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Adversarial Cooperation: Avoiding War with China Through Climate Financing in Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States and China have the opportunity to change the framing of great-power rivalry in Africa through strategic cooperation on climate change. Both the United States and China have an interest in addressing climate change and both countries are currently engaged in Africa. The United States has conducted counterterrorism operations for nearly 20 years and has been a leader in development finance through grants, loans, and technical assistance in Africa. China has engaged through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which focuses on building major infrastructure projects with speed and minimal conditions when compared to U.S. or international organization-led projects. There is significant overlap with the scope and mission of U.S. and Chinese development aid in Africa. However, each have their own specializations. Cooperation would allow for the United States and China to address climate change in Africa through a more effective and efficient process if both parties rely upon their strengths. Cooperation on development in the name of combating climate change would provide a necessary avenue for both Washington and Beijing to engage in positive dialogue. Positive engagement with China could improve the relationship between the two countries by operating as a gateway to a more cooperative coexistence, rather than one of tension or a new cold war.

There exists recent precedent for collaboration between powerful adversaries. In 2001, the United States and Iran cooperated to overthrow the Taliban from power in Afghanistan and in Iraq they coordinated using intermediaries to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In 2014, the United States and China formally introduced a bilateral climate agreement. These instances of cooperation amidst rivals provided a

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basis for both parties to move forward towards a more amicable relationship. However, due to domestic politics in the United States, these instances of cooperation were fairly short-lived.

For the United States, cooperation with China in Africa would be an opportunity to mitigate the effects of climate change in a part of the world that will face some of the most severe results of climate related disasters. It would also mark a shift away from the current U.S. policy in Africa that is focused primarily on security assistance and counterterrorism than on development. A framework for the region where the two countries utilize their comparative advantages would be far more efficient than the current policies of both the United States and China. The current U.S. policy is often disjointed and ad hoc, while the Chinese policies of the BRI are more concerted. To reach a successful cooperative framework for the region, the United States and China must build trust with one another within the region through coordination of resources and funds through their African counterparts to understand what needs investment and establish standards for how they should operate in the region. The strategy of the U.S.-Chinese cooperation in Africa would lead to a point in which the U.S. government uses its advantage in technology, technical expertise, and capital while China utilizes its ability to mobilize its manufacturing, diplomats in Africa, and speed for executing infrastructure projects. Ultimately, this would operate as an avenue for positive relations to grow between the United States and China in a time of worsening relations between these countries.

History of Cooperation with Adversaries

Since the end of the Cold War in the early 90s, the United States has been the preeminent power in the world. Yet advancing its interest in the 21st century often required calculated diplomacy with perceived adversaries – namely Iran and China.

US-Iranian Cooperation in 2000s

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the U.S.-Iran relationship has been hostile with few moments of cooperation or mutual understanding in the

21st century. The first instance was the Bonn talks in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks to work together to oust the Taliban from power in Afghanistan.¹ The United States joined a coalition that involved many major players in the region, but U.S. and Iranian cooperation on the matter was especially instrumental in overthrowing the Taliban and aiding the Northern Alliance. Through multilateral and joint cooperation, Washington and Tehran were able to reach their mutually shared goal in Afghanistan.²

The post-9/11 period of U.S.-Iranian cooperation was especially notable in that it proved Iran and the United States could, in fact, work together on issues of importance not just through diplomatic channels at the United Nations (UN), but also bilaterally through Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) cooperation with the Northern Alliance.³ Some diplomats present at the Bonn talks understood this period as a step towards broader cooperation or reconciliation on other issues.⁴

After President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Speech, in which he deemed Iran part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea, American and Iranian diplomats rarely, if at all, cooperated.⁵ However, diplomatic engagement did result in a win for the U.S. in 2007 after a meeting in Baghdad between diplomats from the United States, Iran, and Iraq. This meeting, according to Ambassador James Dobbins, resulted in a moderation of the behavior of Iranian backed Shiite militia groups.⁶

Of course, there were many avenues of cooperation between the United States and Iran during the course of the Global War on Terror that were not taken as a result of ideological and domestic political reasons. Two notable areas of potential cooperation – or at least coordination – were in counter-narcotics and border security.⁷ Had the United States and Iran been able to work on these narrow areas of mutual concern, the two countries could have generated opportunities for closing the gap on other areas of disagreement and moved towards a more neutral – as opposed to hostile – relationship.

US-Iranian Coordination Against ISIS and the Path to the JCPOA

During President Barack Obama's Administration,

the United States and Iran re-engaged – even if they started small and secretly. The permanent UN Security Council members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and Germany had worked to deny Iran the ability to obtain nuclear weapons since the beginning of the 21st century. But President Bush chose – more times than not – to reject pursuing a diplomatic agreement on the nuclear issue with Iran.⁸ President Obama, in 2012, opened secret channels between Tehran and Washington to work towards what would become the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal (JCPOA).⁹ This unofficial backchannel dialogue between diplomats from both countries opened the possibility for further engagement and coordination.

Through the use of backchannel dialogues, the U.S. and Iranian diplomats slowly worked on building a rapport with one another, which became a launching point for further coordination and engagement. While there were other parties involved with the JCPOA, former Iranian President Rouhani said “the two principal countries that had the most important roles to play were Iran and the United States of America.”¹⁰ The backchannel dialogues continued for about a year, when the United States, Iran, and other parties formally announced the agreement in late 2013. As a result, the U.S. government built its credibility with Iran by easing sanctions and Iran built its credibility by eliminating and freezing its nuclear stockpile.¹¹

When ISIL began amassing power and taking over land in Iraq and Syria in 2013, many countries in the Middle East and their partners faced a major problem. The United States and Iran were aligned once again against a common threat. The Obama Administration was repeatedly called out by domestic political enemies for “working with” and “enabling” Iran through its policy in the Middle East.^{12,13} While U.S. and Iranian officials deny any cooperation on their mission to drive out or defeat ISIL, there was indeed a level of informal coordination.¹⁴ The communication this time around was not facilitated publicly or through backchannels, but through Iraqi intermediaries. The United States and Iran would often communicate plans such as when and where airstrikes would be, and which groups would receive military supplies.¹⁵

U.S. and Iranian coordination against ISIL and

diplomatic engagement around the nuclear issue were successful insofar as ISIL was eventually territorially decimated and all parties complied with the JCPOA. After the parties finalized the JCPOA, there was a period where real gains towards security in the Middle East occurred.¹⁶ This lends evidence to the fact that a deliberate policy of engagement, coordination, and diplomacy with an adversary on issues of mutual importance can be achieved.

However, in the case of Iran, since President Trump pulled out of the agreement and ordered the assassination of the leader of the IRGC Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, Iran and the United States – even under the Biden administration – returned to a state of hostility with minimal engagement. It has been a deliberate policy choice of both the Trump and Biden administrations to attempt to isolate Iran by strengthening their regional adversaries like Saudi Arabia and Israel. This choice has likely caused Iran to only grow closer to other U.S. adversaries like China and Russia. These countries each have different goals and geopolitical motives for their actions, but are forced to be partners of convenience once again as a result of U.S. foreign policy.

US-China Cooperation on Climate Change in 2014

In 2014, the United States and China introduced a joint statement on how the countries can cooperate to address climate change. This agreement succeeded the Obama Administration’s “pivot to Asia” and preceded the Paris Climate Accords which nearly every country signed onto. Therefore, it is clear that both the United States and China view climate change as a significant threat that requires cooperation to address. The purpose of the agreement was not to bear the entire burden of tackling the issue, but to be peer leaders in a global effort by setting a precedent of international cooperation – even between adversaries.¹⁷

The climate agreement included many advances in the way countries think about addressing climate change. In the agreement the United States and China pledged to address issues unilaterally such as reducing CO2 emissions for the Americans and capping CO2 emissions by 2030 for China. The agreement is groundbreaking compared to the state of the U.S.-China relationship today, with regards to

the cooperative elements, which include:¹⁸

- Expanding joint clean energy research and development through increased funding of the U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Center.
- Establishing new projects to study CO₂ storage systems and enhanced water recovery to produce freshwater from CO₂ injections into saline aquifers.
- Launching a new initiative to ensure that as cities grow, and urbanization increases, that the United States and China share best practices in city-level reductions of CO₂ emissions.
- Promoting trade in green energy technology by lowering tariffs and therefore lowering the costs associated with trade.
- Establishing pilot programs on building efficiency, solar energy, and smart grids.

While many of the programs and goals of the agreement either fizzled out over time or never fully launched, the importance of the agreement lies in what it represented and the time in which it was announced. In 2011, Secretary of State Clinton wrote a piece discussing the “pivot to Asia” idea that has dominated Washington foreign policy spaces since. The U.S.-China climate agreement was announced a few years into this pivot, at a time when antagonism against China within Washington was high, but even while many viewed the two countries as adversaries, they were still able to issue a joint agreement on this issue.¹⁹ Additionally, both parties rightly admitted that the problem of climate change could not be solved without robust cooperation, especially between the world’s two largest economies and emitters.²⁰

The results of the program today can hardly be seen, outside of the rough idea that both the U.S. and China should address climate change and lower their greenhouse gas emissions. What was a cooperative agreement in 2014 created by the Obama Administration and Chinese President Xi Jinping has instead been replaced by competition if not outright hostility from Washington. Individuals crafting economic and foreign policy within the

Biden Administration – like Brian Deese – have been calling for a climate policy that focuses on economically containing China, so that the United States can be the sole global leader in addressing climate change.²¹ As it stands, there seems to be little evidence that under the next Trump Administration there will be positive movement on addressing climate change even domestically.²² But China is still led by Xi who believes climate change is an extremely important issue to address both domestically and internationally.²³

Lessons for Today

U.S.-Iran cooperation and coordination against the Taliban and ISIL show that the United States can work with a historical adversary on areas of mutual interest. The JCPOA highlights the importance of diplomacy in curbing hostility. The 2014 U.S.-China climate agreement indicates the ability for the U.S. in a post-Cold War context to cooperate with another great power, even as tensions between the countries began to rise. These cases collectively illustrate that pragmatism and shared goals can enable collaboration between adversaries, fostering progress in critical areas.

Africa In Times of Great Power Competition

In the period following decolonization in Africa, both the United States and the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) attempted to make inroads with the newly created states. Both relied on the fact that they were not former colonizers on the continent. The U.S.S.R. also utilized the fact that there was overlap between socialist struggles and anti-imperialist struggles in Africa. The United States and the Soviet Union operated under the assumption of a zero-sum world, in that, any country that was squarely in the capitalist camp was a loss for the Soviet Union and any country that was governed by socialists was a loss for the United States.²⁴ This inevitably led to each country taking to foreign interference and meddling. The United States and the U.S.S.R. engaged in backing rebellions, client states, staging coups, and assassinations if it undermined the other’s plans.²⁵

While the United States and Soviet Union engaged in great power competition in Africa, many of the leaders of national liberation movements believed in Third Worldism – the belief that countries in the Global South ought to be viewed as equals to all other states and not pawns of geopolitical games of the great powers. Some examples of this belief included the Arab Socialism of President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt or Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in the Congo. Both wanted to maintain friendly relations with the United States and the U.S.S.R. This remains relevant today, because Africa and much of the Global South still believe in a form of non-alignment and attempt to engage positively with each of the great and middle powers to advance their interests.²⁶

Today, Africa is a potential site for great power competition as a result of its abundance of critical minerals, natural resources, and booming population. Today, it is the United States and China who are operating in Africa, seeking to improve relations with states, address climate change, combat terrorism, and open new markets for imports and exports. The United States engages on the continent primarily through counterterrorism efforts and, to a lesser extent, through development financing. China, on the other hand, engages through its BRI.

Notably, the U.S. strategy in Africa is disjointed and more a set of reactive policies, whereas China’s BRI is a concerted effort.²⁷ For many years, the United States engaged with development policy through ad hoc grants, investments, and loans distributed by various government agencies. The supposed fix to this was the Development Finance Corporation (DFC). However, U.S. policy has not been able to match the same level of coordination with regards to development policy as China; DFC cannot force or direct U.S. companies to invest in Africa like Beijing can.²⁸

The way both countries engage and operate in Africa causes many commentators and national security analysts in Washington to argue that the region is a battleground for competition between great powers. However, these goals do not require a hostile environment between the United States and China. In fact, on the issue of climate change the U.S. and China can and should cooperate.

US Counterterrorism Operations in Africa

During the global war on terror, the United States engaged in counterterrorism (CT) operations across Africa. Terrorist networks and groups posed next to no threat years ago when the United States began CT operations. However, over time these terrorist organizations have grown in numbers and strength despite an increasing U.S. military presence.²⁹ This poses an important question: what is the purpose of these operations and how can the United States really address terrorism in the region?

The United States has been conducting CT in Africa mainly through counter-terrorism training and U.S. military exercises, both of which do not actually work to solve the issue of terrorism and end up costing the U.S. government billions of dollars each year.³⁰ While it is far less widespread, the U.S. military does engage directly in CT in the region through direct combat and/or airstrikes.³¹ This, once again, has a high cost and potential for harm or death to American troops when the threat posed to the U.S. homeland by terrorists from Africa is marginal.³²

The CT policies of the United States in Africa have failed because they are not only ineffective at addressing the root causes of terrorism, but actively radicalize people to join or support terrorist groups. The training operations carried out through various U.S. agencies like the State Department and Department of Defense end up promoting and giving authorization to local police and military to target ethnic minorities and often lead to human rights abuses.³³ The active operations that the United States engages in use far more force than is necessary and most of the active groups regarded as terrorists in the region are “local insurgencies with exclusively local interests.”³⁴ An overuse of force from the U.S. military and U.S.-trained forces causes anti-Americanism and radicalizes people against the United States.³⁵

Rather than relying on military force to address every problem, the United States should understand the root causes and draft better potential solutions to terrorism in the region. Policing certainly plays an important role in addressing terrorism in Africa, but these efforts must be humane and actively avoid radicalizing people against the state.³⁶ The other most effective way to mitigate terrorist activity is through

an integration of a terrorist group (or the idea for which a group is fighting) into the traditional political arena, allowing the group to use conventional means to achieve their goals as opposed to resorting to terrorist violence.³⁷ Lastly, addressing root causes is also a form of long-term counterterrorism, potentially achieved through improving economic outlooks and addressing climate change.

US Development Financing in Africa

While most of the aid the United States provides to Africa is in the form of security assistance, the United States nonetheless invests in Africa to address climate change, promote small and medium businesses, and build infrastructure with many projects seeking to bundle all of the above. However, the efforts of U.S. financing in Africa are inadequate and fail nearly as often as they succeed.³⁸ Additionally, the United States relies upon many different agencies like the DFC or U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to address similar things, likely causing inefficiencies. Lastly, Africa will need roughly \$2 trillion from the international community by 2030 to adequately address climate change due to the continent's high vulnerability to climate-related problems.³⁹ The international community saw a steady increase in climate financing in the region from 2019-2022, but funding remains far short of the necessary amount and would require nearly quadrupling of annual financing.⁴⁰

The main agencies responsible for U.S. climate financing in Africa are the DFC and USAID which have made clear that clean energy is a major priority. U.S. climate financing in Africa is done through grant capital, direct loans, project funding, technical assistance, and risk insurance.⁴¹ All methods have varying degrees of success in their scope but remain short of the necessary work to address climate change and build resilience against the outcomes associated with it. The United States has all the relevant facilities and agencies to be successful in both public and private climate financing, it just lacks the funding and correct partners to work with inside Africa.

A consistent hurdle that U.S. investment faces in Africa is a lack of relevant partners in the region for

which to mobilize capital because of sometimes strict regulations and standards. The United States has been unable to address the climate finance needs even with requisite funding and political will within the U.S. government. Additionally, due to the fact that much of American climate financing comes from the private sector, risk plays an outsized role in leaving countries and regions desperate for financing without it.⁴²

Chinese BRI in Africa

The BRI was launched by Chinese President Xi in 2013 with the stated goal of promoting economic prosperity and mutually beneficial development, but outside observers note that the BRI is a tool of Chinese foreign policy to gain influence globally and to entrap developing nations in debt.⁴³ Others have noted that China's BRI is just a program of policies similar to those of other great powers.⁴⁴ Whatever the reality of China's BRI, it has built massive infrastructure projects in developing nations which require the type of international investment that China is providing. In this sense, the BRI is filling a gap left by the traditional Western powers.

Some of the notable projects that China has built through its BRI in Africa have been railways and deep-water ports across the continent. Both Western observers and local leaders criticized these projects in the past for flooding the domestic markets with cheap Chinese goods without providing the necessary economic benefits.⁴⁵ This evidence may give credibility to the belief that the BRI is purposefully ensnaring developing nations in debt and giving China free access and influence. But, due to the bilateral nature of each BRI project, the failures are more likely to be a result of misvaluation from policymakers and local elites' misconduct.⁴⁶ Additionally, China has sought to focus more of its BRI projects on "sustainable and community focused projects."⁴⁷

The earlier BRI projects that had some obvious concerns associated with the conditions were almost certainly a result of problems associated with Western investment.⁴⁸ Chinese investment and trade with Africa exceeds that of the United States and all major European powers.⁴⁹ Chinese projects also tend to be quicker, larger, and have less overt conditions than those financed by U.S. agencies or Bretton Woods organizations.⁵⁰ This has opened a clear

opportunity for China, which has the political will, financial capacity, and technical expertise to follow through on infrastructure investments.

The U.S. response to the Chinese BRI has been rhetorically strong, with policymakers from both sides of the aisle urging action be taken to counter China for influence in the region. However, this rhetoric has not translated into a successful countering of Chinese actions in Africa. Under the Obama and Trump administrations, the U.S. attempted to build up infrastructure through DFC, but the \$60 billion global investment portfolio is nowhere close to competing with China's BRI investment total.⁵¹ Under the Biden Administration, the Build Back Better World Initiative espoused many lofty goals, but the commitments totaled a measly \$6 million.⁵²

The lessons that the United States can draw from U.S. and Chinese engagement in Africa are clear. The U.S. government is spending far too much on military counterterrorism operations in the region, spending too little to reasonably compete with Chinese investments, and China is quicker and more politically willing to invest in Africa. Chinese lenders and firms that are involved in BRI are operating in much the same way as U.S.-based private firms; they want to minimize risk and win lucrative contracts. The U.S. government must recognize that commonalities provide an opening for U.S. and Chinese partnership in Africa around addressing climate change.

How the US and China Can Cooperate, Not Compete

Within Washington, Africa is increasingly viewed as the site of future geopolitical competition between the United States and China. The narrative of U.S.-China rivalry or even a "New Cold War" is also becoming the prevailing view. The continent is host to an abundance of natural resources and a rapidly growing population which causes some commentators to view it necessary that the United States beats China in Africa. Of course, these narratives deny agency to the states and individuals within Africa. Finally, Africa is likely to be hit hard by climate related disasters and

in order to ensure safety and security, climate change and climate resilience need to be taken seriously across the continent.

A U.S.-China climate cooperation initiative in Africa would serve the dual purpose of mitigating the impact of climate change while creating a framework for positive engagement between great powers. The United States and China are uniquely situated as the world's largest economies and Africa provides a good location since it is in neither state's "backyard." Cooperation could stabilize the relationship, which has grown more hostile and filled with mistrust from both sides.

Pathways to Climate Cooperation in Africa

Multilateral or bilateral standards: This is the most viable option right now (as it would require the least coordination between both countries and would entail coordinating details of where and how the United States and China invest in climate so as not to over or under invest in some areas or countries). Additionally, technology transfers would be coordinated through bilateral means or through organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Coordinating project financing and joint capacity building: The United States and China can also work to coordinate financing climate projects. One such case of this already occurring, although not bilaterally, is the Kipeto Wind Farm in Kenya.⁵³ The United States and China provide different specializations when it comes to their development mechanisms and specializations. Chinese projects often have a comparative advantage with regards to speed and scale, while the United States has an advantage in technical assistance capacity building work.⁵⁴ Joint capacity building can build off of existing projects that both countries pursue with local actors, as well as international organizations to minimize risks in investment.

Joint investment bank: This would be the least feasible of the outlined options due to the high level of cooperation and coordination of finances. However, if the United States and China were to start successfully cooperating on other pathways, the prospect of a Joint U.S.-Chinese green energy

investment bank becomes more likely. This bold pathway would allow Washington and Beijing to pool their financial resources and specializations into one organization that has the sole focus of providing green energy infrastructure and climate finance to Africa.

Outcomes of US-China Cooperation

Climate change presents an issue of common interest for the United States and China, potentially reducing the likelihood of conflict. Washington and Beijing can set this as a new precedent for international cooperation in other areas of mutual concern like public health, supply chain resilience, or regional stability. This relates to the theory of incremental negotiation, whereby two parties at odds can work to advance their interests where there is agreement so that they can eventually work on more contentious issues.⁵⁵ The idea of incremental negotiation and positive cooperation would de-escalate military tensions; this has been seen in recent history to work, notably with the United States and Iran, and should be a guide for how to navigate a future U.S.-China relationship – if the relationship were to devolve further towards conflict. If the parties opt to continue down the road toward great power rivalry and conflict, Africa will likely be a flash point. Given the current standing on the continent of the United States, compared to China, it would be in Washington's best interest to avoid turning the region into a battleground for great-power competition.

Other Positive Outcomes of US-China Cooperation

A U.S.-China initiative to address climate change in Africa would not only have the benefit of avoiding escalation between the United States and China, but would present an opportunity for the United States to achieve other aims in the process. First, if the two parties cooperate on climate change using some of the highlighted pathways, they would be able to increase economic prospects for the communities where infrastructure projects would be located. Chinese BRI often uses many Chinese nationals to complete projects and U.S. financing focuses on local business and government partners. Any sort of U.S.-Chinese cooperation would have to take into account the

necessity to hire workers from the communities being targeted, otherwise animosity towards both the United States and China would start to occur.⁵⁶ If the projects integrate, provide technical assistance, and promote local business into the projects, this would prove to be a boost to the local economies and also allow for African firms to take more of a leadership role down the line.

Second, addressing economic concerns and climate change would address some root causes of terrorism in Africa.⁵⁷ Climate change would intensify resource scarcity which is often a major driver of extremist groups and local or regional conflict.⁵⁸ U.S.-China cooperation would be better enabled to address the issues of climate resilience and mitigate the damage done from climate related disasters than if the United States and China were competing. Simultaneously, U.S.-China cooperation would address socio-economic concerns thus reducing the appeal of extremist or terrorist groups.⁵⁹

Finally, if the United States cooperates with an adversarial great power to address the existential threat of climate change, this would credibly demonstrate to countries in Africa that America truly is trying to solve the problem as opposed to using climate change as another means to score political points domestically and internationally. Many politicians cite the fact that China continues to emit more CO₂ than America does as means to avoid addressing the issue. However, it seems clear that Chinese leadership sees climate change as an important issue, and they are working to address it domestically and internationally. Working with China in Africa would also help the United States to improve its badly tarnished international reputation.

Conclusion

With Trump re-assuming the presidency, addressing climate change is set to be low on the list of priorities for the United States government. However, addressing the growing challenge of Chinese influence across the world is still a priority for Washington and Donald Trump has expressed an interest in avoiding outright war and downsizing U.S. military commitments abroad. Additionally, the initial days of the second Trump Administration appears to be on the path towards a soft reset on relations with China and observers from both the United States and China

are hopeful of a return to a more mutually beneficial relationship.⁶⁰ The United States has not been as present in Africa when compared to China and can address some major policy priorities by cooperating with China on climate change related development. Such priorities include addressing root causes of instability and terrorism, improving U.S. relations with African nations, and maintaining access to import and export markets for U.S. businesses. Most importantly, however, is that opting into a cooperative framework with China on climate change development in Africa will allow for the United States to keep positive diplomatic channels open – even if relations otherwise turn sour.

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