

An Analysis of the U.S. and China's Africa Support Strategy: Centering on Development Cooperation

by SONG Jisun

Assistant Professor, Dept. of International Economy, Trade and Development Studies

I. Introduction

The deepening strategic competition between the United States of America (hereafter, the U.S.) and China is also taking place in Africa, with the two countries carrying out active development cooperation diplomacy. Not only did high-level visitation by the two countries increase in recent years, but both the U.S. and China have announced strategic documents specifically targeting the region. On one hand, President Joe Biden announced the U.S. Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa in August 2022 and hosted the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022. On the other hand, President Xi Jinping announced the Global Development Initiative (hereafter, GDI), a global initiative that also covers Africa, in September 2021. In comparison to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), GDI is more centered around development finance similar to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)'s Official Development Assistance (ODA). China also hosted the 8th Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (hereafter, FOCAC) in November 2021 and adopted the Dakar Action Plan as well as the Dakar Declaration as the outcome document.

Africa is a key partner region for both the U.S. and China in terms of development cooperation. With Africa being the largest foreign aid recipient region, both countries have highlighted the provision of development

cooperation elements such as grant aid, humanitarian assistance, and technical assistance in their strategies toward the continent. Thus, development cooperation will be vital to both countries in implementing their respective strategies in the region.

II. Key Features of the U.S. and China's Strategies toward Africa: With a Focus on Development Cooperation

The aforementioned strategies can be understood as the two countries' efforts to strengthen their diplomatic engagement and influence in Africa and fortify leadership in the global governance system while keeping each other in check. Objective-wise, both countries laid out similar goals of promoting sustainable development in Africa and addressing the global challenges of health, climate change, etc. Both also stressed the importance of mutual partnership with Africa in implementing the strategy.

Similarities between the U.S. and China's strategies toward Africa can also be found in how they support Africa's socio-economic domains and their mobilization of public and private development finance. For instance, both countries stated their will to support various and comprehensive socio-economic sectors including health, climate, digital, and trade. They also

emphasized the provision of public development finance, including ODA, as well as private sector participation. Moreover, both countries expressed their intent to provide support based on the development needs of the region and thereby help Africa realize the development goals stated in the Agenda 2063 of the African Union.

However, the U.S. and China showed fundamental differences in terms of their development cooperation principles and values. While the U.S. and China stated that they will not dictate or interfere with Africa's choices or affairs, the U.S. selected fostering openness and open societies, delivering democratic and security dividends as two of the four strategic objectives. In addition, the strategy included the U.S. government's aim to work with other stakeholders including civil society and multilateral institutions. Some of the key values underpinning the U.S.' activities and partnerships include transparency, accountability, diversity, equality and equity, women's rights, and inclusivity. As for China, it stated through GDI that China's development cooperation is based on a people-centered and development-first approach, which will ultimately help improve people's well-being. However, it did not explicitly state gender, democracy, transparency, or accountability, which are some of the key values emphasized by traditional donors and DAC members. Rather, the Dakar Declaration of the 8th FOCAC mentioned that China is committed to non-interference in Africa's development paths, no-imposition of its will, no-political-strings-attached assistance, and no-political-gain-seeking investment and financing cooperation in Africa.

A review of the U.S. and China's strategies and approaches toward sustainable development in Africa implies the following. First, the utilization of development cooperation elements to reinforce their engagement in the region show that both countries' development cooperation will strategically reflect their diplomatic and security interests.

Second, as a soft power instrument, development cooperation can play a crucial role in successfully executing the strategy. For China, it may also be used to offset opposition to BRI, which mainly provides non-ODA-like development


finance such as loans in the region.

Third, stark differences in development cooperation principles, values, and styles between the U.S. and China will be more conspicuous in key overlapping areas such as infrastructure and digital sectors. In the process, both countries will stress their own development cooperation as a better and more sustainable alternative. For instance, while the U.S. did not explicitly point fingers at China, it mentioned in the memorandum on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, which the U.S. will also leverage in Africa, that 'financing options that lack transparency, fuel poor governance and create unsustainable debt burdens' often lead to unsustainable results, unlike the U.S. approach characterized by quality financing and better outcome.

Fourth, the U.S. and China, the two largest foreign aid donors in Africa, are likely to gradually increase their development cooperation contributions to gain an upper hand and achieve sustainable development in the region. In the course of doing so, grant aid will be crucial. For example, U.S. foreign assistance to sub-Saharan Africa showed an upward trend in 2021-2023, and the Biden administration's request for foreign aid to the region increased by \$380 million between 2022 and 2023. China also allocated the largest share (44.7%) of its foreign aid to Africa in 2013-2018. Both countries also underscored the importance of mobilizing development finance from the private sector.

III. Policy Recommendations for Korea

It is crucial that Korea takes careful note of the strategic competition among major donors, particularly the U.S. and China, in Africa. The Korean government has expressed its will to bolster Korea's development cooperation diplomacy in Africa, the second largest recipient of the country's ODA. To achieve the said goals, Korea should further advance its development cooperation by clarifying Korea's diplomatic and development cooperation goals in Africa respectively, and creating better linkages between relevant

diplomatic and ODA strategies. Furthermore, the quality of Korea's development cooperation should be upgraded by creating synergies with other diplomatic resources and networks while fostering regional experts. Moreover, Korea should enhance cooperation with other major donors and multilateral institutions in the region. Lastly, Korea should build wider and deeper networks in Africa via high-level visits and special summits. 

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and are not to be construed as representing those of IFANS.

The Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security
(IFANS)

Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Republic of Korea

Nambusunhwanro 2572, Seocho-gu, Seoul 06750
E-mail: research@mofa.go.kr