

China's Expanding Military Footprint in Africa

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ABSTRACT China's growing military profile in Africa is following its economic footprint in the continent as exemplified by the Chinese "logistics support base" in Djibouti. It is moving towards an ever more expansive definition of its global interests, as its business in Africa pushes it to create new mechanisms for securing those interests, including its own growing military footprint abroad. This brief examines the changing nature of China's involvement with the continent, analysing the present economic priorities and how they have motivated China to play a larger role in African peace and security.

INTRODUCTION

On 11 July 2017, China sent military troops to Djibouti to help set up its newly constructed naval base in the tiny African nation.¹ The two vessels, carrying Chinese troops and departing from China's Zhanjiang port, were the *Jinggangshan* and *Donghai Island*; the former is an amphibious transport vessel, able to load helicopters, special troops and serve in protective convoys, and the latter is capable of rescue missions and assistance in ship repair. The construction of the Djibouti naval

base—China's first military base abroad—has generated varied reactions around the world. The base is seen as a move pushing China's own limits to its foreign policy, and underscores its growing security profile in Africa.

Referred to as a "logistics support base"² by the Chinese Defence Ministry, this new facility in Djibouti is designed to "carry out cooperation with and provide assistance to Djibouti in the areas of international peacekeeping, personnel training, medical service, equipment

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maintenance, and emergency rescue and disaster relief.”³ Since 2008, the Chinese Navy has been involved in anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, and the Djibouti base is intended to provide logistical support for those activities. *The Global Times* has highlighted other benefits derived from the base,⁴ such as rent money and jobs for Djiboutians, protection for China's plans under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), provision of food supplies to ships, and an insurance against disruption by the local population.

This new military foray in Africa, as explained by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a press conference in 2016, was part of China's willingness to “play a constructive role in the political settlement of international and regional issues, so as to create a more secure and stable environment for China's development overseas”, and to “take on more international security responsibilities.”⁵ “China will not take the old path of expansionism followed by traditional powers”, said Wang at the same event.

Chinese sources have often asserted that the foreign policy of their country is “defensive” in nature, and does not support military expansion. Nonetheless, some countries feel threatened by its new presence in Africa. In India, reports reflect a concern for the country's vulnerability to its northern neighbour's military activity in the Indian Ocean region.⁶ The US, for its part, worries that its own activities are now open to Chinese surveillance.⁷ Camp Lemonnier, the American military base in Djibouti, is only a few miles away from the new Chinese base.

Indeed, China's growing military profile in Africa is following its economic footprint in the continent.⁸ Over the last two decades, Beijing has been investing significantly in developing economic linkages with Africa.

TRADE AND AID

One can gauge Sino-African relations by observing the upward trend in aid and trade since the 1990s. From just US\$1 billion in 1992, the value of trade between China and Africa was recorded at a huge US\$220 billion in 2014, and by 2020, it is expected to grow further to US\$400 billion. Of this, US\$100 billion is in direct investments.⁹ The China Exim Bank provided US\$63 billion in loans to almost all countries in Africa from 2000-2015,¹⁰ and the “contractual value of contracted projects” signed by Chinese commercial bodies and African nations between January and November of 2016 amounted to over US\$65 billion.¹¹

The present terms of engagement between China and Africa are perhaps best understood through the Johannesburg Action Plan (2016-18),¹² formulated in the 2015 summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). This extensive plan calls for the enhancement of cooperation in various areas including high-level visits and dialogue, infrastructure development, agricultural assistance, trade, financial aid, humanitarian contribution, education, science and technology, environmental protection, cultural exchange and promotion, and military and security. Personnel training, capacity building and exchange of information accompany aid partnership in these sectors.

Two key areas in this bilateral relationship deserve more attention: infrastructural development and energy. While the former is crucial to Africa's needs, the latter is one of China's most important imports.

While China and Africa have only tentatively agreed to formulate a China-Africa Railway Cooperation Action Plan (2016-2020), Chinese companies have already been making huge

investments in Africa's railway sector. For example, the China Road and Bridge Corporation, China Civil and Engineering Construction Company, and China Communications, among other corporations, have signed contracts since 2011 for the development of railway lines spanning Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. These connections are expected to boost access to and transport of resources like bauxite, iron ore and uranium, increase convenience of travel, facilitate the transport of goods, open up landlocked regions to ports, and create employment for locals. Beneficial to the African people first, railways will surely serve the interests of other Chinese projects across Africa as well.

Speaking of the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway line, the Chinese ambassador last year stated that the railroad was "built with Chinese standards and technology";¹³ such an assertion is noteworthy in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative, where the emerging superpower is opening up new economic opportunities by linking domestic regions with its neighbours, as well as parts of Africa and West Asia. Planning important infrastructure in African nations helps China promote a *Chinese* way of doing things as intrinsic to its own progress. Perhaps it may be said that China is in its early phases of setting standards for development in Africa.

The appeal of a strong partnership with China is also evident in the decision of countries such as Malawi and Gambia to sever their diplomatic ties with Taiwan to earn China's favour and, subsequently, opportunities for business. True enough, in Malawi, Beijing constructed a parliament building, a national conference center, a five-star hotel, schools and university buildings, presidential villas, roads and boreholes. Local employment was generated for these projects. Further, China and Malawi signed a memorandum of understanding in

2008 in areas of trade and investment, following the end of Malawi's official relations with Taiwan the previous year.

Gambia, for its part, ended its diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2013. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang said in March 2016 that China will "conduct mutually beneficial cooperation in six priority areas including agriculture and fishing, processing and manufacturing, facilitation of investment and trade, infrastructure building, human resources development, and people-to-people exchanges."¹⁴ Then in July 2017, a free trade agreement was signed between Banjul and Beijing. Thus, China has enticed African countries with funding and developmental expertise to advance its agenda.

In Rwanda, skyscrapers, hotels, hospitals, schools, a building for the Rwandan Foreign Ministry, and an overwhelming 80 percent of roads have all been the work of Chinese engineers. China has built roads and a university in Liberia, as well as a hospital in Chad. Also a gift from Beijing is the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, where Chinese Finance Minister Wang announced in June 2017 new infrastructure projects for the continent.¹⁵

THE OIL FACTOR

African countries are the second largest source for China's crude imports, with China receiving 1.4 million barrels a day, or 22 percent of its total, from the continent.¹⁶ China currently stands as the world's largest global importer of oil, biggest producer and consumer of energy, and second largest consumer of oil. Its international oil enterprises include Sinopec, China National Petroleum Corporation, and China National Offshore Oil Corporation, which have operations in many African countries.

The first major Chinese oil investment in Africa was made in Sudan, in 1996. China expanded to Angola in 2004: it gave the country a grant of US\$2 billion in aid to build schools and roads, invested in Angolan telecommunication training, and laid a fibre-optic network. In turn, China obtained a major stake in Angola's future oil production.¹⁷ In the same year, Petro-China and Sinopec signed contracts with Nigeria's oil companies for supply of oil and development of oilfields and exploration wells. Sudan, Angola and Nigeria were the three countries that started out as China's largest African partners in energy cooperation.

Today, Chinese oil companies have stakes in Ghana, Egypt, Niger, Gabon, Ethiopia, Namibia, Republic of Congo, and more recently, Chad and Kenya.¹⁸ China (along with India) is Kenya's first buyer of crude oil, having signed a deal earlier this April.¹⁹ Importantly, in 2016, West Asian countries, China's largest sources of oil, banded under the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to cut production of oil, as a worldwide supply glut had caused severe depression in oil prices.²⁰ Given the decision to extend these cuts through the first quarter of 2018, as well as high Chinese consumption that stood at 12.4 million barrels a day in 2016,²¹ China's dependency on African oil is likely to grow further in the coming years.

The Sino-African equation reveals itself thus: Africa is resource-rich and pocket-poor, whereas China lacks natural and mineral resources but has tremendous wealth—the yin and yang of a 'win-win' partnership. Certainly, aid and business from China have translated to economic support not only for African nations, but for China itself.

THE SECURITY DIMENSION

The flip side of the coin is security. Increasingly, in several African nations, violence and political

instability are creating danger for Chinese nationals living or working in these countries, placing strains on Chinese industrial projects and other economic commitments in the region.

Over the last few years, China has had to carry out several evacuations of its citizens amidst civil conflicts. In 2008, for instance, over 200 Chinese nationals were evacuated from Chad after heavy fighting broke out between rebel forces and the government.²² Four years later, activities carried out by armed rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR) also prompted China to take action, where its diplomatic mission started its "round-the-clock emergency response mechanism followed closely the situation and coordinated the evacuation of Chinese nationals based on the voluntary principle."²³ Some 239 Chinese nationals were put on flights to neighbouring countries like Sudan, Angola and Cameroon.

The most prominent of these operations was carried out in Libya, an energy partner of China's, following the outbreak of anti-Gaddafi protests in February 2011. On 25 February that year, China deployed a frigate to evacuate its citizens from the region; the deployment of Xuzhou, a modern navy "warship, marked the first time China pressed into service its military to protect citizens abroad."²⁴ The evacuation was coordinated between government agencies and Chinese companies like China Rail Construction and China National Petroleum Corporation. By 3 March 2011, 35,000 Chinese nationals were successfully moved to safety through chartered and military aircrafts, buses and merchant vessels. In 2014, China again had to evacuate citizens from Libya.

For these woes, China has little sympathy to expect in the Western media. Indeed, its activities in Africa have been called nothing short of "economic imperialism".²⁵ Amongst the

African people, too, China is viewed by some quarters as being responsible for their civil problems. “China is trading petroleum for our blood,” once said Khalil Ibrahim, leader of the Justice and Equality movement in Sudan.²⁶ Khartoum receives major financial support from China; of this, more than two-thirds are reportedly channeled to Sudan’s military, aiding its forces in suppressing the movement. Ibrahim made this statement after the movement attacked a Chinese-run oilfield, in 2007. In the same year, the Ogaden National Liberation Front in Ethiopia struck at the base camp of the Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau, killing nine Chinese and 65 Ethiopian workers.²⁷ Five years later, Collum mining workers killed their Chinese boss over a pay dispute in Zambia.²⁸ There have been incidents of Chinese workers being kidnapped in several countries, such as in Sudan, where rebels of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement from the north captured 29 of them from the camp of a Chinese hydropower company.²⁹ They were later released. Workers from China have also been kidnapped in Egypt and Nigeria. Besides facing these direct threats, Chinese nationals are also getting caught in the crossfire between extremists and state forces.

Following the killing of three Chinese railway company executives in Mali by Maghreb terrorists in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that “China will strengthen cooperation with the international community”³⁰ to tackle terrorism. It has provided arms and funds to governments in Nigeria and Cameroon to take down the Boko Haram, and in Somalia to fight the al-Shabaab. Chinese weapons have also been given to Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Namibia, and Chad—all destinations for Chinese exports and spaces of energy extraction by China.³¹

China now has reason to move away from its long-held foreign policy of non-intervention to

shield its own stakes in Africa from harm. It has to protect its workers and interests in the continent and respond to attacks. Beyond supplying arms to African governments, China is slowly changing how it operates in the continent to combat the issues of anti-Chinese movements, terrorist groups, local opposition, and general political turmoil in order to ensure the safety of its African spoils. Does this mean, however, that it will move beyond its own concerns to incorporate international security as part of a broader approach towards Africa?

In 2000, China established with Africa the triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) conference, signaling its intent to give greater importance to its security engagement with the continent. Over the last decade, China has contributed US\$11 million for the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, US\$1.8 million to the AU’s peacekeeping mission, US\$300,000 to the Kenyan Red Cross, and US\$300,000 to the AU for the African Union Mission for peacekeeping in Somalia. It has also sent 435 soldiers, nine police officers and 14 observers for the UN Mission in Somalia,³² and appointed a special representative to the AU and to Sudan.

It was at the 2012 FOCAC conference that the then President of China, Hu Jintao, pledged measures to “support the cause of peace and development in Africa and boost a new type of China-Africa strategic partnership.”³³ He also proposed to launch the “Initiative on China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security”, backing greater cooperation with the AU, funds for forces like the African Standby Force, and training of more officials in peace and security.

Three years later, at the 2015 summit, through the Johannesburg Action Plan for 2016-18, China promised US\$60 million in military assistance and support to security

mechanisms such as the standby force, as well as crisis response. Among these contributions were joint exercises, expansion of personnel training, exchanges in technology and intelligence, and strengthening cooperation on anti-piracy efforts.³⁴ These new agreements outline China's official security commitment to Africa today, and demonstrate an expansion of military cooperation between the continent and China.

Further, China is aggressively expanding its arms export market, becoming the third largest exporter of arms after the US and Russia. China's share of global arms exports rose from 3.8 to 6.2 percent between 2007-11 and 2012-16, a growth rate that is more than that recorded by France and Germany.³⁵ This growth is a reflection of the expanding market for Chinese arms equipment and the export-oriented domestic defence manufacturing. A noticeable trend in this context has been the increasing Chinese arms exports to the African continent. China is increasingly making inroads in the African markets as more than "two-thirds of the entire continent operate equipment of Chinese origin, with at least ten new operators emerging within the last decade."³⁶ This has been rapidly increasing in recent years, with Chinese arms exports to states in Africa growing by almost 122 percent from 2007-11 to 2012-16.³⁷ Chinese exports seem to be filling a growing void in the African defence market that was once filled, in the post-Cold War era, by cheap surplus Soviet-era systems from the inventories of former Warsaw Pact states.³⁸ This increasing China's arms trade with Africa is another reflection of the growing influence of China in the region.

Although China may rank eleventh amongst the largest contributors to UN's peacekeeping operations, it deploys more peacekeepers than any other P5 member, and is the second largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget.

China has dispatched 2,436 troops, 30 military experts, and 173 police—for a total of 2,639 personnel—as per UN statistics as of August 2016.³⁹ Since 2008, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has policed the Gulf of Aden to combat piracy with Somalia, and has deployed the 'Peace Ark', a medical ship that provides free healthcare to countries like Djibouti, Kenya and Seychelles. President Xi declared in 2015⁴⁰ at the UN that China would set up a permanent peacekeeping force, and a standby force of 8,000 troops in Africa, and grant US\$100 million in military aid over the next five years. China has combat troops in Mali and South Sudan. Namibia is also a consumer of Chinese fighter aircraft.⁴¹

Finally, the crisis in South Sudan showcases an important, albeit isolated case of China's practice in international peace-making. South Sudan is yet another site of Chinese oil investment. As noted earlier in this brief, China commissioned a Special Representative on African Affairs in 2007, a position currently held by Zhong Jianhua. Since 2012, China has been part of the reconciliation process between the government and Sudan People's Liberation Movement in South Sudan. Chinese officials have made direct contact with the non-state actors in the situation, implying a possible deviation from China's commitment to non-intervention. This was addressed by Zhong in an interview⁴² where he stated that while China was making an effort to sustain its policy of non-interference, it was stepping up efforts in South Sudan by communicating with rebel forces.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang saw things differently; he has asserted that with permission from the South Sudanese government, Chinese officials were talking to the rebels, and that former President Hu's pledges at the 2012 FOCAC conference were based on the understanding that contributing

to African peace was a requisite for African development.


Zhong personally addressed the rebel movement, urging its fighters to place the development of the country first and allow the oilfields to function; at the time of the interview, China had about 300 of its nationals running the oilfields. Zhong said that Chinese efforts in the situation were not only about protecting Chinese interests, and proceeded to mention the various areas of military cooperation between China and Africa.

It is clear that China's role in Africa is evolving; the naval base in Djibouti is only one example of the increasing Chinese security presence in the continent. There are reports that China is planning to build other naval bases on the African coast, such as in Luanda, Lagos, Walvis Bay, and Mombasa—these will serve to strengthen Chinese efforts in crisis response, including in the evacuation of its citizens.

CONCLUSION

As a rising global power, China is under pressure to have effective and comprehensive military engagements with the rest of the world. No longer can it repose faith in what it calls a non-interventionist foreign policy; China is commercially involved in many conflict zones such as in Africa, and thus, security in the continent is imperative for its continued

economic success. The establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, the contribution of funds to African armed forces, the support of the PLA, amongst other recent forms of diplomacy and security cooperation, potentially mean even more to China. It is moving towards an ever more expansive definition of its global interests, as its business in Africa pushes it to create new mechanisms for securing those interests, including its own growing military footprint abroad.

India's own perception of China's role in Africa is also evolving rapidly.⁴³ China's Djibouti base is feared to form part of the pattern of Chinese naval bases along the Indian Ocean, or 'string of pearls', and given the ongoing hostility over the Doklam plateau, India is likely to view China's growing military footprint as more of a threat than a source of security. Further, while India has had warm and long-held friendships with African countries—having welcomed many of them, when they were newly-decolonised, into the Non-Aligned Movement and presently maintaining cooperation through the India-Africa Forum—trade between them today is valued at a mere US\$ 52 billion,⁴⁴ dwarfed by China's plan to reach US\$ 400 billion in African trade this year. As China moves deeper into the continent and scales up its involvement, questions arise as to whether India can remain an important partner of African nations, and if there is space for Sino-Indian cooperation in the continent. 

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