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China Looks to Cement its Future in Africa by Turning to the Past

Nairobi, Kenya -- Chinese archeologists are busy here in Kenya. They are working in the waters surrounding the Lamu archipelago on Kenya's north coast. Their goal is to find evidence of Chinese trade with Africa in the 1400s. Demonstrating such a link would show the world that China was here as a commercial and military power before the Europeans arrived. The fact that the 15th Century Chinese missions were conducted by Admiral Zheng's formidable "Treasure Fleet" is all the more important to the Chinese. As it seeks to rule the seas once again, China desires tangible symbols of its past as a naval power. Finding a sunken Chinese ship or coins in Kenyan waters would be powerful in this regard.

While the well-funded Chinese archeologists dive for sunken Chinese treasure off the coast of Kenya, Chinese sailors and soldiers on its largest surface ship, the LPD Kunlan Shan, are patrolling the Somalia Coast ostensibly to protect Chinese ships from pirates. By interacting with NATO vessels on EU anti-piracy duty, the Chinese are gaining valuable insights in to Western naval doctrine. Their current naval mission in the region is laying the foundation for a Chinese permanent presence in the Gulf of Aden where Admiral Yin Zhuo stated China may build a base.

Back in downtown Nairobi, China continues its multi-year road works project to repave Kenyan streets and build good will in this strategic capital. To the south, it is laying fiber optic cables in rural Rwanda. Chinese businessmen and tourists crowd the local hotels. A Kenyan taxi driver complained, however, about other Chinese initiatives in the continent that are less positive -- the markets are flooded with Chinese counterfeit goods, China generously underwrites some of the continent's worst dictators and often treats the locals shabbily.

Nowhere outside of Southeast Asia is China's rise as a global power more visible than in Africa. Africa's growing population, huge mineral and oil reserves and vast agricultural lands promise an important future for the continent notwithstanding its troubled recent past. China understands this potential and is planning to stay longer this time and leave a bigger mark than Admiral Zheng did some 500 years ago.

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