

Spelling the end of Washington's leniency with Beijing The United States' return to Africa

By Abdelhak Bassou

Summary

The African arena is but an episode in the China-USA soap opera. Nevertheless, given the continent's significance in terms of opportunities for major powers, it is also a space where their rivalry comes to the fore. This is the lens through which the beginning of Africa's return to the American agenda can be seen.

Introduction

The advent of Donald Trump's presidency of the United States of America brought the tensions between the United States and China to the fore. The US President stands out for his crude and straightforward manner, his disregard for political correctness, where other presidents or world leaders surround themselves with diplomatic veneer and ceremonial maneuvers. His manner, however, exposes tensions that have been simmering long before him, with the same degrees of acuity. Trump's economic war on China has taken the form of new, tangible economic measures, but the climate of tension between the two countries goes back far beyond the era of the current White House tenant.

The Chinese-American rivalry is described by Henry Kissinger as characteristic of a common rivalry between an established and an ascending power (here the USA and China). Henry Kissinger cites a Harvard study that

showed that out of 15 similar historical cases reviewed, ten ended in war. Can this war manifest itself in the economic and commercial sphere? That seems to be the case with Trump's policy towards China.

The competition/rivalry between the USA and China is therefore emerging as a real geostrategic and geo-economic battle in which Africa is one of the main theatres. While the Americans do not expressly mention Africa in their strategic documents, various comments from politicians readily refer to the continent as an arena for China-USA confrontation.

Although China is considered to be the most well-established power on the continent, the latter also seems to be attracting the attention of the USA nowadays, with, as a declared motive, the interest of American businessmen in the continent's potential and, as unstated objective, that of countering China's advance in the black continent, particularly through its "Belt and Road" project.

An analysis of a report entitled: “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018” concludes that Chinese leaders are increasingly seeking to exploit economic growth, diplomatic dynamics and military might to establish regional leadership and expand their country’s influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. The same report also argues that countries participating in the BRI could develop an economic dependence on Chinese capital and that Beijing could exploit this dependence to better serve its interests¹:

“China’s leaders increasingly seek to leverage China’s growing economic, diplomatic, and military clout to establish regional preeminence and expand the country’s international influence. “One Belt, One Road,” now renamed the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), is intended to develop strong economic ties with other countries, shape their interests to align with China’s, and deter confrontation or criticism of China’s approach to sensitive issues. Countries participating in BRI could develop economic dependence on Chinese capital, which China could leverage to achieve its interests. For example, in July 2017, Sri Lanka and a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) signed a 99-year lease for Hambantota Port, following similar deals in Piraeus, Greece, and Darwin, Australia.”

To the Americans, China is seeking to influence the world’s politics and economy. According to Mike Pence, while China has long engaged in “American intellectual property theft” and the “predatory practice of forced technology transfers”, the real threat it poses to the United States lies in its ambitions to influence American public opinion, referring to the mid-term elections of November 2018².

1. Republican Senators, who blame China for ensnaring some poor nations in debt and then taking control of infrastructure, have urged the administration to develop an economic diplomacy tool to counteract Beijing’s influence in Africa. This is what led to the creation of the “International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC)” under the BUILD Act 2018.

2. Mike Pence’s speech on October 4, 2018, to the Hudson Institute. The American Vice-President notably stressed that: “China has launched an unprecedented effort to influence American public opinion and the 2018 elections... China wants a different American president. The Chinese specifically targeted industries and states that would play an important role in the 2018 elections. According to one estimate, more than 80% of American counties targeted by China voted for President Trump in 2016. China wants to turn these voters against our administration... Beijing has mobilized actors, front groups and propaganda outlets to shift Americans’ perceptions of Chinese policies.”

Is the USA now lagging behind China in Africa? If so, can it catch up? A brief review of the recent history of these two powers’ relationship with Africa is required before looking at the implications of recent actions.

China and Africa

China’s involvement in Africa, which is currently primarily economic in scope, was not initially intended solely for commercial purposes. Chinese-African relations were driven by a triptych:

- Avoiding the risk of international isolation, after the bloody crackdown in Tiananmen;
- Ensuring Taiwan’s diplomatic marginalization, by securing the backing of African countries and;
- Securing access to raw materials and new markets.

As early as the Bandung Conference in April 1955, China had expressed its interest in Africa and set out the guiding principles of its African policy based primarily on non-interference in internal affairs; respect for national sovereignty and peaceful coexistence. And what could be more attractive for a continent that was emerging from a century of colonization during which the West had interfered in Africa’s internal affairs, flouting the sovereignty of its states? Between the 1960s and 1980s, China focused primarily on developing a meeting of the minds from a political and ideological perspective and a sense of understanding towards a revolted continent. China and Africa were, above all, connected by hostility to Western imperialism and the Chinese tried to instill an aversion to Soviet “social imperialism” in Africans as well. It is not until the end of last century (December 1999) that China announced a pro-Africa policy through the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), which encouraged Chinese companies to seek opportunities in Africa. From just US\$10.6 billion in 2000, trade between China and Africa reached US\$170 billion in 2017, a 16-fold increase. In the first half of 2018, the volume of trade between China and Africa was already US\$98.8 billion.

A 2017 survey by the international consulting firm McKinsey found that:

- Out of more than 1,000 Chinese companies surveyed, 89% of employees are African;
- Over the past three years, about 48% of Chinese companies have introduced new products or services

- in Africa and 36% have introduced new technologies;
- According to the 50 African government officials interviewed, Chinese partners have completed infrastructure projects at a lower cost and in an efficient manner.

The USA and Africa

While still associated with Western imperialism, the United States of America, unlike Europe, is not a former colonial power. To Africans, the imperialist character of the USA dates back to the Cold War. During this period, several African regimes stemming from coups d'état or so-called social-communist revolutions initiated by the Soviets, established themselves as revolutionaries dedicated to deep-seated hatred of the Western world and, particularly, the United States.

The US African policy after the Second World War (1947-1989) focused almost exclusively on a single objective: combating the spread of communism.

During the 1960s and 1970s, it became apparent that the United States had a certain interest in China's presence in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia. A special report was prepared by the CIA in February 1972 entitled "China's Role in Africa," which focused on the Chinese-Soviet rivalry on the continent. However, this report cites among China's motivations in Africa, the reduction of American influence.

Nevertheless, as an increasing number of African colonies gained independence during the early 1960s, China stepped up its efforts to gain influence, mainly to match Soviet moves. The Chinese were also trying to counter the rival overtures of the Nationalist regime on Taiwan and reduce US influence on the continent. As Chinese

As a result, as soon as the Berlin Wall fell, Africa lost all strategic interest in the eyes of the Americans. It must be noted that from George Bush Senior to Bill Clinton, American policies towards Africa were either non-existent (G. Bush senior) or idealistic and paternalistic (Clinton)³.

'The African Growth and Opportunity Act', which was passed by Clinton at the end of his term in office, undoubtedly boosted trade between Africa and the United States, but the initiative remained selective both

in terms of participating countries and of commodities included.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Americans decided to redefine new areas of strategic interest, particularly in the fight against terrorism and diversify their energy supply sources, and Africa was once again included in the American strategy:

- Aid to Djibouti went from 3 to 10 billion. The Americans set up a regional counter-terrorism base there covering Al Qaeda in East Africa.
- The Middle East was becoming a high-risk area for oil supplies to the United States and American geo-strategies were turning to the African continent. It should be noted that US oil imports from Africa between 2000 and 2007 were up 63%.

The post-9/11 period had made Africa a strategic area for the US, which therefore strengthened its presence on the continent. While the Americans had consistently brandished peace and security in the world and a watered-down desire to develop the continent as their motivation, their true purpose was, as always, to serve the economic and strategic interests of the United States.

I. America's disinterest in Africa

The recent history of the two powers' relations with Africa therefore displays policies that are at least different, if not opposed. While China had already been gradually building relations with Africa since the 1960s, the United States had adopted an on again off again attitude in response to international circumstances and its own interests.

The latest changes in American policy towards Africa follow a period of American disinterest in the continent. Barak Obama, on whom Africans had pinned high hopes, eventually disappointed them. Donald Trump stood out, from the very beginning of his mandate, for his rude and indecent comments, which reflect not only disinterest, but almost contempt for the continent. Under both presidents, Africa seemed to be on the sidelines of American politics.

However, in 2018, the American attitude towards Africa was reversed and American measures towards Africa started to emerge, indicating an interest that, at first

3. See: "AFRICAN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES FROM 1947 TO 2005: FROM SELECTIVE COMMITMENT TO 'LEGACY' POLICY" Mamadou Ka; University College of Saint Boniface Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

sight, seemed sudden and unexpected but which, on analysis, was underpinned by Donald Trump's attitude towards other powers in the world, mainly, China. A report entitled **"Ethiopia's Strategic Importance, US National Security Interests at Risk in the Horn of Africa,"** dated September 2018, considers Ethiopia to be of paramount strategic importance to the US. Two countries are cited as antagonistic to American interests: China and Russia. In January 2018, the 30th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, provided President Trump with an opportunity to reconnect with African leaders and begin to shift the country's policy towards the continent. In his letter of 26 January to the Chairperson of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, to the Heads of State and Government, as well as to the delegations meeting in Addis Ababa, Donald Trump did away with the insensitive tone of his early mandate and stressed "that the United States respects Africans enormously" and stated his "commitment to solid and respectful relations with African States as sovereign nations".

In May 2018, the U.S. Secretary of State went on a five-day tour of Africa, which took him to five countries - Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Chad and Nigeria. Tillerson's visit was part of Trump's new policy, a policy focused on Africa.

This new focus of American policy on Africa has come into effect in three phases:

1. The appointment of a Deputy Secretary of State in the Office for African Affairs⁴

When he became President of the United States of America, Donald Trump had no qualms about displaying a near contemptuous indifference towards Africa. Although the US military continued to operate on the continent, the political administration and economic spheres showed no interest in Africa. Worse, the president displayed real or simulated ignorance of the continent to the point of mistaking the names of some African capitals or acknowledging that he knew nothing about others.

Several months after his swearing in as President of the United States, Trump had yet to appoint a Deputy

Secretary of State for Africa and several ambassadorial positions remained vacant. It is only in the second quarter of 2017 that the White House made its first move with regard to Africa:

- The government postponed the decision to permanently lift sanctions against Sudan.
- Cyril Sartor, of the CIA, was appointed senior official for Africa in the US National Security Council.
- Scholar Peter Pham, an Africa specialist, was shortlisted by the American administration for the position of Deputy Secretary of State for African Affairs. This prospect was defeated following the fierce opposition of Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, who considered that Pham was very close to Morocco and that this appointment would undermine the resolution of the Sahara issue.

It took a year for an official to be appointed to take charge of African affairs within the American administration. Appointed in May 2018, Tibor Nagy was heard and confirmed by Congress one month later as Deputy Secretary of State for African Affairs. He takes up his duties on 23 July 2018.

He seems to like his role and to have strong ties to the continent, built during his 20 years living there. He says he wants to look at Africa through the windshield and not through the rearview mirror. His recommendations for Africa were clearly outlined during his appearance before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives on 12 December 2018. His statement indicates that China remains at the center of American concerns: "... and China is asserting itself on the continent in economic, military and political arenas. We must remain a positive alternative and make it clear that engagement with the United States will mean greater prosperity and security for Africa..."

2. Adoption of the BUILD Act

On October 3, 2018, the U.S. Senate adopted the BUILD Act by a vote of 93 to 6⁵. The bill was signed by the American President two days later. This law establishes a new agency, the International Development Finance

⁴ The State Department's Office of African Affairs is responsible for developing and managing U.S. policy on the continent. Four pillars form the basis of American policy towards Africa:

- Strengthening democratic institutions.
- Supporting economic growth and development.
- Advancing peace and security.
- Promoting opportunities and development.

⁵ "Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development." The literature published on this law in the United States describes it as an innovative way to mobilize private sector capital for infrastructure construction, first access to electricity, and job-creating businesses in developing countries, in order to reduce the need for US foreign assistance in these developing countries. It aims to modernize America's engagement in developing countries to bring it closer to a genuine partnership.

Corporation (IDFC). The broad consensus obtained by this law shows that while Democrats and Republicans have divergent opinions and philosophies on several points of American policies, they converge on China's economic influence in the world through its Belt and Road Project. While the law itself is not identified as a measure targeting China or its presence in Africa, it is clear from the timing of its drafting and adoption, as well as comments from key figures close to the project, that it is a tool designed to serve the United States in its rivalry with China in the world in general, and in Africa in particular.

BUILD significantly increases the United States' ability to provide the necessary funding for major infrastructure and other projects abroad, particularly in Africa, where China, Europe and others have been providing more funding than the United States.

The main and overarching goal of the IDFC is to close the infrastructure gap in Africa estimated by the AfDB to be between US\$13 billion and US\$170 billion per year. This deficit impacts the transport, ICT, housing, health and energy sectors.

3. Bolton's speech to the right-wing Heritage Foundation

On December 18, 2018, John Bolton, President Trump's National Security Advisor, delivered a speech at the right-wing Heritage Foundation in which he analyzed the US' new Africa strategy.

This strategy has a twofold target. To neutralize the actions of the two rivals, China and Russia, which "deliberately and aggressively target their investments in the region to increase their comparative advantages over the United States".

Bolton's speech is structured around three objectives:

- **Redirect American aid to Africa.** The US administration is increasingly mindful of the outcomes of its aid to Africa. The United States conditions its support to countries on the continent on a requirement of good performance in terms of governance, to guarantee stability and transparency; and economic development, to ensure social peace and security and lead to lasting peace. According to John Bolton, the old model of assistance is over, as it can be summarized as "aid with no effect, assistance

with no accountability and relief without reform."

- **Reduce, if not cut, US contributions to peacekeeping operations, half of which are directed to Africa**⁶. The US is questioning UN peacekeeping missions, some of which have lasted for years without achieving concrete results. This approach seems to express the USA's intention to no longer finance peace and ensure a climate of stability that is more to China's advantage.
- **Stigmatize China's and Russia's actions in Africa.** Bolton is quick to blame China for resorting to "bribes, opaque agreements and the strategic use of debt to keep African states captive to Beijing's demands"⁷. As for the Russians, they are accused of trading "arms and energy sales for votes at the United Nations". The US official blames the two countries for slowing economic growth in Africa, threatening the financial independence of African countries, and hindering US investment opportunities.

II. The case of Ethiopia. A key piece in the Chinese BRI Project, and an important focus for the USA

1. Ethiopia as viewed by China

The CIA suspected links between China and Ethiopia as early as the 1970s. Its report of 28 March 1977, entitled "The Ethiopian Revolution and its implications," uncovered small deliveries of Chinese weapons to Ethiopia - even if the volume of these deliveries did not equal that of the Soviets - and pointed to possible future relations between the two countries.

6. "The United States will no longer provide indiscriminate assistance across the entire continent, without focus or prioritization. And, we will no longer support unproductive, unsuccessful, and unaccountable U.N. peacekeeping missions." Bolton said in his December 13 speech.

7. This may well be illustrated in the case of the port of Mombassa: the Kenyan government may be forced to hand over the management of its main port to its Chinese creditor. The loan in question is estimated at €4.3 billion, which was used to finance the construction of two sections of the railway line between Nairobi and Mombassa.

90. The military regime, as part of its general campaign to improve ties with Communist countries, has expanded Ethiopian contacts with China. Peking is the largest single source of Communist economic assistance, and it has provided a supply of small arms and ammunition, but its arms aid—and its influence—is unlikely to match that of the Soviet Union. There is a strong ideological affinity between the Ethiopians and the Chinese; the military leaders view China in particular as a model for economic and social development. Over the longer term, we believe there are good possibilities of a closer Chinese-Ethiopian relationship; for now, these possibilities are limited by Ethiopia's immediate need to shift the Soviets away from their pro-Somali tilt.

The CIA anticipated an ideologically-based rapprochement rather than an economic or commercial one. The American Services' prophecy came true towards the end of last century and, at first sight, it was not particularly motivated by purely economic interests.

Indeed, given its scant natural resources, Ethiopia cannot stand up to comparison with some of its African peers such as Nigeria, the DRC or Angola. What little oil and gas it has is located in Ogaden, a dangerous region where nine Chinese workers from the Zhongyuan oil exploration office were killed and seven others kidnapped by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (FNLO) in 2007. Ethiopia is also located in the heart of the Horn of Africa, a high turbulence area⁸.

However, the ideological bond is not the only pull factor considered by the Chinese in their relations with Ethiopia. It therefore seems to have other reasons to appeal to China. The country's importance is strategic, in fact:

- Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is home to the headquarters of the African Union (AU) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA);
- The country controls the springs of the Blue Nile (Lake Tana);
- China considers the country's political stability (between 1995 and 2015) to be a considerable advantage.
- With the emergence of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, Ethiopia's strategic location became even more important to Beijing, as evidenced by the construction of the Djibouti-Addis-Ababa railway line.

8. For more information on the subject, see: "China and Ethiopia: between authoritarian affinities and economic cooperation by Jean-Pierre Cabestan, in perspectives chinoises N° 2012/4

Although landlocked, Ethiopia is a strategic country. Its position as a country with a certain stability in the midst of the geopolitical volcano of the Horn of Africa makes it a cornerstone of the region. This strategic position and stability are further bolstered by its demographic weight and the size of its territory. This strategic position takes on even greater significance with the Chinese Belt and Road initiative.

2. Ethiopia within the American strategy

A long-standing interest

American interest in Ethiopia is not new. During the Cold War, the two powers (USA and USSR) were vying for power in the Horn of Africa, a strategic area. Ethiopia has swung between the two, siding with one or the other depending on the situation. During this Cold War period, the United States never lost interest in Ethiopia, as evidenced by the large number of CIA documents, now declassified. One of these documents, dated May 1, 1976, acknowledges that relations between the United States and Ethiopia are friendly but not close, before adding that the country remains dependent on American military assistance, despite attempts by the Ethiopian council to strengthen ties with non-aligned and communist countries.

Approved For Release 2002/10/30 : CIA-RDP85T00353R000100280001-5

SECRET

25X1

VI. Ethiopia's relations with the US are generally friendly but not close.

A. The council has placed emphasis on strengthening Ethiopia's non-aligned credentials and broadening relations with communist countries, but Ethiopia's continued reliance on US military assistance restrains the council from seriously jeopardizing the ties with Washington.

According to the official US State Department website, "Diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the United States are important, complex and focused on four main goals:

- Protecting American citizens;
- Strengthening democratic institutions and developing human rights;
- Spurring broad-based economic growth and promoting development and;
- Advancing regional peace and security"⁹.

9. See: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2859.htm>

Recent American analyses¹⁰ of the situation in the Horn of Africa region highlight that:

- Eritrea, emerging from its isolation, thanks to the restored peace with Ethiopia, will seek to establish strategic partnerships with States that do not criticize Eritrea for its authoritarianism, namely, China and Russia.
- Eritrea's reopening to the world also threatens Djibouti, which will have to strengthen its ties with China, which established its first military base in Djibouti in 2017.
- China will seek to take advantage of its important role in the Ethiopian economy in the forthcoming privatizations in Ethiopia.

Recent developments

At the beginning of the century, Ethiopia was a key partner of the United States in the global fight against terrorism, particularly in the Horn of Africa region. The country has played a leading role in the fight against terrorism in Somalia, earning it not only the consideration of the American administration, but also sustained assistance in the areas of security and intelligence. In parallel, Ethiopia has maintained very close and privileged economic and political ties with China, to the extent that it has emerged as one of the nodes of the Chinese New Silk Road Project. This duality has never been reassuring to the Americans, especially since China's military presence in Djibouti threatened to extend the mainly political and economic China-Ethiopia partnership to security and defense issues. Such an extension could lead to the USA's irreversible exit from the Ethiopian theatre.

The American administration will therefore seize the opportunity of changes that occurred in Ethiopia in 2018, to try to consolidate American influence in the country more effectively. Indeed, recent changes are creating factors favorable to the USA in the country:

- The unrest in Ethiopia since 2015, which led to the weakening of the TPLF within the governing majority, was mainly instigated by Ethiopian nationals living in the USA.
- Most of the instigators of this unrest have now returned to Ethiopia and some are even in leading positions in the country.

¹⁰. See: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-09-12-Ethiopia-written-testimony.pdf>

- The new Prime Minister embraces an ideology that is closer to liberal democracy than to the Chinese political and economic model.
- The TPLF, which is close to Chinese ideology, is virtually marginalized within the EPRDF.

The USA has therefore found a way to at least level the playing field with China in Ethiopia. The country is once again at the center of American policy in Africa. The new Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Office of African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, told members of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee of the House of Representatives in Washington in September 2018 that the United States should support Ethiopia and strengthen its ties with the country. In the view of the US official, the country had undergone historic changes and needs the support of the US to consolidate its reforms. **Without this support, Nagy believes that the new Ethiopia will be vulnerable.** Reading between the lines, the words of the US official can be interpreted as also addressed to Ethiopia, to indicate that its only path to salvation is through cooperation with the USA¹¹.

In other words, Ethiopia stands out as a major arena for China-USA confrontation in Africa. The United States is putting much stock in the latest developments in Ethiopian leadership in order to strengthen its influence in the region. To this end, they seem to be increasingly involving their allies in the Gulf (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). How China will react and how far the China-U.S. rivalry can go, are the questions that are left outstanding and whose answers are likely to drive geopolitical changes in the region, in particular, and in the African continent in general.

¹¹. Hassen Hussein, a Minnesota-based academic and writer, said that resolution HR-128 adopted by the US House of Representatives, just after Ahmed Abiye took office, granted largesse to the Ethiopian government to help it resolve certain issues, provided the reforms were successful: "The new resolution reminds the Ethiopian government that if it fails in its reform, it can no longer rely on US generosity to contain problems at home."

About the author, Abdelhak Bassou

Abdelhak Bassou is Senior Fellow at Policy Center for the New South. He occupied several offices within the Directorate General of the Moroccan National Security where he was Borders' Division Chief from 1978 to 1993. He was the former Director of the Royal Institute of Police in 1998. He also served as the Chief of Regional Security (Errachidia 1999-2003, Sidi Kacem 2003-2005) and was also Head of the Central General Intelligence from 2006 to 2009. He also contributed to the output of several international organizations endeavors including the Council of Arab Interior Ministers from 1986 to 1992, where he represented the Directorate General of National Security in several meetings. Abdelhak Bassou holds a Master's Degree in Political Science and International Studies from the Faculty of Law, Economics and Social Sciences of Agdal in Rabat.

About Policy Center for the New South

Policy Center for the New South, formerly OCP Policy Center, is a Moroccan policy-oriented think tank based in Rabat, Morocco, striving to promote knowledge sharing and to contribute to an enriched reflection on key economic and international relations issues. By offering a southern perspective on major regional and global strategic challenges facing developing and emerging countries, the Policy Center for the New South aims to provide a meaningful policy-making contribution through its four research programs: Agriculture, Environment and Food Security, Economic and Social Development, Commodity Economics and Finance, Geopolitics and International Relations.

The views expressed in this publication are the views of the author.



Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.

Email : contact@policycenter.ma

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : www.policycenter.ma