



Commentary

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China Expands Its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa

At the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and China-Africa Defence and Security Forum, Beijing showcased an increasingly strategic approach to its defence relations with African countries and its role in managing challenges to peace and security on the continent.

China's growing engagement with African countries got a publicity boost on 3-4 September with the latest Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The triennial event brought leaders and officials from 53 African countries and the African Union (AU) to Beijing for meetings that culminated in a resolution to continue strengthening ties and a renewed pledge of billions of dollars in Chinese loans, grants and investments. Over the past decade China's role in peace and security has also grown rapidly through arms sales, military cooperation and peacekeeping deployments in Africa. Today, through FOCAC and support to the AU and other mechanisms, China is making a growing effort to take a systematic, pan-African approach to security on the continent.

This rising role in security undergirds Beijing's economic statecraft and commercial interests in Africa, helps professionalise China's military and protect its citizens there, and furthers its ambitions to be a major power with global influence. The rapid pace of change is taking Chinese security policy practitioners into new territory. To avoid pitfalls for themselves and their African partners, they should deepen their expertise on local politics, societies and

cultures, and the dynamics of conflict and its remedies; better monitor and modulate how China's own engagement affects stability on the continent; and work more transparently with other governments, multilateral organisations and civil society to address problems.

Blue Helmets and Bases

In his address to the 2015 UN General Assembly, China's President Xi Jinping offered \$100 million in military assistance over five years to support the AU's peace and security architecture through initiatives such as the African Standby Force and African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises. The 2015 FOCAC summit in South Africa reinforced this commitment. In Xi's keynote address to this year's forum and in its ensuing plan of action, China pledged to channel some of that funding into a China-Africa Peace and Security Fund, military assistance and 50 programs in law and order, peacekeeping, anti-piracy and counter-terrorism.

These FOCAC initiatives will build on an increasingly pervasive Chinese presence in Africa's security sector, of which the most visible example is its growing participation in UN peacekeeping operations. Based on the UN's formula for assessed funding, which considers China's relative wealth and permanent member status on the Security Council, Beijing is now the second-largest contributor to the peacekeeping budget. Chinese personnel have served on missions in Africa for decades, but until 2013 they were small contingents in unarmed

roles such as medical and engineering support. China now provides more personnel than any other permanent member of the Security Council – they numbered 2,506 as of September. This total is fewer than the leading troop contributors – Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan each provide upward of 5,000 – but still large. Chinese peacekeepers now serve in infantry, policing and other roles in Africa. With the end of China’s fourteen-year deployment with the UN Mission in Liberia in March, most are in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Sudan and South Sudan, where they have come under fire and taken casualties. As International Crisis Group described in its 2017 report, China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan, the civil war in South Sudan also obliged China to nuance its avowed doctrine of non-interference to allow for more active roles in mediation and UN mandates to protect civilians – with the blessing of the AU and neighbouring countries.

Informed by those experiences, Beijing in 2015 set up a unique UN Peace and Development Trust Fund that the UN Secretariat manages. In 2016 and 2017, it allocated over \$11 million for UN projects that include building African capacity to train police and soldiers for peacekeeping roles, regional operational analysis for peacekeeping missions and support for the AU’s initiative to “Silence the Guns” and end conflict in Africa. Last year, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) registered an 8,000-member standby force with the UN. While remaining at home in China, these troops have completed peacekeeping training and are available for operations. The UN says 800 of them will join its new Vanguard Brigade, a rapid response unit. Beijing also has committed to provide police and helicopter squads and demining assistance, and to train 2,000 foreign peacekeepers. Last fall, Chinese production companies even worked with the PLA’s Political Department to launch a new television series called “Peacekeeping Infantry Battalion”, to dramatise the lives of Chinese blue helmets in Africa. These initiatives reflect a welcome

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interest in reforming and improving UN peacekeeping.

A more controversial sign of China’s military footprint is the 36-hectare Djibouti facility that the PLA established in 2017 with a ten-year lease at \$20 million annually. The PLA describes it as a support base for naval anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, peacekeeping in South Sudan and humanitarian and other cooperation in the Horn of Africa, but has also used it to conduct live-fire military exercises. In line with China’s 2015 defence white paper and counter-terrorism law, the Djibouti base enables the PLA to project force and protect Chinese citizens, supply chains and other interests in Africa and along its “Maritime Silk Road” across the Indian Ocean.

With those objectives in mind, in May 2018 China began constructing additional pier facilities at Djibouti’s Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port, which it has also helped finance. Many of the security pledges under FOCAC will likely draw upon Djibouti as an operational launching pad for joint exercises and training. As its regional role expands, the PLA would do well to communicate and cooperate more transparently with others jostling for influence around the Red Sea. The U.S., France and Japan have long had bases in Djibouti; Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have bases in the Horn; Saudi Arabia also plans one; and Qatar and Turkey have both shown interest in developing Red Sea ports. For its part, India suspects, not unreasonably, that other Chinese bases could pop up along the Indian Ocean.

Defence and Security Relations

Less noticeable to outsiders but broader in impact is China’s direct defence and security cooperation with African counterparts. This takes place through a growing number of joint

exercises, naval patrols and exchanges. In the first half of 2018 alone, the PLA Navy's 27th and 28th anti-piracy escort task forces reportedly visited ports in Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana and Nigeria, while PLA units conducted drills in the same countries, and its medical teams did work in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Zambia. Mere months after Burkina Faso's May decision to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, the PLA is already working to develop military ties that will likely emphasise counter-terrorism cooperation.

The first China-Africa Defence and Security Forum, held from 26 June to 10 July this year, marked a new, more formal and comprehensive level of dialogue. It brought senior military officers and officials from 49 African states and the AU to Beijing for discussions on regional security and military cooperation, and visits to PLA facilities for demonstrations of military equipment. Like FOCAC, it leveraged Beijing's convening capacity to build personal connections, market Chinese hardware and position China as a supportive partner.

China clearly intends to continue increasing such engagement, including through military training. Its Africa policy paper of 2015 proposes inviting thousands of African military officers for workshops. On 30 August, the Ministry of Defence confirmed that it plans further cooperation with African countries on personnel training, logistics, peacekeeping, health care and relief operations. As these initiatives move forward, China's Central Military Commission has expanded the remit and capacity of its Office for International Military Cooperation to manage them.

The 2018 FOCAC plan of action goes even further, calling for an ongoing China-Africa Peace and Security Forum and China-Africa Law Enforcement and Security Forum, and commits both sides to more intelligence sharing. It also pledges to support programs in consular services, immigration, justice and law enforcement, including running an annual anti-corruption course that aims to train 100 African officials by 2021. For police, there will

be more exchanges, donations of equipment and training, and formalised engagement with the African Police Cooperation Organisation. Chinese – and wider Asian – demand for African wildlife and its products, particularly ivory, rhinoceros horn and pangolin, drives poaching, smuggling and trafficking, the profits from which often fuel violence and organised crime across the continent. China's ivory import ban, which took effect on 1 January, was a welcome and long-overdue step, but it requires enforcement. FOCAC has helpfully added a three-year plan under Interpol to combat such activities.

As the FOCAC commitments note, China is complementing these cooperation mechanisms with more military assistance for the AU. In the first major disbursement from China's \$100 million commitment, it concluded an agreement in February to provide \$25 million in military equipment for the AU's logistics base in Cameroon. Beijing has also made small contributions to the AU's mission in Somalia and to sub-regional organisations. Still, most military assistance flows directly to countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe, where China also has significant commercial interests. A recent example is the \$30 million training centre that China completed in February for Tanzania's military at Mappinga.

The political and defence relationships fostered by these programs grease the wheels for weapons sales. Data compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that China has become the top supplier of arms to sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 27 per cent of the region's imports over the four year period from 2013-2017, an increase of 55 per cent over 2008-2012. Some 22 countries in the region have procured major arms from Chinese suppliers in recent years, key among them Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia. In June, China's State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence reported that Beijing now has defence industry, science and technology ties with 45 African countries. Given China's particularly

influential role in sales of small arms, light weapons and ammunition, it should do more to improve transparency, monitoring of end users, and cooperation with UN investigators to prevent those weapons from ending up in the wrong hands.

Drivers of Chinese Engagement

There are multiple reasons for China's growing security role and perceived need for an overarching strategy. One is simply supply and demand: the swelling capacity of its military and industrial base, and African governments' interest in its relatively affordable arms, flexible financing terms and comparatively unrestricted approach, including non-interference in matters such as governance and human rights.

China's own expanding economic interests are a further driver. Africa's largest trading partner since 2009, China increasingly counts on the continent for natural resources and markets to maintain its own growth and social stability. Its Belt and Road Initiative, which has metamorphosed into a global set of bilateral agreements to foster Chinese trade, investment and financing, first expanded into East Africa with infrastructure projects in Kenya and Ethiopia. The initiative is now open to the whole continent, and the Chinese are prospecting for opportunities in West Africa. As the new FOCAC plan indicates, that effort is stimulating Chinese concerns about piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and terrorism in the Sahel, as well as discussion of building local capacity to counter them. Beijing intends that the security-related programs in the new action plan support the Belt and Road.

Moreover, roughly a million Chinese are estimated to live and work in Africa, and China's leaders have a domestic political imperative to ensure their safety. Beijing has already contended with evacuations from Libya, South

Sudan and Yemen, and incidents of violence and property damage elsewhere. The 2017 Chinese blockbuster action movie *Wolf Warrior II* brought home a Rambo-esque fantasy version of these concerns. Set in a nameless African country that descends into chaos, it closes with the hubristic message that China's government will protect its citizens wherever they go.

Geopolitical and propaganda priorities are a further impetus. President Xi's lofty foreign policy agenda requires portraying China as a major power that provides public goods and seeks to rebalance global governance and give greater voice to developing countries. FOCAC supports that narrative by showcasing China as a continental-scale partner that tends to support African positions in forums such as the UN Security Council – at least when it suits Chinese interests. Xi is also determined to modernise the PLA, and giving it expeditionary experience in diverse African environments advances that ambition.

Chinese Aid and Investment and African stability

China's multilateral pledges to support African peace and security initiatives are welcome. But how much its overall footprint will contribute to improving stability is less certain. African conflicts' multiple drivers include not only state weakness but also political exclusion, repressive leadership and politicised institutions. Chinese economic and political influence could exacerbate those dynamics, for example by deepening debt, enriching elites, widening disparities, fostering corruption and stifling dissent – whether or not that is the intent. Security sector cooperation risks transferring methods and technologies from Beijing's authoritarian playbook, in which the law and its enforcers are instruments of party and state power rather than constraints on it. That might help African states impose

“Geopolitical and propaganda priorities are a further impetus for Chinese engagement.”

order and control, but at the cost of progress on accountable governance and human rights. Optimally, China and its African partners would match their laudable 2018 FOCAC pledges with efforts to address these concerns. Chinese and other scholars working on Africa have already floated a number of options for doing so.

First, in line with the FOCAC pledge to increase training for non-military personnel and deepen academic exchanges, China should continue improving its knowledge, talent and analytical capacity on African peace and security issues, for example through extensive field research by scholars and more participation by civilian personnel in peacekeeping. For policy practitioners, this effort should include engagement with African and international experts and civil society representatives on topics such as conflict resolution, early warning, peace-building and response to complex emergencies. While such learning is likely to move the needle of Beijing's policy only gradually, it could, over time, lead to Chinese engagement in Africa that supports the conflict prevention and resolution efforts of the UN, AU and regional bodies.

Second, the Chinese state could use its unique capacity to direct assistance, investments and loans to ensure they spread their benefits more widely, promote employment and corporate social responsibility and do not aggravate instability. The new China International Development Cooperation Agency established this spring could channel more assistance to challenges with security implications such as youth employment, climate change, public health and food security. China's policy banks could effectively fulfil the 2015 FOCAC pledge to expand special loans for small and medium-sized enterprises in Africa from \$1 billion to \$6 billion. China's law enforcement agencies could crack down on Chinese citizens involved in criminal activities such as illegal mining and trafficking.

Finally, China could engage more transparently and cooperatively with the full spectrum of actors involved in peace and security on the continent. As it widens channels to African

governments, the UN and AU, it should do likewise with other governments, civil society and the media. When it comes to the U.S., Japan and non-governmental organisations, given current levels of mutual suspicion, such engagement may need to start with informal communication and incremental collaboration to build trust and familiarity. That might include sharing good practices on technocratic topics such as aid effectiveness, project implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

If China's stepped-up military cooperation only reinforces incumbents and strengthens African security forces, in particular repressive and authoritarian regimes, that alone is unlikely to make Africa more peaceful. Of course, China is hardly alone in making that mistake — some Western countries have much longer histories of doing so. But as Beijing's influence grows, whether it uses its clout to nudge African leaders toward accommodation with rivals and addressing the grievances underpinning instability, or simply enables their entrenchment in office, will matter ever more.