Opinion – China's Expanding Security Footprint in Africa

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Over the past decade, China has substantially increased its security engagements across Africa – from peacekeeping and naval patrols to military training and strategic infrastructure – reflecting a broader shift in Chinese foreign policy from limited involvement to more assertive engagement. As Chinese investments and citizens spread across Africa, threats from armed groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and various insurgencies have highlighted the risks to Chinese workers and projects. Moreover, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea has endangered vital trade routes, thus becoming a concern for China – Africa's largest trading partner. So far, China has expanded bilateral ties, maintaining defense attaché offices in over 20 African states, and supplying arms through state-owned companies. Joint exercises, naval visits, and counter-terrorism training have equally deepened cooperation between China and several countries on the continent. Although Beijing claims to uphold the non-interference principle, its activities reveal a more flexible approach when its citizens and interests are at risk. In short, China's Africa policy has evolved from principled distance to cautious activism, laying the groundwork for its current security strategies.

By the mid-2000s, China began contributing to UN peacekeeping in Africa, gradually becoming a leading security actor on the continent. Today, it deploys more peacekeepers to Africa than any other permanent UN Security Council member, and is the second-largest financial contributor after the United States (U.S.). Over 2,200 Chinese personnel now serve in missions from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to South Sudan, undertaking tasks ranging from engineering to force protection, while China also provides funding and equipment to African Union (AU) operations, pledging support for the African Standby Force. This peacekeeping engagement, framed as empowering "African solutions to African problems," bolsters China's image as a responsible great power and provides the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with valuable operational experience in relatively low-risk environments. Beyond peacekeeping, China has expanded its security presence through naval deployments and military training programs. Since 2008, the PLA Navy has maintained continuous escort missions in the Gulf of Aden, recently extending patrols to the Gulf of Guinea, while its first overseas base in Djibouti opened in 2017, symbolizing Beijing's military presence in the Horn of Africa. Military training has also become a signature element of Chinese cooperation. In China, academies host hundreds of African officers while instructors provide courses on the African continent. At the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit, Xi Jinping pledged to train 6,000 senior officers, 500 junior officers, and 1,000 police by 2027, alongside scholarships for 500 young African officers to study in China. These initiatives strengthen local capacity while cultivating long-term ties between African militaries and the PLA.

Another instrument in China's toolkit is arms sales and defense industrial cooperation. China has become one of Africa's top arms providers, supplying a range of equipment from small arms and surveillance gear to fighter drones. These arms deals often come with training and maintenance support, and they appeal to African states by being cost-effective and usually free of the political conditions Western arms suppliers might impose. While difficult to quantify due to opaque reporting, Chinese arms transfers have equipped security forces in countries as varied as Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zambia. The broader context for this is China's use of military diplomacy to deepen relationships. High-level defense dialogues and frequent exchanges of military delegations have enhanced mutual trust. Today, more than 40 African defense chiefs have visited China, and military-to-military engagement is further institutionalized through the China–Africa Peace and Security Forum (CAPSF). This forum allows Chinese and African officials to

align perspectives on security challenges and discuss cooperation – all under the banner of South–South cooperation, distinguishing it from Western-led initiatives.

China also leverages development initiatives with security implications, notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although BRI is primarily an economic and infrastructure program, it carries significant security dimensions in Africa. As Beijing finances ports, railways, and telecommunication networks, instability along these routes threatens its investments, prompting China to engage more actively in efforts to stabilize the surrounding environment. Chinese officials frequently reiterate the "development–security nexus" – the idea that economic development brings peace and that security is necessary for development. In Africa, this has translated into projects like securing trade corridors and protecting Chinese-run installations. Furthermore, Chinese companies have built and upgraded police training centers, provided satellite communication systems for security forces, and even constructed the AU's headquarters in Addis Ababa as a symbol of support for continental peace efforts. In the case of Africa, the BRI is increasingly understood as creating a web of economic and security interdependencies that gradually integrates African states into a China-led network that blurs the line between development and security.

While China has become an influential security actor in Africa, African states and institutions are far from passive recipients of Beijing's security policies and strategic priorities. African agency plays a critical role in shaping how and to what extent Chinese initiatives take root. Many leaders appreciate China's stance of non-interference, and its willingness to provide security assistance without the political conditionalities often attached to Western aid. For governments facing external criticism or sanctions, Beijing's support – such as vetoes or quiet diplomacy at the UN Security Council – can be a valuable shield. Ethiopia's experience during the Tigray conflict (2020–2022) illustrates this dynamic. China echoed Addis Ababa's line that the crisis was a sovereign matter and opposed external intervention, a position welcomed by the government. At the same time, African governments guard their sovereignty vis-à-vis China and make pragmatic choices in their own interests. Ethiopia again offers a clear example. While China convened a Horn of Africa peace conference in 2022 and appointed a special envoy, it was the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) that brokered the eventual peace deal. China's envoy remained in the background, signaling deference to African-led mediation. The episode shows how African actors use China's presence when useful, but ultimately retain the lead in conflict resolution. Ethiopia also demonstrates how African states diversify their partnerships. Long regarded as a showcase of China–Africa cooperation, Addis Ababa nevertheless sought support from Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) when Beijing was hesitant to get directly involved in its internal war. This pattern reflects a broader African strategy of engaging multiple security partners – from the U.S., France, and the European Union (EU) to Russia and Middle Eastern states such as the UAE and Qatar – to avoid over-dependence on any single patron. Such multiple engagements allow governments to negotiate better terms, while public opinion and civil society pushback against aspects of China's presence, such as mining or labor practices.

African states have also reinterpreted China's security concepts. Though sovereignty and stability resonate with African leaders, they have adjusted these principles to their needs. Ethiopia again illustrates this: by exploring engagement with Somaliland for strategic reasons, Addis Ababa contravened Beijing's strict line on territorial integrity, prioritizing regional interests over Chinese preferences. Similarly, while African governments often endorse China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) in forums, they reinterpret it in light of Agenda 2063 and AU frameworks. Ethiopia's case demonstrates how African actors navigate Chinese engagement with a mix of receptiveness and caution. They welcome resources and diplomatic backing, but ensure partnerships serve their sovereignty and development goals. This dynamic means China's security policies in Africa are ultimately co-shaped by African decisions, adaptations, and at times, resistance.

In sum, China's security engagement in Africa has expanded from the margins of its foreign policy to a central feature. Looking ahead, the trajectory of China as a long-term player in the continent's security will be shaped by both its global ambitions and Africa's own agency. Any expansion of China's footprint—new bases, intelligence sharing, or mediation—will test how far African partners are willing to go with a rising great power that presents itself as a South–South ally. Conversely, Africa's evolving security needs will test China's ability to deliver in ways that foster sustainable peace.

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