

The first month of Donald Trump’s presidency has raised the specter of heightened competition between China and the United States. The tensions have been at their peak over issues involving the two countries’ trade policies, their roles in the South China Sea, and their policies toward Taiwan. But in Africa, too, Trump’s team appears concerned about competing with China, which is the continent’s largest trading partner. Among a list of questions that the president’s transition staff submitted to the State Department about U.S. policy in Africa was one that asked, “Are we losing out to the Chinese?”

Many officials in Beijing and African capitals likewise believe that China and the United States are locked in a zero-sum competition on the continent. Such views have been common since the 1990s, when China began to accelerate its engagement with Africa by building infrastructure, investing in natural resources and other sectors, and increasing its foreign aid contributions to the region.

These attitudes, however, gloss over the opportunities that China and the United States have to work together. Despite the inevitable competition between the two countries, Beijing and Washington can still cooperate on issues where they share interests. In Africa, it should be clear to both sides that their shared priorities dwarf their differences—and that these priorities are also held by many on the continent.

Africans, Americans, and Chinese broadly agree on the importance of supporting economic growth and development, combating disease, mitigating conflict, enhancing political stability, and fighting violent extremism and organized crime. Because the basic objectives of China, the United States, and African states overlap, collaboration can offer real benefits to all three. What is more, coordination among Beijing, Washington, and African capitals is not as quixotic as it may sound.

Together with the African Union and the subregional Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the United States and China have already been working closely on the peace processes in Sudan and South Sudan, easing the contention between the two states over oil, urging South Sudan’s two warring parties toward peace, and generally seeking to reduce the tensions between Sudan and its southern neighbor. Since 2010, China and the United States have coordinated their efforts in a successful antipiracy operation off the Horn of Africa. And in West Africa, Beijing and Washington worked together to help the region overcome the Ebola crisis that erupted in 2014.

Chinese and U.S. officials alike have pledged to step up their cooperation on the continent in recent years. Yet only a few U.S.–Chinese projects are currently underway in Africa, and there as elsewhere, the two countries risk drifting apart. Given the overlapping interests of Africans, Americans, and Chinese, there is still much to do together, especially when it comes to peace and security issues. By cooperating on peacebuilding, working together on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, and addressing the causes and consequences of violent extremism in the Sahel and Sahara, African states and their Chinese and American partners can help create a more stable, more prosperous continent—to the benefit of the countries involved, their relationships, and the rest of the world.

Supporting Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping operations are a pillar of Africa’s security. The U.N. spends more than 80 percent of its annual peacekeeping budget on the continent, and China and the United States play essential roles in supporting its efforts. Beijing has sent some 2,600 Chinese citizens to serve as U.N. peacekeepers in Mali,

peacekeepers are not an appropriate option—as when the goal is to end a conflict by subduing the combatants, instead of keeping the peace by policing them—China and the United States should encourage the U.N. Security Council to fund the AU’s deployment of its own troops. Improvised steps such as appointing special envoys—a role that three of us have held

Maritime Centers called for by the Yaoundé Code, which are charged with facilitating cooperation in the Gulf, is fully operational yet.

The next step should be for West and Central African states to establish a forum in which they can regularly exchange information about maritime activities. A similar information-sharing body already exists in the Gulf of Aden; it meets monthly to coordinate the work of the various organizations and countries securing those waters. Once it's operational, the Interregional Cooperation Center called for by the Yaoundé Code could establish and lead a similar forum for West and Central Africa. This is where China and the United States should get involved: The two countries could use the forum to coordinate the maritime security support programs that each provides to the region's states, making everyone's work more efficient. Such steps could help to stabilize the vast, vulnerable, and valuable ocean corridor that stretches from Angola to Senegal.

Tackling Terror, Together

North of the Gulf of Guinea, at the intersection of West Africa and the Sahel, climate change, food insecurity, unemployment, radical ideologies, and the harm caused by trafficking networks have spawned a wide range of extremist groups. Organizations such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and Boko Haram, which have carried out attacks in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger, pose an enormous challenge to the region's security. Boko Haram, the world's deadliest terrorist organization, has disrupted food and industrial production throughout northeastern Nigeria and has caused a major humanitarian crisis there and in the neighboring states.

Here, too, Beijing and Washington have a role to play. Officials from the area's subregional

Win-win-win

These are just a few of the dozens of areas of potential cooperation among China, the United States, and African governments. But it is also vital to be clear-eyed about where collaboration is probably not possible. Mistrust, military rivalry, commercial competition, and different approaches to governance have long characterized Chinese–U.S. relations. In Africa, too, Beijing’s and Washington’s

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