Nadège Rolland

Changes in Chinese domestic and foreign policy have affected African studies, along with other regional disciplines, within China.¹⁴² The support and funding of the field have grown as China has become more globally oriented and the need to better understand the continent has increased. As in other humanities fields, Chinese Africanists would like to create a “Chinese school” of African studies based on distinctly Chinese standpoints, rather than emulating their foreign colleagues’ perspectives.¹⁴³ The recent uptick of Chinese African studies programs and research centers does not necessarily coincide with a real flourishing of scholarship, however. Nurturing expertise is a long-term endeavor.

Development Phases

The growth of African studies in China and the subsequent creation of Africa-focused knowledge centers in think tanks and universities are driven from the top down and have occurred in three distinct phases. Each phase correlates to changes in China’s foreign policy and relations with Africa.¹⁴⁴

Phase 1: 1950s–70s

During the 1950s and early 1960s, as China’s relations with the Soviet Union were deteriorating, Beijing began to shift its attention to the developing world and engage with African countries as part of Mao Zedong’s Theory of the Three Worlds.¹⁴⁵ Following the 1955 Bandung Conference, China formed five institutions dedicated to African Studies: the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Peking University, the Asia-Africa History Teaching and Research Office of the History Department at Peking University (later consolidated into the Center for African Studies and the Chinese Society of African Historical Studies at Peking University), the Africa Economics and Geography Research Office of Nanjing University (later known as the Research Center of Africa Studies), the African Studies Office of Xiangtan University, and the Institute of Asian-African Studies of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (which later became the West Asia and Africa Research Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or CASS). The Institute of Asian-African Studies was specifically tasked with studying domestic African politics in an attempt

¹⁴² The Chinese term usually used is *feizhou xue*, which considers the theory and construction related to the field itself, in addition to interdisciplinary research, whereas *feizhou yanjiu* encompasses all research activities related to Africa. See Liu Hongwu, “‘Feizhou xue’ de yanjin xingtai ji qi Zhongguo lujing” [Evolution of African Studies and Chinese Methods], *International Political Studies*, no. 6 (2016).

¹⁴³ See, for example, Ren Xiao and Liu Ming, “Chinese Perspectives on International Relations in the Xi Jinping Era,” National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report, no. 85, June 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinese-perspectives-on-international-relations-in-the-xi-jinping-era>; Nele Noesselt, “Is There a ‘Chinese School’ of IR?” GIGA, Working Paper, no. 188, March 2012, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/giga/0024528/f_0024528_20026.pdf; and Xu Liang, “African Studies with Chinese Characteristics? A Perspective and a Vision,” International Institute for Asian Studies, Autumn 2018, <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/african-studies-chinese-characteristics-perspective-vision>.

¹⁴⁴ Liu Hongwu, “Feizhou yanjiu de: ‘Zhongguo xuepai’: Ruhe keneng” [How to Create a “Chinese School” of Africa Studies], *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 5 (2016); and Zhang Hongming, “Zhongguo Feizhou wenti de ‘zhiku yanjiu’: Lichen, chengxiao he wenti” [“Think Tank Research” on African Issues in China: History, Achievements and Problems] *Xiya Feizhou*, no. 4 (2014).

¹⁴⁵ Zhang, “Zhongguo Feizhou wenti de ‘zhiku yanjiu.’”

to forge deeper ties with newly independent African countries.¹⁴⁶ During that period, academic research was largely focused on the political and diplomatic considerations of the CCP rather than economic interests.

Phase 2: 1980s–90s

Following Mao's death, China's subsequent leaders focused on building comprehensive national power, prioritizing economic development over international revolutionary activities. Following the United States' recognition of China in 1979, ties between the two countries improved and, as a result, Beijing's strategic prioritization of Africa decreased.¹⁴⁷ The number of Africa-centered research institutions founded during this period reflects the government's shifting priorities. Although four additional research institutions were formed, the field remained relatively stable. Of note, Peking University's Center for African Studies and Shanghai Normal University's Center for African Studies were established in 1998.

Phase 3: 2000–Present

Throughout the first decades of the 21st century, as China's relations with African states significantly grew, so have the number of Africa-focused research centers, especially following the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit in 2006.¹⁴⁸ To provide one example, the Africa Research Institute of Zhejiang Normal University, headed by Liu Hongwu, was established in 2007. There are currently seventeen research centers focused on Africa. Research throughout this phase has focused on economics, the impact of African domestic developments on China's interests in Africa, and forward-looking assessments of the relationship. According to Li Anshan, for the past twenty years, most Chinese theses on Africa have focused on economics.¹⁴⁹ China's leadership also began to rely more closely on Africanists in China to provide lectures to top leaders and review draft speeches for FOCAC.¹⁵⁰

Significance

The demand for African studies is largely government-driven, and the funding for research on Africa mainly stems from the state. In March 2012 the Ministry of Education organized the first Regional Studies National Work Conference, hosting representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, delegates from 52 Chinese universities, and former Chinese ambassadors and members of various government think tanks such as the State Council's Development Research Center, CASS, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, and the China Institute of International Studies, in addition to China Radio International. Taking stock of the "profound

¹⁴⁶ Zhang, "Zhongguo Feizhou wenti de 'zhiku yanjiu.'"

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ In October 2000 (the year of its launch in Beijing) and 2003 (in Addis Ababa), FOCAC was a ministerial conference. It was upgraded to a summit in 2006 (in Beijing) and has continued to be held every three years, alternating between China and Africa (in 2009 in Sharm el-Sheikh, in 2012 in Beijing, in 2015 in Johannesburg, and in 2018 in Beijing). The next summit will take place in Dakar at the end of 2021. For an early effort to map China and Africa research centers, see Tatiana Carayannis and Nathaniel Olin, "A Preliminary Mapping of China-Africa Knowledge Networks," Social Science Research Council, January 2012, <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/392EA92D-FF5E-E111-B2A8-001CC477EC84>; and Martina Bassan, "Principaux centres et instituts chinois de recherche sur l'Afrique" [Main Chinese Research Centers and Institutes on Africa], *Outre-Terre* 4, no. 30 (2011): 397–408.

¹⁴⁹ Li Anshan, "African Studies in China in the 21st Century: A Historiographical Survey," *Brazilian Journal of African Studies* 1, no. 2 (2016): 48–88.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

evolution of the global pattern and the continuous improvement of China's comprehensive national power," the work conference set the course for the creation of specialized knowledge centers focused on regional studies whose mission would be to help the central decision-makers in formulating national strategies and policies, to engage in international exchanges and cooperation, and to contribute to China's promotion as a great power on the world stage.¹⁵¹ The Ministry of Education soon announced the creation of more than 30 regional studies centers in universities across the country.¹⁵²

The Chinese leadership often directs research ventures through speeches at large symposiums and conferences. In 2017, for example, Lin Songtian, the director of the African Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provided a keynote address at a meeting held by the Institute of West Asian and African Studies at CASS. He encouraged scholars to conduct research on how to increase Chinese soft power in Africa and improve China-Africa relations at the highest level.¹⁵³

The government also funds a significant amount of research on Africa, and the National Social Science Fund supports many of these projects. The database of the National Social Science Fund lists more than one hundred projects focused specifically on Africa—most of them launched after 2008—with research topics spanning in scope from politics to sociology to religion.¹⁵⁴

The development of knowledge centers is encouraged to support not only China's political decision-making but also its public diplomacy. Research centers are considered as useful conduits for the "formation, dissemination and persuasion of public opinion,"¹⁵⁵ and the government has encouraged academics and think tank experts to participate in national efforts to expand China's international influence and appeal.¹⁵⁶ Chinese African research centers have taken up this task seriously and have begun to cultivate academic exchanges with their African counterparts.

In addition to relations developed bilaterally, intellectual exchanges are also organized and planned within the FOCAC framework. The 2010 China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Plan, which aims at strengthening cooperation and exchanges between scholars and think tanks from the two sides, is regularly updated and upgraded.¹⁵⁷ The China-Africa Think Tank Forum, originally launched by Liu Hongwu's Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University in October 2011, has since 2012 been subsumed within FOCAC to serve as a "special platform for building consensus," contributing to the dissemination of China's development experience, "including development planning, reform and opening-up, self-reliance and unremitting diligence, good governance, and capacity building."¹⁵⁸ In addition, the China-Africa Think Tank 10+10

¹⁵¹ Ministry of Education (PRC), "Quyu he guobie yanjiu peiyu jidi diyici gongzuo huiyi chenggong zhaokai" [Inaugural Work Conference on Regional Research Cultivation Bases Successfully Held], April 17, 2012, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/s3165/201204/t20120417_134244.html.

¹⁵² Liu Hongwu, "Feizhou xue de yanjin xingtai jiqi Zhongguo lujing" [Evolution of African Studies and China's Path] *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu*, no. 6, 2016.

¹⁵³ "Zhongguo Ya Fei xuehui juban 'Feizhou xingshi yu Zhong Fei guanxi' baogao hui" [The China Asian-African Society Launched a Report on "Africa and China-Africa Relations"], China-Africa Trade Research Center, May 17, 2017, <http://news.afrindex.com/xiehuijigou/126/article8962.html>; and Liu, "Feizhou xue' de yanjin xingtai ji qi Zhongguo lujing."

¹⁵⁴ The National Social Science Fund project directory is available at <http://fz.people.com.cn/skygb/sk/index.php/index>.

¹⁵⁵ Wang Lili, "Jiaqiang 'zhiku gonggong waijiao' tisheng guojia huayuquan" [Strengthening "Think Tank Public Diplomacy" to Enhance China's Discourse Power], *Guangming Network Theory Channel*, December 26, 2019, https://theory.gmw.cn/2019-12/26/content_33431242.htm.

¹⁵⁶ "CCP General Office and State Council General Office Opinions Concerning Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics," China Copyright and Media, January 20, 2015, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/ccp-general-office-and-state-council-general-office-opinions-concerning-strengthening-the-construction-of-new-types-of-think-tanks-with-chinese-characteristics>.

¹⁵⁷ FOCAC, "Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan (2010–2012)," November 12, 2009, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/dsjbjzhy/hywj/t626387.htm>; and FOCAC, "Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021)."

¹⁵⁸ Liu Hongwu, "New Benchmark for Cooperation," *China Daily*, December 21, 2020, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202012/21/WS5fdfe560a31024ad0ba9ce86.html>.

Partnership Plan, announced in October 2013, intends to pair ten Chinese research institutes with ten of their African counterparts to further deepen academic exchanges and cooperation (see **Table 1**).

Finally, at the September 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing, Xi Jinping announced his decision to create an institute of African studies to “enhance exchanges with Africa on civilization.”¹⁵⁹ The China-Africa Institute, hosted within CASS, was inaugurated in Beijing by Yang Jiechi in April 2019, with a mission to “play a positive role in strengthening cultural, policy, and people-to-people links between China and Africa, achieve greater policy synergy

TABLE 1 China-Africa Think Tank 10+10 Partnership Plan

African research centers	Chinese research centers
South African Institute of International Affairs	China Institute of International Studies
Nigerian Institute of International Affairs	Zhejiang Normal University
Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Senegal)	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
African Economic Research Consortium (Kenya)	Yunnan Nationalities University
Institute for Peace and Security Studies at the University of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)	CCP Central Party School
Centre for Chinese Studies at the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa)	Shanghai Institutes for International Studies
Université Mohammed V (Morocco)	Peking University
International Relations Institute (Cameroon)	China Foreign Affairs University
N/A	N/A
N/A	N/A

SOURCE: “SAIIA Attends China-Africa Think Tanks 10+10 Partnership,” South African Institute of International Affairs, November 3, 2013, <https://saiia.org.za/news/saiia-attends-china-africa-think-tanks-10-10-partnership>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), “China-Africa Think Tanks: The Way Ahead,” January 12, 2012, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/xsjl/xzhd/t894943.htm>; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), “Initiative for the China-Africa Think Tanks 10+10 Partnership Plan,” October 2013, <https://saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Initiative-for-the-China-Africa-Think-Tank-10plus10-Partnership-Plan.pdf>.

NOTE: Partnerships are not listed in any particular order. At the time of writing, the final two partnerships had not been announced.

¹⁵⁹ “Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Speech at Opening Ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit,” Xinhua, September 3, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c_129946189.htm.

for an even higher-level comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership between China and Africa, create a strong talent pool for people-to-people exchanges between China and Africa, foster favorable public opinion for the friendship and cooperation between China and Africa, and make great contributions to building an even stronger community with a shared future between China and Africa.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), “The China-Africa Institute Established in Beijing Yang Jiechi Reads the Congratulatory Message from President Xi Jinping and Delivers a Speech,” April 9, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1654342.shtml.



Seattle and Washington, D.C.

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98105 USA
PHONE 206-632-7370, FAX 206-632-7487

1819 L ST NW, NINTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 USA
PHONE 202-347-9767, FAX 202-347-9766

NBR@NBR.ORG, WWW.NBR.ORG