BRIEFING

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# China's growing role as a security actor in Africa


## SUMMARY

China has emerged as an important economic, political but also security actor in Africa as a result of its 'Going out' policy officially launched in 2001, and the massive roll-out of its signature connectivity strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), since 2013. The presence of Chinese citizens and economic assets in Africa has grown substantially due to China's expanding trade with, and China-funded infrastructure projects in, African countries. Many of those countries are plagued by intrastate armed conflicts, jihadist terrorism or maritime piracy off their coasts. The rising number of violent attacks against Chinese workers, calls from the domestic Chinese audience for action, and surging economic loss are some of the factors that have compelled the Chinese government to react. China has shifted from uncompromising non-involvement to selective and incremental engagement in bilateral, regional and international cooperation on peace and security by nuancing, on a case-by-case basis, the narrow boundaries of its normative foreign policy framework, including the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries, that had made a previously inward-looking China for decades a free-rider on global security, provided by the US in particular.

As in other fields, China has pursued a two-pronged approach to African security issues, to defend its economic and security interests and to expand its influence in Africa. On the one hand, it has contributed to existing multilateral structures and instruments to foster peace and security. It has participated in UN-led peacekeeping missions to Africa and in the UN-mandated counter-piracy action off the Horn of Africa. Both have provided the pretext for China to accelerate its massive blue-water navy build up, to be present in the Indian Ocean and beyond and to set up its first overseas military base, in Djibouti. On the other hand, it has expanded its military presence by engaging African countries bilaterally through joint drills, military training, and military infrastructure-building and multilaterally through the newly created China-Africa fora on security issues.

Against this backdrop it remains to be seen how complementary or competitive the future EU-China security cooperation, which so far has remained in its infancy, will be in seeking 'African solutions to African problems'.


In this Briefing




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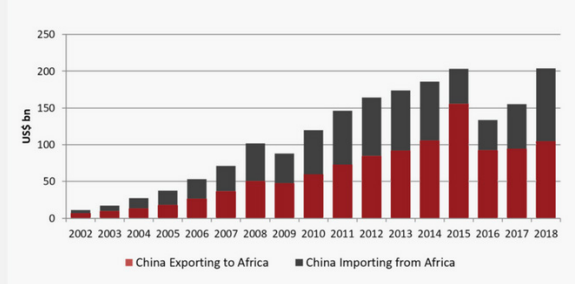
# Drivers of China's growing security footprint in Africa

China's growing role as a security actor in Africa is first and foremost related to its mercantilist policies and the resulting rising numbers of Chinese workers and economic assets present in Africa. The vast array of security threats that Chinese citizens face in Africa has compelled the Chinese government to step up their protection, in order to maintain the authoritarian one-party state's legitimacy at home. China's more recent ambition to boost its image as a responsible great power that provides public goods for the international community may be seen as yet another driver.

## Domestic drivers: 'Going Out' policy and Belt and Road initiative

China's economic engagement in Africa has grown rapidly since the formal launch of its '**Going Out' policy** in 2001, which encouraged at first mainly Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to venture abroad, both to gain access to natural resources and to open up new export markets for Chinese finished goods. Tackling energy security became vital in 1993, when China became a net oil importer and sought to tap into African oil reserves to diversify its energy supplies. Since China was a latecomer in post-Cold War Africa, the strategy of Chinese SOEs for gaining access to oil and mineral resources has often been to accept a higher exposure than Western private companies to security risks in conflict-ridden resource-rich African countries and to provide loans to African governments in exchange for access to natural resources. These deals have often been referred to as the 'Angola Model' and have remained for African countries an attractive alternative to loans from the West, as they come without any political strings attached.

Figure 1 – China-Africa, US$ billion

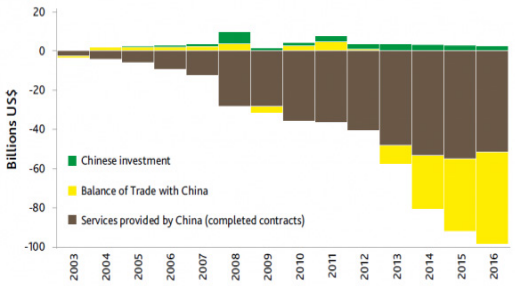



Source: China Africa Research Initiative, UN Comtrade 2002-2017, Chinese customs 2018 (accessed in August 2019).

Due to the 2008 global financial crisis, which also led to a steep decline in EU-Africa trade, in 2009 China became Africa's single biggest trading partner and has retained this position since. In 2015, the decline in global commodity prices brought about a downturn in trade values (see Figure 1). Chinese customs data for 2018 suggest that bilateral trade has since recovered and imports and exports are fairly balanced in value terms.

Although Chinese SOEs are meanwhile heavily invested in the extractive industries of resource-rich African countries, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) data from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) suggest that Chinese FDI in Africa has remained modest, particularly as a share of China's global FDI. Yet, these figures fail to capture the final destinations of significant FDI channelled through Hong Kong or offshore financial centres. These comparatively low levels of Chinese FDI, however, contrast with the surge in Chinese engineering contracts and the rising volume of Chinese loans (estimated at US$143 billion from 2000 to 2017) granted to African countries in exchange for access to natural resources or for large-scale infrastructure projects.

Figure 2 – China's investment, trade and service ties with Africa 2003-2016 in US$




Source: China in Africa: Goods Supplier, Service Provider rather than Investor, T. Pairault, July 2018, based on MOFCOM and UNCTAD data.

To illustrate the large discrepancy between China's trade with Africa and its investment and construction contracts there, Chinese FDI in and trade with Africa may be contrasted with the value of Chinese services provided to Africa, using the turnover of overseas construction contracts completed in one year as a proxy for services.[1]

Figure 2 shows that the turnover of Chinese construction firms in 2016 significantly exceeded Chinese FDI in Africa. This suggests that in 2016 China was an important service provider and lender to Africa, rather than a major investor in it.

A major driver of Chinese infrastructure construction is China's **Belt and Road Initiative** (BRI), which was launched in 2013 and at first only spanned eastern Africa. This policy now covers the whole of Africa and may be seen as an enhanced version of the 'Going Out' policy. The two policies have significant similarities, such as a focus on resource- and market-seeking. Large-scale infrastructure projects are usually based on opaque state-to-state debt-financed turn-key package deals requiring that contracts be predominantly allocated to Chinese firms without public tender. This lack of transparency may breed corruption and unsustainable debt. As of 2018, China has funded 18.9 % of infrastructure projects in Africa, while it builds 33.2 % of them. Hence, Chinese-built and Chinese-funded infrastructure projects are an important reason for the increasing presence of Chinese workers in Africa and their greater exposure to security threats there.[2]

Next to the state-driven dimension of Chinese migration to Africa, there is a growing presence of private Chinese firms operating in more stable African countries, which is largely under-reported by official Chinese data. A 2017 McKinsey report focusing on field work in eight sub-Saharan African countries that together account for almost two-thirds of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP, suggests that the setting up of manufacturing facilities that take advantage of Africa's low labour costs has become a strong driver of the growing presence of Chinese migrants working in Chinese private firms. Their involvement in manufacturing that primarily targets African consumers rather than export markets contributes to job creation and technology transfer, although sourcing is still largely done from China. Moreover, a 2019 report based on field research in Angola and Ethiopia challenges negative perceptions of Chinese firms' labour practices in Africa. African countries in general view China's economic engagement in Africa positively, as a chance for industrialisation.

## External drivers: old and new security threats in Africa

As the economic interdependence between China and Africa has grown, so has China's definition of national security interests broadened. China has become interested in securing maritime shipments along major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) linking eastern African to Chinese ports, against rising pirate attacks since the 2000s. Moreover, next to intrastate violent conflicts in a number of African countries, the actions of several jihadist groups, such as Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram operating in the Horn of Africa peninsula and the Sahel region, have threatened the security of Chinese workers and caused economic loss to Chinese projects valued at US$20 billion, thus necessitating a Chinese response. In addition, China's first-ever sea- and air-borne evacuation of more than 35 000 of its citizens during the civil war in Libya in 2011 made it obvious that China's lack of naval capabilities to operate in far-off seas had undermined its ability to protect its overseas citizens and interests. Hence, China's need to counter overseas security threats in order to defend its economic interests, preserve political legitimacy at home, and boost its image as a responsible great power has provided the pretext to accelerate the build-up of its blue-water navy capabilities for out-of-area missions in the framework of the massive modernisation of its armed forces.

# China's political engagement with Africa on security

In 2000, China initiated the **Forum on China-Africa Cooperation** (FOCAC), a triennial ministerial conference or summit that brought together China and those African countries that adhered to the one-China policy, for a structured dialogue on a range of policy areas; this range has hitherto broadened significantly. Although this seemingly multilateral regional diplomacy platform has served mainly as a tool for China to make bilateral relations more efficient rather than to strike multilateral deals, it has enhanced considerably China's visibility as a provider of alternative norms for global governance and has had a strong pull effect on African countries that still had diplomatic ties with Taiwan. As of July 2019, only the Kingdom of Eswatini, former Swaziland, maintained diplomatic ties with the democratic island. As FOCAC has gradually covered the whole African

continent, China's relations with the **African Union** (AU) and its **regional economic communities** (RECs) have become increasingly institutionalised, opening up opportunities for China to socialise Africa into its norms.

FOCAC has no permanent secretariat; it is organised and coordinated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which largely oversees the agenda-setting and language of the joint declarations and action plans. While financial commitments are unidirectional, some initiatives, such as the creation of the FOCAC legal forum, have been put forward by Africa. Yet, FOCAC – despite China's equality rhetoric – allows for an imbalanced power distribution between China and Africa (similar to a traditional donor-recipient-relationship), on which China can capitalise to maximise its influence. FOCAC encourages competition among African countries, which has made African policy coordination challenging. It has affected the 'agency' of African countries to leverage their diplomatic weight and push their own agenda. However, the FOCAC arrangements may be changed, in line with the 2017 proposals for AU reform, which aim among other things to reduce the number of AU members participating in FOCAC meetings and call for a united African voice.

FOCAC is embedded in the ideological framework of South-South Cooperation. FOCAC documents for instance highlight Africa's and China's shared experience of being developing countries with a past or present 'population dividend' and past victims of colonial or imperialist rule and of joining forces in resisting Western hegemony. This rhetoric stresses sovereignty-based political equality and non-interference in each other's political systems as the foundation of a 'new type of strategic partnership' between China and Africa to change global governance. This explains the absence of political norms and values, such as human rights and the rule of law, from the FOCAC agenda.

FOCAC documents regularly refer to the concept of '**African solutions to African problems**', according to which Africa should rely on its own resources for coping with its challenges. However, in the FOCAC context this concept, allegedly coined in the 1990s by George Ayittey, former professor for applied economics from Ghana, includes China's opposition to 'the interference in Africa's internal affairs by external forces in pursuit of their own interests' (FOCAC 2012 Action Plan), with a view to insolating African countries from Western influence and to building on the preference China shares with African authoritarian rulers for regime security over human security.

China's policy emphasis on the 'security-development nexus', based on political stability and regime security, is portrayed as an alternative to the Western development model, which stresses the need for economic development to be coupled with a robust democratic system to achieve peace. Given that since its 19th party congress in October 2017 China has promoted the emulation of its development model (the 'China solution') notably by developing countries, there is a risk that African countries' responsiveness to the EU's good governance policies may decline over time, although a 2018 study into Angola, Ethiopia, and Rwanda does not (yet) confirm such an evolution.

While security issues were relatively marginal during the first FOCAC meetings, they became more prominent after China's threats to veto UN Security Council action in response to Sudan's Darfur crisis drew strong international criticism and prompted China to nuance its rigid non-interference principle and to shift to a gradual and incremental engagement in peace and security in Africa. After the publication of China's first Africa policy paper, the 2006 FOCAC Action Plan announced China's commitment to work closely with the AU on peace and security, to support the AU's leading role in resolving African security issues, and to take an active part in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. In 2007, China appointed its first special representative on African affairs and started to hold regular political consultations with African countries including on security issues on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. In 2008, it launched a China-AU strategic dialogue mechanism; the seventh strategic dialogue was held in 2018.

The 2012 FOCAC declaration, strongly inspired by the Arab Spring and the removal of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 (as a result of the humanitarian intervention in the civil war in Libya under UN Security Council resolution 1973(2011)), announced a China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security. China's second Africa policy paper of 2015 elaborated on this initiative and led

to China committing at subsequent FOCAC gatherings to financial and logistic contributions to the chronically underfunded AU peace and security architecture (see below), as well as to stepping up the scope and scale of Chinese participation in UN-led peacekeeping in Africa.

As a sign of the growing relevance China attaches to security cooperation with Africa, Beijing hosted the first FOCAC **China-Africa Defence and Security Forum** in June 2018. The new platform brought together high-ranking military officials from China, 50 African countries and AU officials to discuss counter-piracy and counter-terrorism. Furthermore, the 2018 FOCAC Action Plan proposed creating two more **China-Africa forums** – **on peace and security** (the first such forum was held in July 2019) and **on law enforcement and security** – and intensifying intelligence-sharing, among others. It referred twice to the need to protect 'the safety of Chinese nationals, Chinese companies and major projects' and stated that 'China will support African countries in building "smart cities" and enhancing the role of ICT in safeguarding public security, counter terrorism and fighting crime and work with the African side to uphold information security'. In practical terms, this is likely to expand Chinese exports of new surveillance technologies to other African countries besides Angola, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. This raises concerns, as non-democratic countries may employ them against political opponents.

# China's financial support for African security bodies

## The AU and its regional economic communities

In line with China's enthusiasm for symbolic gestures and tangible results, it gifted the AU Headquarters' Conference Centre in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), built by Chinese workers for US$200 million, as a contribution to Africa's integration and capacity-building. The centre was inaugurated in 2012, one year after the AU became a full FOCAC member. The original Chinese IT equipment was removed in 2017, after IT experts allegedly noticed data transfers to China at night. At regional level, China supports the security-related measures taken by the AU's regional economic communities (RECs). Owing to China's extensive economic interests in eastern Africa, it has, for instance, supported financially the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and benefited economically from the latter's peace-building role in South Sudan.

### The African Union Peace and Security Architecture

Since the AU has failed to tackle several conflicts independently, not least due to a lack of financial means, China has started stepping up its financial and logistics support to different components of the AU Peace and Security Architecture (AUPSA), notably the military capabilities for conflict management of the **African Standby Force** (ASF) and the **African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises** (ACIRC). In the 2000s, China provided financial support on an ad hoc basis to individual AU-led peacekeeping operations at comparatively low levels (for instance, US$1.8 million to a total budget of US$466 million for the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) in 2006), once crisis situations became prominent. China in recent years came to announce bigger lump sums of military assistance ranging from US$60 million to US$100 million over three or five years at the 2012, 2015 and 2018 FOCAC meetings. Yet, according to a 2018 Court of Auditors report, China's funding has remained modest compared to the EU funding for operationalising the AUPSA under the EU's African Peace Facility and the Regional Indicative Programmes.

#### G5 Sahel Joint Force

After Burkina Faso severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2018, in January 2019 mainland China announced a grant worth US$45 million to the sub-regional African-led G5-Sahel Joint Force. The latter was created in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to improve the security situation in the Sahel region. The EU, which considers the Sahel countries a strategic priority, currently supports the G5 Sahel Joint Force with €147 million.

The 2018 FOCAC Action Plan announced the creation of a dedicated **China-Africa Peace and Security Fund** to boost cooperation on peace, security, peacekeeping, law and order, and 50 security assistance programmes. For example, US$25 million was provided for military equipment

for the AU's logistics base in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Parts of the funding pledged in 2018 will be allocated to ongoing AU peace support operations. These include the Multi-National Joint Task Force against Boko Haram and support for the police deployment component of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

China may also allocate funding from the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, which it created in 2015 on the occasion of the UN's 70th anniversary with a total budget of US$200 million for a period of 10 years. Peace and development initiatives in Africa are a priority of this worldwide fund. Apparently, China is changing its method of channelling funds for peace and security to Africa. It meanwhile uses written agreements and dedicated funds at AU and UN levels, which reveals a convergence with Western practices and an appetite for greater visibility and recognition for the contributions made. In November, 2018 China supported an African initiative to channel more funds from the UN peacekeeping budget to the AU. The United States opposed the initiative due to scepticism as to whether AU missions meet UN standards.

# China's evolving defence policy and legal framework

The rising number of attacks against Chinese citizens in high-risk African countries, and calls by China's domestic audience for decisive government action[3] have forced the Chinese leadership to gradually adjust China's defence policy, military strategy and security-related legal framework to the new realities of the country's enhanced economic involvement overseas.

Since the end of the 2000s, China's successive white papers on defence have referred to non-combat tasks of its armed forces – the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – such as international peacekeeping, evacuation and counter-piracy action, labelled as 'military operations other than war' (MOOTW), as well as to the need for the PLA to develop related operational capabilities. The 2013 Defence White Paper and the 2015 Military Strategy contain explicit language as to the need for the PLA to operate in far-off seas to protect China's expanding national interest. The 2015 Military Strategy states that the PLA Navy will 'shift its focus from offshore waters defence to the combination of offshore waters defence and "distant sea protection" and build a combined, multi-function, and efficient maritime combat structure'. The 2019 Defence White Paper confirms that China's overseas interests, which are 'endangered by international and regional security threats', are a crucial part of the country's national interests. Moreover, Article 71 of China's 2015 Counter-terrorism Law provides for Chinese security forces to participate in counter-terrorism missions overseas subject to host country consent. China's foreign policy principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries has been applied more flexibly in practice on a case-by-case basis to allow for 'constructive' Chinese engagement.

# China's security engagement in Africa and off its coasts

China has a military presence both in Africa and off its coasts. A link between these two strands of China's military involvement was established with the creation of the naval base in Djibouti in 2017. China's security engagement in Africa can be divided into contributions to UN-led peacekeeping, persuasive diplomacy and mediation and various forms of military-to-military cooperation.

## UN-led peacekeeping

China's stance regarding UN peacekeeping has evolved from outright condemnation to strong commitment to peacekeeping activities, which have become an essential part of the country's soft power. From 1971 to 1980, China opposed UN peacekeeping through non-participation. In the beginning of the 1980s, China reversed its negative stance after it approved the extension of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) under resolution 495(1981). In 1982, China started making financial contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget. In 1988, it joined the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (UNSCPO), endorsing traditional peacekeeping that follows a ceasefire agreement and is based on the three principles of consent of the parties:

impartiality, non-use of force except in self-defence, and defence of the mandate. China sought to carry out missions only with the support of regional actors. During the 1990s, China's personnel contributions to peacekeeping remained very modest. From 1993 to 1999, China deployed only a few military observers but no troops. Since 2000, it has added civilian police and since 2003 it has started deploying troops.

In the 2000s, China's diplomatic and economic ties expanded rapidly, specifically with war-torn yet resource-rich African countries, along with increasing scale and scope of its peacekeeping commitments. In 2003, China joined the UN mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (MONUC, since 2010 MONUSCO), where it has been interested in the exploitation of minerals. The DRC's request for a withdrawal of the UN troops presented a daunting challenge for China, as it had to decide whether the responsibility to protect civilians superseded the host country's consent. In 2013, China voted for UN Security Council resolution 2098 on the DRC, which allows 'all necessary means', i.e. the use of force. Moreover, China in 2003 joined the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia (UNMIL), where access to timber has been an important driver. The UNMIL is an example of China leveraging its veto power on the UN Security Council and peacekeeping capabilities to convince Liberia to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

After mounting criticism regarding the UN Security Council's inaction and China's policy of thwarting the imposition of sanctions against Sudan, given its significant oil interests in that country, China started its 'creative intervention' in the Darfur/Sudan crisis. It engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the UN, the AU and Sudan to secure the latter's acceptance of the hybrid AU-UN peacekeeping mission UNAMID, adopted with China's support under UN Security Council resolution 1769(2007). In 2017, China sent its first helicopter unit to Darfur. In 2013, China for the first time sent an infantry company ('security division') to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), authorised under UN Security Council resolution 2100(2013), to preserve the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In 2015, it deployed an infantry battalion to the UNMISS in South Sudan, after having sent a 'guard unit' to protect own non-combat troops in 2012. Crucially, the broadened UN mandate of 2014 mentions specifically the protection of workers on South Sudanese oil installations in which China has a vital interest.

Figure 3 – China's contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa as of April 2019


Source: EPRS based on https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/data and https://www.unmissions.org/.

Figure 3 shows the share of Chinese peacekeepers deployed to five of the seven UN peacekeeping operations in Africa (out of 14 UN missions worldwide) as of July 2019. China does not participate in MINUSCA, which builds on a previous AU mission and consists of African troops only. UNISFA is manned overwhelmingly by Ethiopian troops and monitors the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement at the border between Sudan and South Sudan.

In recent years, China has stepped up its contribution to the UN peacekeeping budget and troops, most of which are deployed in Africa. As of July 2019, China ranked 11th in terms of troop contributions (2 521) to all UN missions, and it makes the largest troop contribution among the five permanent UN Security Council members. In 2017, China registered a standby force of 8 000 Chinese peacekeepers with the UN, totalling one-fifth of the total troops in the force. Accounting for 10.25 % of the UN peacekeeping budget, it ranks second after the US (28.47 %); the EU is far ahead of both countries, accounting collectively for 31.96 %.

Through their participation in UN peacekeeping and notably in Mali, Chinese armed forces have gained operational experience in hostile environments and had opportunities to test new military weapons and equipment, as well as to conduct live-fire drills and to work with other UN contingents. Yet, operational cooperation may be limited due to concerns about potential intelligence leaks. While Chinese combat troops have remained comparatively risk-averse and engaged in infrastructure construction and provision of medical services in Mali, they are said to have been less risk-averse in South Sudan. China's credentials as an emerging security actor have translated into influential UN positions. Ambassador Xia Huang's appointment by UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, as his special envoy for the Great Lakes region, is a case in point.

## Persuasive diplomacy and conflict mediation

After China had dragged its feet on the Darfur crisis and the conflict had spilled over to Chad and risked prompting boycotts of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, dubbed by some the 'Genocide Olympics', it shifted to persuasive diplomacy with Sudan. By using its economic and political leverage, it obtained President al-Bashir's consent for the deployment of UNAMID in Sudan.

Building on its experience in Sudan, China has continued to play an active role in conflict resolution processes aimed at political stability in those African countries where it has major economic interests. Given its vast stakes in the oil industry in South Sudan, it embarked on a search for less intrusive 'Chinese solutions' to the country's internal conflicts, approaching this task in a trial-and-error manner and considering South Sudan as a 'pilot project for Chinese diplomacy', where China would be prepared 'to set the table but not force outcomes'. Apart from conflict mediation conducted by the Chinese special representative, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, at times stepped up direct mediation, including through rare instances of 'megaphone' diplomacy.

Given this evolution, it has been argued that China has not only shifted to a more nuanced interpretation of its non-interference principle but has actually abandoned it as a result of its relative economic power, changes in the perceptions of its interests and risks abroad, and ambitions to enhance its influence on global governance. However, adherence to this principle is key for China, not least to ensure smooth ties with African countries after regime changes.

## Military-to-military cooperation

### Joint military exercises and PLA Navy port visits

Since China's participation in the UN-led anti-piracy operation off the Horn of Africa, PLA Navy port visits in African countries have become increasingly frequent. In 2014, PLA units performed their first-ever joint drills with Tanzania. In the first half of 2018 alone, the PLA Navy's anti-piracy escort task forces visited ports in Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana and Nigeria, and conducted joint military exercises with these countries. In the future, China could also conduct joint counter-terrorism drills with African countries by emulating joint exercises under the China-initiated Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (SCO). Maybe as a response to China's heightened interest in deepening military ties with Africa, India conducted military drills with 17 African countries in March 2019.

## Military training

Apart from boosting high-level military-to-military exchanges, China provides regularly and at an increasing scale various categories of military training of varying length, both in China and in Africa, as capability-building for African armed forces. China's military training offensive in Africa follows the Chinese 'peace through development' logic, but faces limits in countries where local grievances have perpetuated as a result of weak governance and economic growth that does not translate into a reduction of conflict and insecurity. China has sponsored the training of African security forces specifically for its economic assets. In Kenya, for instance, China's security services set up and trained an elite Kenyan police division to protect the Mombasa-Nairobi railway. At times, China has also called on African governments to deploy security forces for the protection of Chinese citizens. In 2018, Uganda, for instance, deployed its military to protect Chinese interests in response to attacks on Chinese nationals and robberies by locals. Preferential treatment, however, tends to provoke anti-Chinese sentiment in the local population.

## Military infrastructure projects

In several African countries China built loan-financed military infrastructure, including sensitive IT networks, with the involvement of Chinese IT firm ZTE, to foster the capabilities of the armed forces. China built a military training centre for the Tanzanian People's Defence Forces, which provides training, including in amphibious landing and counter-terrorism operations. China had already financed an independent secured mobile network for the defence forces in 2011.

## Arms sales

Chinese arms sales are a significant element of Chinese military engagement in Africa. In recent years, Chinese arms have become increasingly price-competitive and sophisticated. China's flexible handling of the maintenance and training on the use of its arms makes Chinese arms even more attractive than those of traditional arms-supplying rivals. Furthermore, Chinese arms sales may serve as a bargaining chip for other lucrative business in package deals that combine arms sales, loans and access to natural resources, thus linking security and strategic interests.

There is a paucity of official information on Chinese arms transfers, although sparse information on major conventional arms may be obtained from the UNROCA data base. Exports are limited to a small group of African countries, including Chad, Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Namibia, Niger, Sierra Leone and Tanzania. Chinese data exclude, for instance, data on exports of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), which China is known to have supplied[4] in great numbers to Africa (at times despite arms embargoes). Such Chinese SALWs have been identified in past or current conflict areas, such as in the DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan, in contradiction with China's soft-power-enhancing peacekeeping activities. China's non-interference principle means that it can sell arms to regimes irrespective of their political nature and degree of repressiveness. Allegations of illegal arms trade are linked to China's naval base in Djibouti.

According to a 2018 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the five largest arms exporters to the world over the 2014-2018 period were the US, Russia, France, Germany and China, together supplying 75 % of the total volume of arms exports. Africa accounted for 20 % of Chinese arms exports, ranking after Asia and Oceania (70 %) and before the Middle East (6.1 %). There appears to be a big volatility in the long-term evolution of Chinese arms exports to the world, which rose by only 2.7 % between the five-year periods 2009-2013 and 2014- 2018, while between the preceding periods 2004-2008 and 2009-2013 they had surged by 195 %, following a period of extremely low levels prior to 2004. When dividing Africa's arms imports, which decreased by 6.5 % in the 2014-2018 period, into imports to North Africa and to sub-Saharan Africa, it appears that China's position is stronger in sub-Saharan Africa (24 %) than in North Africa (13 %), where it faces

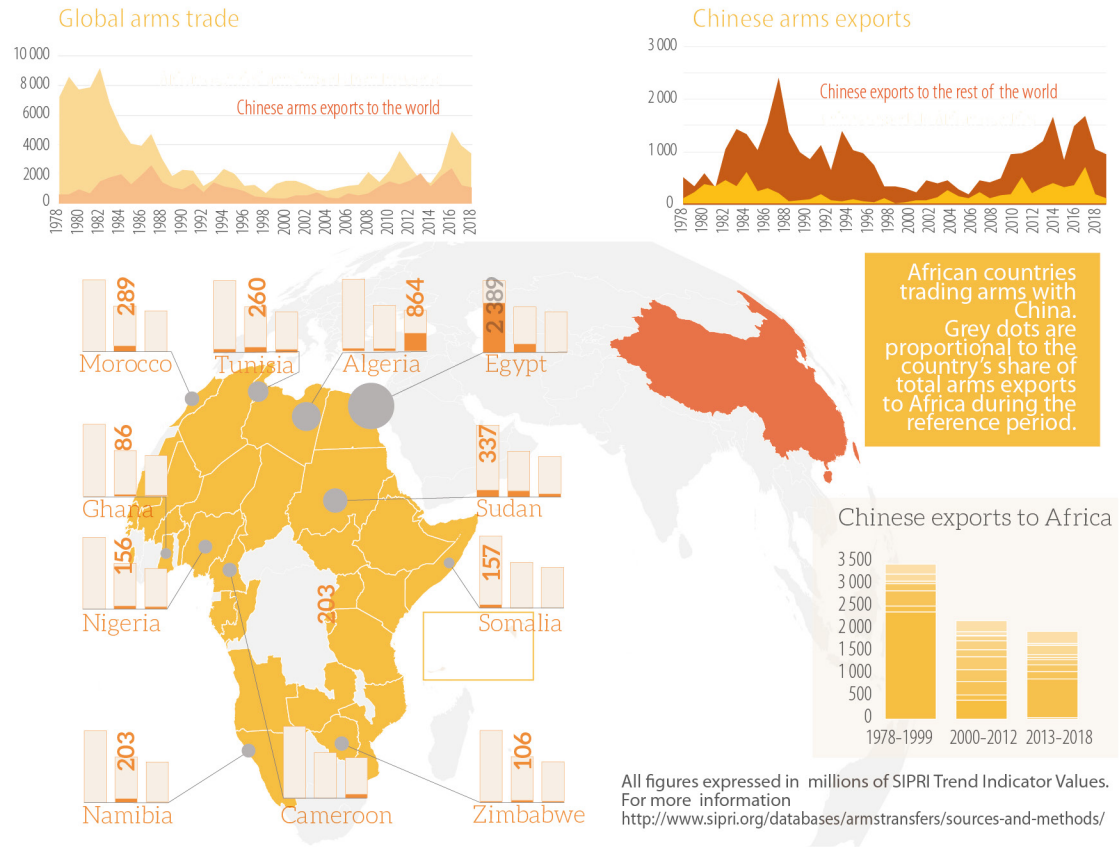
fierce competition from Russia (49 %) and the US (15 %), and a more modest presence of France (7.8 %) and Germany (7.7 %).

Over the 2014-2018 period, trends in Chinese arms sales to the world and to Africa were the increased number of recipient countries – although many of them accounted only for small quantities – and the broadening of the range of arms categories to include more sophisticated, and new, ones based on new technologies, such as unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCVAs), which will have a bearing on future arms sales prospects. For instance, China provided armed drones and satellite imagery to Nigeria to support the country in its fight against Boko Haram.

Owing to strict export controls by major competitors such as the US, China has made major inroads into the UCAV niche market and has become the world's largest supplier of drones for military use. China exported 10 UCAVs to two countries in 2009-2013, but over 2014-2018 it exported 153 to 13 countries, including several African countries. The broadening of the customer base is important for China because four of the major arms importers in 2014-2018 – Australia, India, South Korea and Vietnam – do not procure Chinese arms on political grounds.

The Africa-shaped graph of Figure 4 identifies the main importers of Chinese arms over three periods. The first coincides with the launch of China's reforms and opening-up policy in 1978. The second starts at the beginning of the 'Going Out' policy, and the third starts with the launch of the BRI and covers President Xi Jinping's first term. Since China's arms sales are more scattered across Africa than those of its competitors, and since the volumes are very low, only China's main clients are represented. The graph shows that during President Xi's first term, China gained a bigger foothold in the arms markets of Algeria and Cameroon, among others. Countries like Chad, Ghana, Morocco and Nigeria did not source arms from China prior to 2000.

Figure 4 – China's arms trade with the world and with African countries, 1978-2018




Source: EPRS based on the SIPRI arms transfer database as of April 2019.

## Anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea

Since 2009, China has participated in the international operation to fight piracy and armed robbery at sea off the coast of Somalia in the **Gulf of Aden**, authorised by UN Security Council resolution 1816(2008) and repeatedly prolonged since. For China, the operation has been challenging, as it was the first long-range multi-year deployment outside Chinese waters. China has remained an independent deployer, acting unilaterally in parallel to the multilateral task forces: the Combined Task Forces (CTF-151), the NATO-based Operation Ocean Shield (which terminated in 2016), and Operation Atalanta (EU NAVFOR). However, China has been part of the multilateral coordination mechanisms (Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) at policy level and the interface Shared Awareness and De-confliction (SHADE), which coordinates military efforts at tactical and operational levels. As of April 2019, SHADE had brought together 33 countries, regional and international organisations. The PLA Navy has carried out escorts of merchant vessels and shipments under the UN World Food Programme, as well as Danish and Norwegian ships transporting chemical weapons from Syria for destruction in its separate transit corridor.

By 2019, the original motive of China's engagement has become secondary, since piracy off the Horn of Africa has been significantly curtailed, although a termination of the mission could mean a rapid resurgence. China's continued participation is driven by the economic and strategic interests inherent in its constantly expanding BRI and by the ambition of the Chinese leadership to project maritime power through its blue-water navy. The most lasting impact of the anti-piracy operation is thus not on seaborne commerce but rather on China's upgraded expeditionary capabilities and operational experience in distant waters for future out-of-area missions, and on the PLA Navy's modernisation. The operation has allowed China to increase the PLA Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean and along African coasts and to set up a first overseas military base, in Djibouti.

Despite rising piracy and maritime crime more broadly, no UN-mandated international counterpiracy operation has been deployed to the **Gulf of Guinea**. In 2016, China co-sponsored a UN Security Council open debate on the issue, but has not joined the multilateral framework G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (G7++ FOGG), of which the EU is a member, to implement UN Security Council resolutions 2018(2011) and 2039(2012) and its own policy. China has preferred to conduct counterpiracy drills with individual West African countries since 2014.

## China's first overseas military base in a competitive setting

In a radical departure from what has been referred to as China's 'anti-hegemony ideological posture', which significantly differed from Western military powers, and notwithstanding that this will continue to differ, in 2017 the country set up, with a 10-year lease, its first military base on African territory, at the crucial geostrategic point of Djibouti. The PLA refers to the base as a support facility for naval anti-piracy operations, UN peacekeeping missions and humanitarian cooperation. However, China has expanded the base to accommodate larger warships and has also used it to conduct live-fire military exercises. In 2018, China constructed additional pier facilities in Djibouti's Doraleh Container Terminal, linking security and commercial activities. It is anticipated that more Chinese military bases or 'strategic strong points' will emerge, as African ports with current China-led construction work may be turned into dual-use ports. Middle powers from Asia or the Middle East have been eager to establish military bases in Africa, too. Their growing presence in African countries has transformed a cooperative engagement in the region into a more competitive environment that may reignite tensions, spark interstate conflicts and trigger proxy wars.

# Outlook

China is likely to continue to pursue a multi-faceted approach to security matters in Africa. This approach combines China's participation in UN-led peacekeeping and counter-piracy action to raise its profile as a responsible power, the provision of financial and logistical support to the AUSPA and the use of a range of bilateral forms of security engagement. These forms include military-to-military

cooperation to enhance African countries' capabilities to protect first and foremost Chinese citizens and assets. Moreover, the PLA Navy is poised to become more intrusive than in the past, both because it has become more comfortable in conducting out-of-area operations and because China appears to be less willing to accept economic losses than in the past.

Against this background and given the different interpretations the EU and China apparently have of the notion '**African solutions to African problems**' in line with their fundamental ideological and normative differences, it remains to be seen how complementary or competitive EU-China cooperation to maintain peace and security in Africa – to which they committed themselves at the 21st EU-China Summit of 9 April 2019 (point 22 of the joint statement) – will be in the future. The ongoing negotiations with China to replace the EU-China 2020 strategic agenda for cooperation by a follow-up agenda that would be endorsed at the next EU-China summit in 2020, are an opportunity for the European Parliament to shape the future of EU-China cooperation on Africa.

The European Parliament (EP) adopted a fairly outspoken resolution on China's policy and its effects on Africa back in 2008. In 2015, the EP welcomed China's contributions to UN and AU peacekeeping and EU-China cooperation on security and defence, including the anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in its resolution on EU-China relations. In 2018, it among other things encouraged 'China to mobilise its diplomatic and other resources to support international security, and to contribute to peace and security in the EU's neighbourhood based on international law' in its resolution on the state of EU-China relations.

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## ENDNOTES

1 China's International Project Contracting and Labor Service Cooperation in 2016 by host country/region.

2 As of 2017, official Chinese sources put the number of Chinese overseas workers at 202 689, with Algeria, Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Zambia hosting most of them. This figure is widely considered as too low, with most estimates ranging beyond one million.

3 Selected attacks on Chinese nationals over the 2004-2015 period as described in China's Strong Arm. Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad, Parello-Plesner, J., and Duchâtel, M., The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2015, pp. 28-29.

4 Curtis, M., and Hickson, C., 'Arming and Alarming? Arms exports, peace and security', Annex 6.1 on Chinese arms exports to individual African countries, 1995-2005, p. 44, in Wild, L., and Mepham, D., The New Sinosphere. China in Africa, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2006.

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