



China's Military Positioning in the Horn of Africa and Its Implications for Regional and Global Security Outcomes

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Ibrahim Sakawa Magara

Post-graduate researcher, politics and international studies, Loughborough University, London; founding director, Amani Africa Media and Research Services

Hubert Kinkoh

Research associate, African Leadership Centre, Nairobi/London

Introduction

China's rise into a world power (Lanteigne, 2015) has seen the country play an increasingly important role in international politics, as demonstrated in its leadership in several international arenas (Zigun, 2016: 8). Ikenberry's (2008: 8) observation a decade ago that "China's rise will inevitably bring the United States' unipolar moment to an end" appears to be unfolding. Under its *zou chu qu* or "going out" policy (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014: 444), China's current economic penetration in Africa is unparalleled (Larry & Morris, 2014; Ncube, 2012; Lahtinen, 2018; Sven, 2014; Chen, 2016).

A rich scholarship analyzing China-Africa relations along the binary of opportunity versus threat (Benabdallah, 2018) has since emerged. The former, mostly by Africa's political actors, views China as a trustworthy ally with no colonial aspirations and

respectful of the sovereignty of African states (Maru, 2019). The latter, prevalent in the West, views China as a predator in Africa. This camp argues that China's model of economic engagement with African states is meant to exploit Africa's natural resources and flood the continent with low-priced manufactured products while turning a blind eye to its autocracies (Taylor, 2009: 1-3; Taylor, 2007; Tull, 2006). This is viewed as having a great impact on Africa's human rights outlook as more African leaders turn to China for what is perceived as "financial support" with less conditionality (Taylor, 2007). Equally, there are claims of China (re)colonizing Africa through "debt burden" (Zhao, 2014; Mohan, 2013; Rotberg, 2009; Jumbo, 2007).

There is an equally increasing scholarship on the security cooperation between China and Africa, including Chinese military positioning in strategic locations such as the Horn of Africa. This essay argues that China's strategic military positioning in the Horn of Africa will not only shape regional security outcomes but also potentially disrupt international polarity. Rogin (2018) sees the escalation of Chinese military presence in the Horn of Africa as a strategic rivalry to the U.S. dominance, arguably making the region one of the potential confrontation fronts between China and the U.S. on the African soil. While Beijing's military expansion in Africa is an important paradigm in international political theory, the rapidly advancing Sino-Africa scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on the economic dimension. This leaves an important gap on China's strategic military positioning and its implication, not only for Africa, but globally.

The Horn of Africa is particularly emerging as a key entry point for China's military penetration and positioning on the continent. Apart from its involvement in Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan, China's profile in Djibouti offers a classic example where its military presence is seen as a clear geopolitical positioning with possible important implications on shifts in the regional security complex and ultimately global balance of power (Styan, 2013). This is partly owing to the strategic significance of the Horn of Africa and the fact that Djibouti is one of the countries in which Western powers, particularly the U.S., have historically maintained visible and strategic military presence (Degang & Zubir, 2016; Sun & Zoubir, 2016; Styan, 2013). China's military positioning in Djibouti raises important questions. Included are whether or not, and at what cost and what implications, China is attempting to counter U.S. dominance. Finally, what does this portend for Africa, as well as global peace and security outcomes? By problematizing China's growing military positioning in the Horn of Africa, this essay makes a contribution to broader debates on Sino-Africa relations from a regional security perspective.

China and the UN Peacekeeping in the Horn of Africa

In a bid to sideline its key rivals, particularly the U.S., China is arguably using the United Nations peacekeeping missions to enhance its grip on strategic regions such as the Horn of Africa. Extant literature on China's military presence in Africa includes analyses of its role in ensuring the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2000 (Zhengyu & Taylor, 2011), Liberia in 2003 (Moumouni, 2014), Darfur in 2008 (International Crisis Group, 2017) and Mali in 2013, as well as her responsiveness to the call for intervention in the 2011 Libyan crisis (Fung, 2015; Garwood-Gowers, 2012). Other analyses touch on the presence of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) anti-piracy force in the Gulf of Aden (Henry, 2016), the controversial arms trade between China and various African states such as Sudan (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012; Hauauer & Morris, 2014) and China's security cooperation with the African Union (AU) (Benabdallah, 2015; Stahl, 2016).

China's recognition of the importance of collective security became apparent in 2006, when China was the first nation to ask the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) for a peacekeeping mission in Somalia. In June that year, at the UNSC meeting in Addis Ababa, China's permanent representative to the U.N., Wang Guangya, scolded other diplomats for neglecting Somalia and urged them to support the deployment of peacekeepers. It was significant that China approved the "close liaising" with the African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), where earlier it had objected to the development of links between UNAMID and U.N. missions (Holslag, 2018: 38). China's stance on U.N. peace operations is closely linked to its attitude on state sovereignty, and this limits the type of interventions Beijing is prepared to sanction vis-à-vis its role in peacekeeping missions. Yet, it appears that Chinese policy in this regard is fast evolving (Hirono & Lanteigne, 2011). There are Chinese peacekeepers serving in places as diverse as the DRC, Liberia and the volatile South Sudan. The latter case is particularly important since South Sudan is the first country where China has provided infantry troops to a U.N. peacekeeping mission, the first of its kind in the history of China's external peacekeeping operations. At the same time, China has assumed a number of new political roles, such as mediating between warring parties and engaging in multilateral peace talks (Shaban, 2017). According to the U.N., China has more than 2,600 peacekeepers serving around the world; 700 of these troops serve as peacekeepers in South Sudan (Cicirello, 2018) and are tasked with multiple roles (UNMISS, 2017). China also contributes funds to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the eight-country African trade bloc Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediation process in South Sudan (Maru, 2019).

There is an indication that China is altering its security policy toward Africa within the U.N. peacekeeping (Zhengyu & Taylor, 2011), hence making such change of policy an important question that will shape scholarly and policy discourses on China-Africa military engagement. Beijing's policy shifts could be explained through "self-help" theory. Having attained its level of economic development, it seems that China is espousing a policy orientation to ensure endless supplies of African raw materials. As such, China's robustness within the U.N. peacekeeping is, in part, aimed at developing and maintaining its capacity to exercise influence in countries like Sudan that are cradles of its resource supplies. This not only clearly demonstrates the nodal points linking China's military and economic engagements with African nations and regions, but also is a factor that requires a change of strategy. Particularly, the strategic shift aims to confront security challenges autonomously, while keeping other powers at bay (Holslog: 2018: 33-5). What stands out clearly is that Beijing is gradually becoming a leader among its peers in the UNSC in terms of military contribution to U.N. peacekeeping operations in Africa. The reluctance of the U.S. and Western countries to put boots on the ground seems to work in China's advantage, as it seeks to establish and maintain strategic military presence in places like the Horn for "self-help."

Working within the U.N. peacekeeping comes with specific benefits, such as legitimacy and legality through international laws on collective security. Unlike the U.S., which has been accused of violating such norms, for example in Iraq, China seems keen on portraying itself as a world power willing to operate within international norms. China's recent involvement in U.N. peacekeeping in Africa, especially in the Horn, is a clear movement away from its historical "wariness and at times outright hostility towards the institution of U.N. peacekeeping missions." (Hirono & Lanteigne, 2011: 243) China's enthusiasm about U.N. peacekeeping, particularly in Africa, appears to be in keeping with its recent foreign policy strategy of supporting multilateral solutions rather than unilateral actions to address strategic threats. While extant literature explicitly reveals these shifts in China's foreign policy, there is need to advance scholarship on analyses of China's peacekeeping engagement within its broader policy goals (Hirono & Lanteigne, 2011: 244), especially the covert security and economic interests beneath its military positioning principally in the Horn of Africa, and its implications locally and globally.

China-Africa Military Cooperation

China's security engagement in Africa is deepening and is evident in the number of high-level summits between China and African states. The triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), for example, which has brought together

political actors from 53 African states and the AU since 2000, has culminated in a commitment to strengthen existing economic ties as well as military cooperation in terms of grants and logistics, arms sales, and peacekeeping deployments (Kovrig, 2018). This growing security engagement got a publicity boost in June 2018, when Beijing hosted the inaugural China–Africa Defense and Security Forum, signaling its growing security interest and engagement on the continent. The summit, like the September 2018 FOCAC, partly focused on regional security issues, financing and upgrading Africa’s security capacities and improving defense cooperation (Dahir, 2018; Kovrig, 2018).

Based on the above, many scholars continue to contend inherent limitations of Beijing’s traditional “hands-off foreign” policy posture (Alden et al., 2018; Aidoo & Hess, 2015; Wang, 2013) with others like Cheesman and Klaas (2018) arguing that China has since shifted its policy toward a “constructive engagement” stance. This has increased uncertainty regarding China’s security aspirations in Africa. It may be argued that Beijing’s foreign policy strategy, informing its security cooperation with African states, is the result of the instability and violence that has rocked the massive continent. It may be argued that Beijing’s foreign policy strategy, informing its security cooperation with African states, is the result of the instability and violence that has rocked the massive continent. There are numerous cases of attacks on Chinese key economic installations on the continent, for instance, as documented by Holslag (2018: 32–4). In April 2006, a separatist movement detonated a bomb in the city of Warri, Nigeria, warning that investors from China would be “treated as thieves.” Later, in July of that year, violent protests erupted at the Chinese-owned Chambisi copper mine in Zambia, resulting in five deaths. In November 2006, Sudanese rebels launched three attacks on Chinese oil facilities and briefly seized the Abu Jabra oil field close to Darfur. In April 2007, nine Chinese and 65 Ethiopian oil engineers were killed during an assault on an oil exploration site operated by a subsidiary of the China Petrochemical Corporation, Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau, in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. In 2008, the Chinese government organized the evacuation of 212 compatriots from Chad after clashes in N’Djamena.

Furthermore, Chinese travelers have been poached when traveling through the Horn of Africa with the years 2000 and 2006 recording seven incidents with pirates targeting six Chinese ships (Holslag, 2018: 32–4).

Mayhem in the Sudanese province of Darfur, however, casts some doubt on China’s new policy orientation and security ambitions. China has not only been criticized for supporting Khartoum following the commission of war crimes, but the situation in Darfur also puts Beijing in a quandary between two diverging aspects of China’s new diplomatic standards: its traditional emphasis on sovereignty

and noninterference, and its new principle of constructive engagement (Holslag, 2018: 36). In Sudan, China's traditional policy of noninterference was at odds with expectations of other African nations. Hence, it may have a damaging impact and curtail China's diplomatic maneuverability and its ability to maintain the policy of noninterference, which has been quite effective in courting Africa (Holslag, 2018: 36-7).

The dilemma reverts back to the realistic supposition of "self-help." This is perhaps one of the reasons China is keen on a strong regional military presence in the Horn of Africa as it tries to safeguard its interests in Africa. Some of the strategies that China has employed include bilateral military exchanges, military aid, U.N. peacekeeping missions and more recently the establishment of military bases such as the case of Djibouti. The latter is seen as a move to further China's "self-help" policy since it would imply the deployment of military forces whenever China's interests are threatened both inland and off the Indian Ocean, particularly the troubled Gulf of Aden. The case of Djibouti equally reveals China's apparent concern with the increasing military presence of other powers, particularly the U.S. (Campbell, 2008). The establishment of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2006 was a significantly important moment in China's shifts as regards its military activities and security cooperation with Africa. Since then, China and the U.S. have been engaged in what is akin to the "Cold War balancing" on the African continent (Holslag, 2018: 37).

Although China has become some sort of a revisionist power in terms of its economic and security aspirations in Africa, it appears to act as a status-quo power in terms of security objectives. China's "economization" of its Africa policy only began in the late 1990s, hence, the security challenges it is facing now are a recent phenomenon, and solutions to these challenges can only evolve (Holslag, 2018: 39). Nonetheless, the motivations of China's military presence and activities in the Horn of Africa seem to be twofold – economic and global superiority – and intertwined. China is employing "self-help" in dealing with Africa as it seeks to secure and maintain control over access to resources while it attempts to outmaneuver the U.S.'s dominant global superiority. This makes the Horn of Africa one of the most important regions in Africa as far as China's military maneuvers vis-à-vis regional geopolitics and global polarity are concerned.

China in the Securitization of the Horn of Africa

As already indicated, there is less attention on the security dimension – compared to the economic aspects – of Sino-Africa relations. As observed by Walsh (2018: 2), the literature tends to be either overly broad, such as "China in Africa," or concentrated on country-specific case studies which still lean toward obvious,

somewhat infamous examples such as Sudan, Zimbabwe and Angola. As a result, there is a gap in the regional dynamics of China's security involvement in Africa. It is in view of this that this essay accentuates the need for more theoretical as well as empirically-grounded analyses on China-Africa security cooperation, military involvement and positioning within the region as a level of analysis and space of practice. This is particularly important as regional bodies are increasingly playing an important role in Africa's peace and security dynamics (Bach, 2016). Furthermore, China is progressively turning to African regional organizations to collaborate on security issues. For example, in the China-Africa Action Plan Beijing hopes "to support Africa in the areas of logistics ... to continue its active participation in the peacekeeping operations and demining process in Africa and provide, within the limits of its capabilities, financial and material assistance as well as relevant training to the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the AU." (Holslag, 2018: 38-9) China has since made significant contributions to the AU peace and security operations as well as subregional bodies including the IGAD-led peace process in South Sudan and AMISOM in Somalia (Maru, 2019). While this essay does not purport to respond to this gap, it makes a contribution by looking at the China's "regional securitization" in the Horn of Africa from a broader perspective. The essay, particularly, uses the case of the "military scramble for Djibouti" to illustrate the significance of China's security foothold in the region and to problematize its apparent rivalry with the U.S. as a possibly emerging military frontier with significant regional and global security outcomes.

The Horn of Africa is one of the most geo-strategically important regions of the world. It is economically significant in terms of its positioning along an important maritime trade route that links Europe and Asia, coupled with the access it provides to emerging markets with low labor costs. At the same time, the region is highly "fragile," having witnessed significant conflicts including the "failure" of Somalia and the reality of piracy off its coast (Sullivan, 2010), as well as armed conflict in Darfur and civil war in South Sudan. Proximity to the civil war in Yemen; and endemic political crisis with flashpoints of ethnic unrests in Ethiopia; many years of armed insurgency in Northern Uganda, terrorism, episodic political violence in Kenya and, not least, the securitization of the Red Sea, as exemplified by Djibouti, which is a global leader in hosting foreign military bases (Styan, 2013) makes the Horn one of the most security complexes in Africa. The Gulf crisis of June 2017, when Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) blacklisted Qatar, added a dangerous twist to the lingering border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti when Doha withdrew its nearly 200 troops stationed in the contested territory of Dumeira (Shaban, 2017). In the wake of this impasse, China offered to send troops to the disputed border area. A month later, China officially opened its first overseas logistics and military base, a naval resupply facility in Djibouti

which, according to Beijing, would help China to better fulfill its international anti-piracy obligations in Somali waters as well as safeguard peace and security in the region (Kuo, 2017). The Horn's location at the crossroads of commerce and conflict has undoubtedly transformed the region into some sort of a "theatre of global competition," or, in the words of Alex de Waal (2009), a "political market place" in which China is increasingly becoming an important "merchant."

These developments seem to be driven by Beijing's intention to leverage its position as a rising world power and seize new spheres of influence including militarily. While this arguably presents a potential for stability (Asante, 2017), it equally has a potential to further destabilize the already fragile region (Chuka, 2011). While China's military maneuvers in the Horn are shaping security dynamics with significant regional and global security outcomes, the cost at which this is happening is contestable and the implications remain to be seen. Hence, need for continued theorization on this factor cannot be overemphasized.

China in the Militarization of Djibouti

China's military presence in Djibouti is seen as a direct rivalry with the U.S. The U.S. military base there is unique, not least because the Americans have closed a number of military bases in Europe and East Asia since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, until recently, Djibouti had not been considered a U.S. ally. Thirdly, since the end of the Cold War, most of the countries hosting U.S. military bases have been regional economic or military powers. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, global U.S. military bases have purportedly aimed to deter potential enemies. For instance, U.S. military bases in Europe seek to prevent the growth of Russian military might while those in Asia-Pacific strive to confront nuclear North Korea, China's rising economic and military power and the potential revival of Japanese militarism (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 113). But the U.S. military base in Djibouti does not aim to curb direct threats from Djibouti's neighbouring countries – Ethiopia, Kenya and Eritrea – as these are important U.S. allies and partners in the war on terror. This begs the question as to why Djibouti has taken on so much strategic importance, a question to which there is no simple answer (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 113-4) and one that needs further probing. While extant literature lacks up-to-date analyses of the U.S. military base deployment in Djibouti – particularly its dynamics, functions, processes and prospects (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 114) – various hypotheses have been fronted. Key among them are the geostrategic significance of Djibouti (Gu, et al., 2006) from the perspective of U.S. global military deployment (Arkin, 2005), and Djibouti's role in U.S. global anti-terror strategy (Davis & Othieno, 2007). Additionally, the U.S. military deployment is arguably due to

Djibouti's long-term adherence to traditional Islam which lessens the basing risks (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 114).

In some respect, Djibouti can be considered “the Bahrain of Africa.” US failure to resolutely condemn the Guelleh regime's brutal repression during the “Arab Spring” is in line with Washington treating the Djiboutian government with kid gloves, and even actively supporting it (Bloice, 2011). This is reminiscent of U.S. policy during the Cold War when it supported authoritarian regimes that provided it with strategic military facilities. But, as seen above, when the U.S. seeks regime change, the client can turn to the patron's rival – in this case China, which has considerable economic leverage in Africa. The regime in Djibouti is quite concerned about U.S. rhetoric on democracy promotion, especially since the city-state's human rights record is dismal (U.S. Department of State, 2014). Having new sources of revenue with less stringent conditions is appealing to Djiboutian elite, just as is the case with many African leaders (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 115–6).

China is equally keen on regional military positioning that enables it to act in defense of its economic interests in Africa and to secure land and sea transport channels, even as it simultaneously seeks to rival the U.S. military dominance. As such, U.S. military basing in Djibouti that reveals some sort of “global defense-offence posture” (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 120) attracts a counter posture by China. With such a strategy, it can be expected that the size and sophistication of China's military base in Djibouti will be directly in response to the U.S. posture in the country and the region at large. Additionally, such presence will equally be determined by China's increased economic engagements in the region, especially Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as the security situations in the Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia (Sun & Zoubir, 2016: 119–121). Finally, this essay hypothesizes that in as far as the U.S.'s military posture is tilted to counterterrorism, China's military cooperation with Djibouti and other countries in the Horn of Africa will take the familiar economic dimension, as it will seek to use “financial support” to woo regional countries to its side, hence creating new contestations in global spheres of influence. In this regard, Djibouti will continue to be an important and possibly potential confrontational front between the U.S. and China on African soil, with important regional and global security outcomes.

Conclusion

There are several reasons to believe that China will enhance its security cooperation strategy in Africa. It appears that it is just starting, and this can only escalate in the foreseeable future. The persistence of the double security challenge – the growing strategic importance of Africa, and China's growing military might and diplomatic assertiveness – may lead to confrontations between Beijing and

Washington on the African continent akin to the Cold War dynamics. For the long-haul, however, the geo-economics in question, specifically the vulnerability of its long supply lines, may prevent China from resorting to an offensive stance; the country may remain a non-aggressive global power for longer. As such, it may expectedly continue with its so called “win-win development agenda,” as well as utilize collective security measures, especially the U.N. peace support operations to assert its growing military influence.

The posture of African countries in regard to these changing dynamics, particularly in the Horn, will largely determine China’s security orientation. Indeed, as Holslag (2018: 41) argues, “despite changing interests, perceptions and means, China is and will remain dependent on the good will and collaboration of other players to help safeguard its economic interests in Africa. As long as its economic stability relies on a supply of Africa’s natural resources, China will stick to the path of security cooperation.” This may make China a key ally for countries in the Horn of Africa, as far as maintaining peace and security is concerned, as it seeks to diffuse and avoid future friction with other world powers by not being drawn into national power plays and by preventing regional hostility in the region. What remains to be seen is whether and/or how prepared countries in the Horn of Africa are to benefit from these changing geopolitical dynamics and/or if they are going to suffer similar consequences as those of the Cold War.

About the Authors

Ibrahim Sakawa Magara

Ibrahim Sakawa Magara is currently a Ph.D. student at Loughborough University in London. His Ph.D. research focuses on regional conflict management in eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa, specifically the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) peace mediation in South Sudan. Magara has many years of practical work experience, both in academia and in practice. He holds a Master of Arts degree in peace studies and international relations from Hekima University College, a constituent of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. He has a background in philosophy and theology and a certificate in leadership and management. A research associate and adjunct lecturer at St. Paul’s University in Kenya, Magara is co-founder of Amani Africa Consultancy, based in Nairobi, Kenya, where he is actively engaged in peace research and peace policy advice. He previously worked at Catholic Relief Services (CRS), among other organizations.

Hubert Kinkoh

Hubert Kinkoh is a research associate and fellowships coordinator at the African Leadership Centre, a joint initiative of King's College London. In this capacity, his work involves providing significant support to the head of fellowships across all aspects of the ALC Fellowship programmes – from development to implementation, and monitoring and evaluation – as well as supporting major research projects being undertaken at the Centre. Hubert holds a master's degree in peace studies and international relations (with distinction) and has five years' professional experience researching and analysing peace, security and development across Africa, especially in the Horn of Africa and the African Great Lakes region. His research interests span human security dimensions of China-Africa engagements, youth agency in peace and security, disruptive dialogues about African and Black masculinities and feminisms, and politics of knowledge production on peace and security in Africa.

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