

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

China's Approach to the Red Sea States

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. Subject: China's Approach to the Red Sea States.

2. Purpose: This paper aims to present the results of the CSAG's analysis of China's Approach to the Red Sea States, including the "5-No Approach" to the African countries.

3. Observations & Facts:

- a. The basis of China's objectives and actions in the Red Sea arena today resides in its economic engagement in the region.
- b. States in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa have broadly welcomed China's expanding economic presence, which also comes with diplomatic, cultural, and military (dual-use) engagement.
- c. Due to China's economic prominence in the region, its international policy aims have gained political backing. Saudi Arabia along with the other GCC countries¹, indicated support for China's "One China" policy in the joint statement made after the China-GCC Summit¹.
- d. Many countries want to diversify their suppliers (e.g. while maintaining its partnership with the US, Egypt also cooperates with Russia and China, including the defense industry) and do not want to have to choose between the US and China. However, some countries with no other option (although not the case for wealthy GCC countries) have to make deals with China and attract investment.
- e. In order to avoid isolating the Red Sea partners, China generally does not get involved in Middle Eastern conflicts, with the noteworthy exception of its recent efforts for mediating relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- f. China tailors the planning and implementation of its investments in countries by taking into account the needs of these countries.
- g. Even though China is not the main arms supplier to states in the Red Sea region, the majority of these states have purchased significant amounts of arms from China during the past 20 years.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping Attends First China-GCC Summit and Delivers Keynote Speech, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202212/t20221210_10988406.html, (accessed Mar 3, 2023)

This trend will likely continue considering China's increasing technology and appetite for the defense industry. Even so, China's role in supplying arms to the Gulf States is insignificant compared to that of the US, which is the biggest arms exporter to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.

- h. When countries have to choose between their long-term and near-term objectives, they give priority to the near-term ones. This situation results in countries with limited financial resources to cooperate with China under certain conditions.

4. **China's "5-No Approach" to African Countries:**

- a. China has the "5-No Approach"² toward African countries. Countries that see China as a supplier and accept its investments may need to consider how realistic the approach listed below is and what consequences it might have.
 - a. No interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions;
 - b. No interference in African countries' internal affairs;
 - c. No imposition of China's will on African countries;
 - d. No attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa;
 - e. No seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa.
- b. China may not be acting in good faith when providing loan to countries. Countries need to be careful not to fall into the debt trap. In one such case, China is claiming land from Tajikistan in return for providing support to Tajikistan during its challenging times.

5. **Conclusion**

- a. The Red Sea arena directly impacts US economic and security interests, given effects such as regional instability, terrorism, and China's growing military presence.
- b. With escalating tensions between the US and China, the prospect of cooperation between them is dwindling; regardless, the US faces a complex balancing act that calibrates its policy towards China in the Red Sea arena.
- c. China will continue to benefit and rely on the combined task force (led by the US Navy) and others to secure SLOCs in the region.
- d. China is likely to refrain from supplying weapons in quantities that could tilt the balance in favor of one side or another in a number of regional rivalries in the foreseeable future.
- e. Especially for African countries, the fact that countries may start to purchase complicated equipment such as guided ammunition, air defense system, or aircraft from China may put the position of the US, which is the main supplier, into the background.
- f. While China has so far shown no interest in becoming the region's main security provider, that doesn't mean it won't happen in the future, especially given the 'dual-use' nature of Chinese assets in the region.
- g. The US does not aim to establish a balance between the countries with which it cooperates or provides support. However, China's approach is different from that of the United States. China maintains a balance between the countries it does FMS with. It even provides weapons in a way

² Liangyu, Xinhuanet, China's "Five-No" Approach Demonstrates Real Friendship Toward Africa: Kenyan Analyst http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/06/c_137447556.htm, (accessed Mar 3, 2023)

that does not disturb the balance. In this context, appearing as a "balancing power" may give China an advantage internationally.

- h. Unless a severe threat directly affects China's security and economic interests, it seems unlikely that its policy toward the area will change.
- i. Although it has a large "say-do gap", China will continue its non-intervention policy and economic engagement to gain friends and influence in the Red Sea arena.
- j. Potential Sino-Russian cooperation in the Red Sea arena might be a cause for concern, although the scope and durability of the two countries' partnership are still up for debate.
- k. The main recommendation for the US would be to consider China's "5-No Approach" and to explore counter-narratives based on the facts showing the real role of China.