



# China-Africa Military Relations

Trends and Challenges

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**Lina Benabdallah, Ph.D.**

*Assistant professor of politics and international affairs, Wake Forest University, U.S.*

## **Introduction**

China-Africa military ties go back to African revolutionary wars in the 1950s and 1960s when Chinese support (with armaments, training soldiers and medical staff) was invaluable to various African independence movements. Although China-Africa security/military relations stagnated in the post-independence period, armament sales and military cadre trainings remained strong. Between 2014 and 2017, Africa accounted for 20 percent of Chinese arms exports, putting China as the world's fifth-largest exporter of major arms.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it was only in 2006 that peace and security cooperation became an official component of the 20-year-old Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Since then, however, China-Africa military and security relations have evolved rapidly. Today, the PRC's military presence in Africa is multifaceted. Beyond the Chinese naval base in Djibouti and

<sup>1</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs\\_1903\\_at\\_2018.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf) P. 5

an increasing share of arms sales to Africa,<sup>2</sup> China–Africa military ties consist of several lower-profile, less visible yet strategic mechanisms. These can be grouped under military-to-military diplomacy including training seminars and workshops for high-ranking African army officers, regular joint navy/army drills, and, since FOCAC 2018, a China–Africa Peace and Security Forum. Central to these strategic mechanisms of China–Africa military relations are three themes that will be discussed in this brief: providing capacity-building programs, strengthening networks between Chinese and African military and defense elites, and reinforcing the interlinks between commercial/developmental and security goals.

Over the last decade, along with booming economic ties, increasing trade and deepening investment relations, threats to the PRC's economic interests, nationals and assets in Africa have become more visible and more concerning for Beijing. This encouraged a shift away from the iconic noninterference principle of Chinese foreign policy to more active engagements in African security and military issues.<sup>3</sup> It is also evident that there are further advantages to the PRC for its increased engagement in security and military issues in Africa. Besides the direct benefit of a rapid response capability in case of crises threatening the safety of Chinese nationals and business interests, Chinese defense apparatuses would gain much-needed operational experience in combat as well as conflict resolution, peacemaking and mediations.

Relatedly, the Chinese government — and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) — could earn positive reputation points from discursively playing up its constructive role and successful contributions to global peace.<sup>4</sup> To recall, China had often been pointed out (by Western powers) as a free rider when it came to international security issues. Engaging African partners militarily through a mix of peacekeeping operations (PKOs), counterpiracy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and joint training exercises is an opportunity to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to rectify that and paint an image of China as a responsible power that contributes to global goods, such as peace and stability.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2013 to 2017, China has become the top arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa, supplying 27 percent of its imports. This marked a 55 percent increase from the period of time between 2008 and 2012. [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssi-pri\\_at2017\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssi-pri_at2017_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Shinn, David and Joshua Eisenman, "China and Africa—A Century of Engagement," (Pennsylvania University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Alden, Chris. 2014. "Seeking Security in Africa: China's Evolving Approach to the African Peace and Security Architecture," Report for NOREF—The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre.

## ***Mixing Economic Ties with Military Interests: China's Security-Development Nexus***

Historically, the Chinese government has considered poverty and underdevelopment to be the root cause of conflict. Chinese international relations and security expert Wang Xuejun (2017, 71-74) argues that there are four sources that contribute to China's level of social stability.<sup>5</sup> These include "promoting stability through development," "subordinating the political democratic reform to national stability," "strengthening the power of the state while concurrently weakening social forces" and the fourth source of stability being "to uphold sovereignty, and through the process of national development." In China's own domestic policy and in dealing with political unrest in remote and underserved provinces in China, the central authorities have sought to remedy grievances and strengthen the CCP's legitimacy through promoting economic growth and development opportunities in these regions. Based on the internal successes of this development-stability nexus, Chinese policymakers have exported this thinking to China's foreign policy in Africa and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

This is to say, from the Chinese government perspective, poverty and underdevelopment are the root cause of conflict and instability. As expressed by Xuejun (2017, 76), "China highlights the concept of peace through development, while holding onto a prudent position on institution building and hasty democratic elections in post-conflict countries in Africa." Creating economic growth opportunities, which encourage employment, poverty reduction and improved living conditions, are viewed as solutions to conflict mitigation and conflict resolution.

The symbiotic relationship between achieving stability and boosting economic growth can be seen in practical examples in China-Africa relations. Negotiating the PRC's first-ever overseas base in Djibouti – officially recognized as a logistical facility in Chinese discourse – was undertaken by mixing development projects (including building a data management center, launching a free trade economic zone and building several housing units) with the base/defense elements. Evidently, Beijing has a huge advantage with its state-driven development model, and has strategically played to its advantage by fusing economic investments with military interests. Through the example of the base in Djibouti, China's

<sup>5</sup> Wang Xuejun. 2017. "Developmental Peace: Understanding China's Policy Towards Africa in Peace and Security," Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent, edited by Chris Alden, et al., Palgrave Macmillan US.

<sup>6</sup> Benabdallah, Lina and Daniel Large, "China and African Security in New Directions in Africa—China Studies," (London: Routledge, 2018).

military presence approach appears to be unique and different from the French or American approaches, which are rather narrowly focused on military activities such as counter-terrorism operations, but with little-to-no economic investments in Djibouti.

## ***Platforms of Engagement for China-Africa Military Relations***

A large part of the focus of China-Africa military relations – since the African struggles for independence – has been put on cultivating and nurturing strong networks between Chinese military officers and their African counterparts. China's social capital investments in the military sector manifest themselves on the ground in a whole host of platforms for engagement. These include holding the China-Africa Defense and Security Forum for officials from the countries' defense ministries – hosted by China's Ministry of Defense – offering training opportunities for high-ranking military officers, conducting joint military and navy drills, and participating in mediation talks. The most obvious advantage of this approach is that investing in strong connections to the future elites of defense ministries can have significant dividends, not only in terms of hardware and equipment sales, but also in ensuring a smooth partnership with the PRC. Cultivating connections with military elites can also prove beneficial on a political level in the event of a military-led regime change.

## ***Defense and Security Forum through FOCAC and Summit Diplomacy***

Forum diplomacy – especially through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) – has become a signature platform for dialogue between China and its African counterparts. Launched in 2000, FOCAC has consistently convened every three years for the last two decades. In July 2018, in keeping with forum diplomacy, Beijing hosted defense ministers and high-ranking military officials from 50 African states under the auspices of the China Africa Defense and Security Forum.<sup>7</sup> The forum lasted two weeks, during which African delegations attended seminars, visited Chinese facilities, were introduced to Chinese-made military equipment and toured several cities in China. But perhaps most importantly, in those two weeks Chinese military officials had a unique networking opportunity

<sup>7</sup> Benabdallah, Lina. 2018. "China-Africa military ties have deepened. Here are 4 things to know," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/06/china-africa-military-ties-have-deepened-here-are-4-things-to-know/>

with their African counterparts, during which exchanges about common visions for peace and stability, challenges and aspirations for the future took place. Only focusing on the military base in Djibouti can eclipse this important aspect of China's diplomacy.

Moreover, in 2019, Beijing hosted another iteration of the security forum dubbed the "China-Africa Peace and Security Forum," and invited African defense ministers and high-ranking officials to China for a week. Similar to the previous forum, this was an opportunity to showcase China's military equipment and tech know-how and exchange views and visions for regional and global peace and security. For example, during the forum African military officials were invited to visit the Special Police College in Beijing that trains anti-terrorism personnel for China's elite armed police force. During the visit, the two sides (African and Chinese) discussed military cooperation and combat-oriented training opportunities for African delegations at the Special Police College.<sup>8</sup> From such examples, it is evident that there is a strong element of networking and strength-building ties between Chinese and African counterparts.

### ***Training Military Officers, Joint Military Drills and Live-Fire Exercises***

Another platform for China-Africa military engagements is the growing number of Beijing-sponsored training opportunities for delegations of African military officers, as well as joint military/navy drills and courtesy calls between African and Chinese navies. There is a robust tradition of sending delegations of high-ranking military officers from Africa to China for such training. Some of these close military ties can be seen in several training schools built by African leaders modeling after China's party schools. In addition to delegation visits, Chinese and African militaries often participate in joint trainings. For example, on December 30, 2019, China-Tanzania launched a 25-day joint military training involving 300 personnel code-named "Sincere Partners-2019."<sup>9</sup> However symbolic, joint trainings and live-fire drills accomplish several important objectives in China-Africa military relations, besides the technical aspects that include interoperability and testing out China's troop capabilities. First, they demonstrate close ties and solidify high-level military-to-military communication between Chinese and

<sup>8</sup> CTGN. 2019. "China-Africa Security Cooperation: African military officials visit Special Police College in Beijing," <https://news.cgtn.com/news/794d444e784d4464776c6d636a4e6e62684a4856/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Panyu, Huang. 2019. "China-Tanzania 'Sincere Partners-2019' military training kicks off in Tanzania," [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-12/30/content\\_9706488.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-12/30/content_9706488.htm)

African counterparts. Second, they are opportunities to showcase China's military capabilities and project an image of a powerful and reliable military partner. In addition, some joint drills are conducted trilaterally (such as the one hosted by South Africa for Russian and Chinese navies in December 2019), allowing for an even greater opportunity for the PLAN – the People's Liberation Army Navy – to learn to collaborate with other partners in Africa.

Other forms of training include Chinese-conducted training for African peacekeepers. In August 2016, the Chinese government offered a training program for 17 senior officers from Angola, Djibouti, Kenya, Liberia, Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The training covered subjects including the peacekeeping legal framework, civilian protection and logistical support.<sup>10</sup> China attaches a great importance to training peacekeeping personnel, as shown in the two facilities dedicated to peacekeeping training: China's Ministry of National Defense Peacekeeping Center (established in 2009) and the China Peacekeeping Police Training Center (established in 2000).<sup>11</sup> In the past three years, China has offered training courses to more than 1,400 peacekeeping personnel from more than 60 countries. In November 2018, China's Ministry of Defense organized its first co-hosted peacekeepers' training course with the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The UN Senior National Planners Course on Peacekeeping lasted two weeks and included 43 trainers and trainees. The training course included topics on the management of peacekeeping and the selection, deployment, rotation and withdrawal of peacekeepers. Among the trainees, five were Chinese.

To be sure, there is a strong demand side from African political and military leadership for capacity-building programs, and Beijing often emphasizes that it is fulfilling African demand by supporting skills transfers and training initiatives rather than suggesting or imposing them on African partners. African demand for Beijing-sponsored trainings is evidenced in instances such as the Rwandan Defense Force inviting the Chinese PLA to send instructors in order to train Rwandan soldiers and police ahead of the military parade marking the 25th anniversary of the liberation from genocide.<sup>12</sup> Similar calls for increasing training opportunities for African military officers in China were expressed in the 2015 and

<sup>10</sup> Benabdallah, Lina. 2020. "Shaping the Future of Power," P. 79.

<sup>11</sup> He, Yin. 2019. "China Rising and Its Changing Policy on UN Peacekeeping," In: de Coning C., Peter M. (eds) "United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order," Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>12</sup> Zheng, Sarah. 2019. "Rwandan troops trained by Chinese military mark 25th anniversary of liberation," <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3017597/rwandan-troops-trained-chinese-military-mark-25th-anniversary>.

2018 FOCAC speeches and agendas. Another example is the launch in Tanzania of the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School by six Southern African Development Community (SADC) political parties and with funding from China. The school, being built by China Railway Jianchang Engineering Company (CRJE), aims at providing training in leadership skills and strengthening cooperation between SADC member states.<sup>13</sup>

## ***Peacekeeping***

The history and timeline of China's initial skepticism towards contributing to peacekeeping in the 1980s and 1990s, which was followed by a period of gradual engagement, is well-documented.<sup>14</sup> For a long time, principles of national sovereignty and China's own sensitivities around secessionist movements framed Beijing's reticent views of humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping operations. Yet a quick look at current UN peacekeeping statistics suggests a radical shift of China's role. Among the five UN Security Council permanent members, China is now the largest contributor of peacekeeping troops. It ranks 11th among 124 contributing nations, with close to 3,000 officers committed, and participates in 11 of the UN's 16 peacekeeping operations.<sup>15</sup> Financing over 10 percent of contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget, China is now the second-largest financial power after the U.S. and ahead of Japan, Germany and the U.K.<sup>16</sup> In terms of troop and personnel contributions to UN missions in Africa, as of June 2019 China had deployed a total of 2,039 officers. Of these, 1,031 peacekeepers were part of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), 413 were in the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), 365 in the UN-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), 218 with the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and 12 in the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Kolumbia, Louis. 2018. "Magufuli launches Sh100bn leadership school project in Kibaha," <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/news/Magufuli-launches-sh100bn-leadership-school/1840340-4667056-xepaw4z/index.html>

<sup>14</sup> Many historical accounts are available on China's gradual warming to international peacekeeping operations, see for instance He, Yin. 2017. "China's Doctrine on UN Peacekeeping," in Cedric de Coning, et. Al. eds, "UN Peacekeeping Doctrine in a New Era," London, Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> UN peacekeeping statistics are available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/>.

<sup>16</sup> The assessed contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget are 10.25 percent and 28.47 percent for China and the United States, respectively, for the 2017–2018 fiscal year. Data source: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping/China <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/china>.

Since Beijing's decision to participate in MINUSMA in 2013, the Chinese contingent has been most favorably assessed vis-à-vis the L2 hospital facility set up in Gao, Mali. Several UN officials as well as local Malian authorities have praised the high quality of medical services offered and the professional demeanor of Chinese personnel. However, Chinese troops, even the combat troops, are mostly limited to ensuring the safety of the camp's perimeter with minimal patrols or activities outside of the camp. As such, in the views of non-Chinese UN staff, the Chinese contribution to MINUSMA is primarily described as risk-averse.<sup>18</sup> There are several reasons for extreme caution on the part of the PRC. Peacekeeping, at least domestically in China, helps fuel national pride and build an image of a strong and responsible big power. For such a reason, minimizing the risk of casualties and/or negative reporting on Chinese peacekeepers is a matter of national interest for the CCP. By the same token, praise of Chinese contingents by UN high officials is a source of Chinese media pride. Internationally, China's risk-averse attitude toward peacekeeping draws a negative or indifferent perception of Chinese contributions to peacekeeping. This is an attitude that must change if China wants to be viewed as a serious participant in UN peacekeeping operations.

### ***Future Trends and Challenges to Chinese Military Presence in Africa***

In the years to come, China is expected to continue its evolving security and military role in Africa through enhanced forum diplomacy, peacekeeping, training offerings, joint drills, military equipment sales, high-ranking officers' visits and more. Yet from Xi Jinping's FOCAC 2018 speech, we can also expect more collaboration between China and African states in countering terrorism in the Sahel and fighting piracy off the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>19</sup> From past examples, it is clear that the PRC has very strong layers of networks with the military elites and within defense ministries across the African continent.<sup>20</sup> Beijing has successfully laid the groundwork for meaningful bilateral dialogue and for winning the hearts and minds of African populations regarding its military presence in the continent. The PRC also benefits from working very hard on supporting regional institutions and local security architecture in Africa. Examples of this include capacity-building

<sup>18</sup> Interviews conducted by the author with MINUSMA staff in Bamako, Mali December 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews conducted by the author with MINUSMA staff in Bamako, Mali, December 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Example of military base and elementary school kids



programs for the African Union's Standby Force (ASF)<sup>21</sup> and donations of military equipment to G5 Sahel members (a total of \$35 million pledged),<sup>22</sup> among other initiatives. Further similar initiatives are expected.

However, there are some serious challenges facing China-Africa military relations and, until addressed, these will continue hindering the efficiency and efficacy of China's contributions. First, generating a deeper understanding of the roots, causes and histories of African conflicts is key. The situation in the Sahel with its complex dimensions, multiple groups, changing loyalties, diverse ethnic groups and different cultural and language profiles presents a formidable barrier for the PRC. There is much room for improvement when it comes to engagement in the Sahel by Chinese diplomats, peacekeepers and military commanders alike. Simply put, countering terrorism in the Horn of Africa or in the Sahel, for instance, is not to China's competitive advantage. Yet, with expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects (both land and maritime), Beijing will likely have more economic interests and assets to protect, further blurring economic investments with security/military interests. BRI projects in Africa (and elsewhere) will require that the PRC improves its knowledge of the histories and contexts where its investment projects are located. Careful risk assessment of BRI projects will also become a priority as the initiative grows bigger, especially with transborder investment projects.

Second, another major barrier facing Chinese military contributions in Africa is the growing tensions and mistrust between major powers, notably between China and the US. Controversies regarding Huawei and the (in)security of 5G networks have important ramifications for military innovation and technology. The narrative around China's alleged "debt-trap" diplomacy is another source of concern and mistrust between relevant parties. Overall, achieving stability and combating terrorism – whether this is in the horn of Africa or in the Sahel – requires cooperation with international partners consisting of intelligence sharing and joint deployments, which risk being undermined by an existing or a growing lack of trust.

Third, China's developmental peace approach or the security-development nexus, discussed above, has been put to test in both Mali and South Sudan. In both cases, the approach is proving to have some serious limitations, primarily because it is

<sup>21</sup> Eom, Janet, Deborah Brautigam, and Lina Benabdallah. 2018. "The Path Ahead: The 7th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation." China Africa Research Initiative, School of Advanced International Studies. Washington, D.C.

<sup>22</sup> Alakhbar. 2019. "Sahel: La Chine promet des équipements militaires au pays du G5," <http://fr.alakhbar.in-fo/15282-0-Sahel-La-Chine-promet-des-equipements-militaires-au-pays-du-G5.html>

not adapted for high-risk environments or for active-conflict situations. There is a need for a more context-tailored approach in these situations and for Chinese military doctrine to adjust to take account of the new areas and operational environments in which Chinese forces are active. Related to this, there is a risk of divergence in thinking about how to achieve peace and stability between so-called traditional powers (European and north American actors) and rising powers. Potential exacerbation of these different ways of thinking and working on global peace may present a challenge for the future of China-Africa military relations.

### ***About the author***

Lina Benabdallah, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of politics and international affairs at Wake Forest University and a research associate at Johns Hopkins SAIS China Africa Research Initiative (CARI). She is the author of “Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network Building in China-Africa Relations” (University of Michigan Press 2020). The book probes the type of power mechanisms that build, diffuse and project China’s power in Africa. Her analyses and publications have appeared in *Foreign Policy*, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, the *Third World Quarterly* and the *Washington Post*, among other leading publications.