

Habro Iryna, Ph.D. in Political Science, Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, ORCID: 0000-0001-8215-7615

Shevchuk Oleksandr, a doctor in Political Science, Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, ORCID: 0000-0003-0335-6873

SECURITY ASPECTS OF CHINA'S PRESENCE ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Abstract

Article analyzes the security aspects of China's growing presence in Africa amid shifting global power dynamics. It explores how Beijing integrates economic engagement, military cooperation, arms transfers, peacekeeping activities, and digital technologies into a coherent strategy aimed at protecting its overseas interests and expanding geopolitical influence. Particular attention is paid to China's military base in Djibouti, defense-industrial cooperation, professional military education, and cybersecurity initiatives promoted through frameworks such as FOCAC, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Global Security Initiative. Using regional and country case studies, the article demonstrates how China's security involvement varies across Africa. It argues that while Chinese engagement offers opportunities for infrastructure development and capacity-building, it also raises concerns related to political dependence, digital surveillance, and the strengthening of authoritarian governance. Overall, China's security footprint in Africa represents a systemic transformation with significant implications for regional stability and global governance.

Keywords: China, Africa, military cooperation, arms export, digital security, FOCAC, Global Security Initiative (GSI), People's Liberation Army, cyber surveillance.

Introduction

In the 21st century, Africa has become an arena of global geopolitical rivalry, where China is increasingly building economic, military, and technological influence. Given the declining influence of traditional Western actors and the deepening crisis of global governance, analyzing China's presence on the continent is crucial to understanding new formats of interaction between the Global South and new geopolitical centers.

Africa is of immense economic, political, and security significance for China. Beijing's economic interests include Africa's natural resources, access to markets for investment and exports, and the global expansion of Chinese business. In this context, its relations with South Africa are important, as it is one of China's largest economic partners in Africa. China also has four main political interests on the continent: improving its image and strengthening China's influence, isolating Taiwan to promote the «One China» policy, ensuring the stability of its economic partners, and opposing international norms that China considers problematic. China's controversial political involvement in Sudan and South Sudan is particularly important. Finally, China's political and economic interests define its security interests as «protecting developments in the economic sphere and increasing political influence».

Today, a significant number of scholars and analysts consider in their works the specifics of China's military and security involvement in Africa. Considerable attention is paid to military aspects and arms transfers. SIPRI reports (Wezeman, 2024; Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025) and A. Arduino (Arduino, 2024) note the steady growth in Chinese arms supplies to Africa and their strategic importance in the context of competition with Russia and the United States. In parallel, scholars examine forms of military cooperation, including African officer training, joint exercises, and the creation of security infrastructure (Nantulya, 2022; Njeru, 2021).

Another group of studies (Diallo & Descamps, 2024; Jash, 2025; Krukowska, 2024) focuses on geopolitical dimensions - the influence of the Global Security Initiative and China's use of narrative diplomacy to shape a favorable image in African countries (Cissé & Pihl, 2025). These works highlight the combination of "soft" and "hard" power, where military presence is reinforced by economic projects and cultural diplomacy.

A number of works (Melese, 2022; Rossiter & Cannon, 2022) explore regional specifics, particularly in Djibouti and the Horn of Africa, which are key for controlling maritime routes. Researchers emphasize that Chinese military bases in strategic African locations serve both defensive and power-projection functions.

Thus, the modern academic literature records a shift from episodic security contacts to a systematic and multi-vector security presence strategy of the PRC on the African continent. However, despite the substantial volume of research, questions remain insufficiently explored regarding the long-term implications of such a presence for regional stability and the response of African societies to China's expanding military role.

Research methods

The methodological foundation of the study is based on the core principles of scientific inquiry: objectivity, systematicity, multifactorial analysis, and determinism. Methods of system and structural analysis were employed to organize relevant scientific information and to explore the core concepts of the research. The use of a systems approach enabled a theoretical synthesis of scholarly perspectives related to the topic of information hygiene. Additionally, general scientific methods - such as analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction - were applied throughout the study.

Using content analysis, a systematic study of official documents, political statements, and initiatives of China (in particular, the Global Security Initiative, FOCAC) and those of African governments was conducted. Particular attention

was paid to the transformation of the PRC's foreign policy rhetoric. Comparative analysis was used to compare China's role with other leading arms suppliers to African countries (Russia, the USA, France) over different time periods.

Quantitative analysis and statistical methods were applied to analyze the dynamics of Chinese arms exports to Africa, the scale of military cooperation, and digital penetration. The case study method allowed to study the experience of specific African countries (Kenya, Senegal, Zambia, Djibouti, Uganda), which demonstrate different models of interaction with China – from military-strategic cooperation to the implementation of Chinese digital control technologies. This made it possible to identify the specifics of influence in various political and economic contexts.

China has expanded its security and defense relations with many states at the multilateral and bilateral levels. The establishment of the country's first overseas naval base in Djibouti demonstrates China's willingness to enhance its regional power projection capabilities. China's presence in Africa has various consequences for the region. Its strategic involvement creates certain opportunities and challenges for the continent. While flexible Chinese loans, trade financing, and inexpensive industrial goods are of great value to African countries, local labor and factories are suffering from Chinese commercial expansion. China's support for African regimes that violate human rights has also drawn criticism from the West (Abid, Fatima & Safdar, 2023).

China's military strategy in Africa aligns with its broader objective of achieving «the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by 2049». As part of this vision, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is expected to evolve into a “world-class force” by 2030, equipped with the combat and power projection capabilities necessary to safeguard China's expanding global interests and prevail in future conflicts near its own waters. While some African states justify China's growing military presence as a means of strengthening defense capacities, others caution

that the continent must manage such partnerships carefully to avoid being drawn into the very geostrategic rivalries that African governments publicly seek to steer clear of.

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 (Grieger and Graphs, 2019).

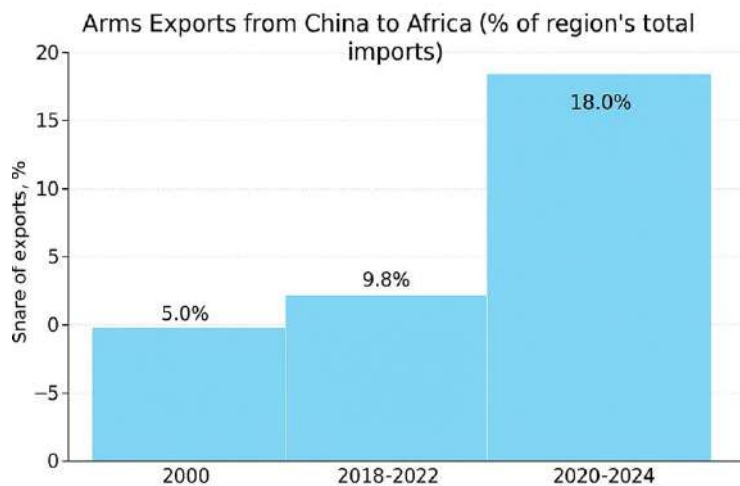
Back then, in 2000, China had less than 5 percent of Africa's arms stocks, hosted fewer than 200 African officers in its military schools, and conducted no military exercises in Africa. Today, China trains approximately 2,000 African officers annually and has become the leading arms supplier to the continent. Approximately 70 percent of African countries now use Chinese armored vehicles.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, China is now the leading arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 19 percent (2019-2023) of imports from the region. Between 2018 and 2022, Russia and the United States were the leading arms suppliers to Africa, accounting for 40% and 16% of major arms imports to the continent, respectively. China ranked third with 9.8%, followed by France with 7.6%. Despite this, sub-Saharan African countries received significant Chinese arms shipments between 2019 and 2023, driven by a combination of competitive prices for Chinese military equipment and ample financing opportunities, which allowed China to gradually overtake Russia's traditionally dominant role and

expand its presence in arms sales (Trends in international arms transfers, March 2025). By 2020–2024, the main arms suppliers to Africa were Russia (accounting for 21% of Africa’s major arms imports), China (18%), and the USA (16%) (Arduino, 2024).

In French-speaking Africa, sanctions against Russia and the rise of anti-French sentiment have opened a gap in the security market that Beijing is seeking to fill.

The following diagram, which shows the growth of China’s share of arms exports to Africa across different periods, clearly demonstrates how China has significantly increased its presence.



Compiled by the authors

China’s joint exercises with African forces, 20 of which have been held since 2006, have grown in scale and complexity in recent years, as evidenced by the land and naval exercises of Tanzania, China, and Mozambique in August 2024, and the joint exercises of the Chinese and Egyptian air forces in May 2025. These were the largest deployments of Chinese land, naval, and air forces in Africa in history, respectively (Nantulya, 2025a).

Mozambique, Namibia, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe

receive more than 90 percent of their weapons from China. In 2024, Namibia became the first foreign country to purchase the Shaanxi Y-9E medium military transport aircraft.

China is also expanding its military ties with non-traditional partners such as Senegal and Kenya. In this manner, in 2006 (a year after the resumption of the China-Senegal partnership), Senegal joined FOCAC, opening the door for Senegalese officers to enroll in Chinese staff colleges. In 2009, then-President of China Hu Jintao visited Senegal and announced a multi-year package of aid and grants, including \$49 million in additional funding for military education and training, as well as a range of equipment for the police and gendarmerie.

From 2018 to 2024, Senegal co-chaired FOCAC. During this period its military cooperation with China became as regular as with China's more prominent defense partners such as Egypt, Tanzania, and Nigeria. In 2023, China North Industries Group Corporation Limited (NORINCO), a major Chinese defense firm, opened a regional office in Dakar, its fourth in Africa after Angola, Nigeria, and South Africa. NORINCO used this presence in the country to strengthen its role as a regular supplier to Senegal's security sector and expand its operations in the Sahel, where it increased its supplies to Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

A turning point in the Kenya-China relations came in the 1990s, when then-President of Kenya Daniel arap Moi, seeking external support to maintain his rule, turned to China. China responded by sponsoring intensive exchanges between the CCP and the Kenya African National Union between 1992 and 1995. These exchanges paved the way for meetings at the level of the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Military Commands in Nairobi and Beijing in 1996 and 1997, respectively (Nantulya, 2025a).

Kenyan officers began studying at Chinese military academies and staff colleges in 1999. By 2001, Chinese security assistance included annual

scholarships for Kenyan officers, sales of military equipment, joint exercises, peacekeeping, and support for Kenyan officer training institutions. This later expanded to police cooperation, as is the case in over two dozen African countries (Njeru, 2021).

By 2018, Kenya had begun allowing Chinese law enforcement agencies to conduct joint operations on Kenyan territory (mostly targeting Chinese and Taiwanese nationals). In July 2021, China and Kenya launched a program to train 400 Kenyan security personnel in China annually, including elite units of the Presidential Guard, the Criminal Investigation Department, and the General Service Unit. In addition to systematic cross-party exchanges, China's security assistance programs in Kenya were also implemented alongside a major scholarship initiative for students, professionals, and government officials, as well as one of Africa's largest portfolios of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects.

In 2022 when the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School was opened in Kibaha, Tanzania. This was China's first overseas ideological school built with a \$40-million grant from the CCP International Liaison Department, which also deployed instructors. It is owned by the six liberation parties in power in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, and trains their cadres in party strengthening, political mobilization, and leadership among other topics.

The CCP also cultivates countries that do not share its revolutionary legacy. At least 50 African countries of different ideological stripes participate regularly in Chinese PME. By 2019, Botswana had educated over 500 officers thanks to 43 annual training slots provided by the PLA since 2007. Cabo Verde, Liberia, Mali, and Senegal each send 10 participants to China annually, while Côte d'Ivoire sends 50, on par with countries like Namibia and Tanzania. Sierra Leone sends 30 (Nantulya, 2023).

The creation of the Algeria-China Governance Capacity-Building Forum in

2015 brought together Algeria's Interior Ministry and China's Academy of Governance. Between 2015 and 2018 alone, it trained four hundred Algerian civil servants and public security officials to implement local government reforms, including within Algeria's national police force. Algeria's ruling National Liberation Front party has consistently ranked in the top five of the six hundred political parties with which the CCP maintains «fraternal exchanges» (Rolland, 2022a).

The binational commission between China and South Africa has a legislative counterpart - a regional exchange mechanism established by South Africa's National Assembly and China's National People's Congress. Within this framework, members of South Africa's parliamentary police committee regularly visit Chinese police academies and stations to study their operational environment, while Chinese officials undertake reciprocal visits. Records of parliamentary hearings reveal a notable admiration among ANC legislators for China's policing system - particularly its use of technology, organizational discipline, and emphasis on education and training.

South Africa's Police Strategic Plan 2020–2025 reflects significant influence from Chinese models, especially in approaches to community policing. Yet, parliamentary debates underscore a clear recognition that the two nations' political systems differ fundamentally - particularly regarding the separation of powers, oversight mechanisms, and human rights protections, which remain central to South Africa's governance. Across the political spectrum, lawmakers attribute South Africa's persistent crime problem to inadequate professionalism, weak education, and limited tactical capability within the South African Police Service (SAPS). Many ANC members see China's example as a potential remedy for these weaknesses.

For China, cultivating this relationship serves a strategic purpose: leveraging its ties with the ANC to ensure that South Africa's security priorities

also safeguard Chinese interests. This agenda aligns well with South Africa's role as the largest recipient of Chinese FDI in Africa and with the ANC's desire to be perceived as a trusted ally of the Chinese Communist Party. Additional pressure comes from South Africa's well-organized Chinese diaspora, which maintains close contacts with parliament, police institutions, and the ANC.

In 2014, Chinese language instruction was added to South Africa's national school curriculum, and in 2015 the initiative was extended to police training - starting with the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (the Hawks) and later expanding to other SAPS divisions by 2017. By 2020, SAPS units across the country were participating in these programs, which are funded and coordinated by China's Ministry of Public Security, the Chinese embassy, Confucius Institutes, and various Chinese community associations (Rolland, 2022b).

African openness to Chinese political and security practices is increasingly evident through the rise of joint security operations involving Chinese and African law-enforcement agencies. In January 2022, a highly coordinated operation between Chinese and Ugandan police commandos resulted in the capture and deportation of four individuals designated by China as terrorists. The mission received direct approval from Presidents Yoweri Museveni and Xi Jinping, underscoring the depth of bilateral security cooperation. A decade earlier, in January 2012, former Chinese military and law-enforcement personnel employed by a private Chinese security company collaborated with the Sudanese army to rescue 29 Chinese oil workers kidnapped in South Kordofan - another example of China's willingness to act decisively to protect its citizens and assets abroad.

Since 2016, China has provided extensive training for Uganda's police forces, particularly in the directorates of crime intelligence, criminal investigations, and forensics (Nankinga, 2017). Additionally, China has been instrumental in constructing Uganda's wireless police surveillance network and internal government communication systems. In 2018, following a surge in

robberies targeting Chinese industrial sites, Uganda deployed troops to safeguard Chinese-owned facilities — a move ordered soon after 121 Chinese business leaders met with President Museveni to express security concerns. The following year, the two countries formalized their ties by declaring a «comprehensive strategic partnership».

In July 2025, Somali security officials completed law enforcement, internal, and border security training in China under the GSI, making them the latest in a growing list of African law enforcement personnel that have received training under the GSI label. These trainings borrow heavily from those conducted under the CCAM's Lancang and Mekong River Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Center (Nantulya, 2025b).

In another revealing episode, in 2019, a Chinese national of Uyghur origin reported to a French newspaper that he had been interrogated in Cairo by three Chinese agents, suggesting the presence of Chinese security operatives in Africa conducting extraterritorial actions. More broadly, this case highlights the expanding international legal influence of China's public security institutions. By 2021, a total of thirteen African countries had signed extradition treaties with China - a sharp increase from just one in 2018. Between 1997 and 2022, Egypt and Morocco were among 27 Muslim-majority states that extradited ethnic Uyghurs to China in coordination with Chinese security services. In total, 1,546 extraditions were recorded across the Middle East and North Africa during this period, underscoring that a growing number of African states have become unsafe havens for individuals wanted under Chinese law.

On the diplomatic front, African governments have consistently supported Beijing's counterterrorism policies in Xinjiang. Many of them regularly send ambassadors stationed in Beijing on fact-finding missions to the region, during which they often commend China's "poverty alleviation" efforts (Liu, 2021). Between 2020 and 2021, African members of the UN Human Rights Council

formed majority coalitions that repeatedly blocked Western-sponsored resolutions condemning China's human rights record. Similarly, during a July 2, 2019 session, African states joined a 53-member coalition that rejected a resolution backed by 27 mostly Western countries criticizing China's national security law in Hong Kong.

This diplomatic alignment demonstrates that African representatives are increasingly promoting and defending Chinese national security norms within international institutions - often in open defiance of Western criticism.

African governments welcome China's security cooperation for various reasons. For many, China is a source of affordable arms with less stringent export controls and more flexible lending terms compared to Western suppliers. Some see China as a means to strengthen regime security. Others seek closer security ties with China as part of a hedging strategy (Nantulya, 2025a).

China is gradually taking on a more assertive role in African security, moving from a norm-accepting to a norm-setting approach. This shift aligns with President Xi Jinping's broader goal of increasing China's global influence and promoting an alternative model of governance. On August 1, 2017, China officially opened its first overseas military base with a flag-raising ceremony in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, on the same day as the People's Liberation Army celebrated its 90th anniversary. And since its establishment, the base has expanded from a "logistics center" intended to handle rotational deployments to a large logistics base with a special naval pier capable of hosting China's largest navy vessels sailing in blue waters, and a deployed special operations unit of the Chinese Marine Corps capable of supporting combat missions.

The Chinese military base in Djibouti performs a number of functions. Djibouti is strategically situated on Africa's eastern coast, at the crossroads of maritime routes to Europe and the Middle East, giving it significant geostrategic importance. The country has signed a military cooperation agreement with China,

which includes small arms training and high-level bilateral engagement, with both nations maintaining military attachés. By diversifying its political and economic partnerships, Djibouti has been able to exert some leverage in its dealings with China.

China, in turn, actively invests in the country's infrastructure, including the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway and the Dorale multi-purpose port. The Dorale port, operated by China Merchants Group and located near U.S., French, and Japanese military bases, allows the Chinese navy not only to replenish supplies but also to conduct troop training and equipment testing under unique operational conditions.

China established its military base in Djibouti to protect its economic interests. China needs Africa's natural resources. The PRC's economic growth is based on access to natural resources in other regions. The Horn of Africa is one of the strategically important parts of Africa. In recent years, huge reserves of hydrocarbon resources have been discovered in Ethiopia and Somalia. Natural resources in the maritime areas of Somalia include oil and gas reserves. Somalia's offshore oil reserves are estimated to be around 110 billion barrels. The oil resources would make Somalia the seventh largest reserve in the world. In addition, Somalia has nearly 440 trillion cubic feet of offshore gas, making it the fourth largest gas reserve in the world.

Like Somalia, Ethiopia has vast hydrocarbon resources in various parts of the country. For example, Ethiopia has huge reserves of gas and oil in the Ogaden Basin. Netherland Sewell and Associates, an energy consulting firm based in the United States, confirmed that the volume of reserves is seven trillion cubic feet. This is a huge amount of hydrocarbon resources discovered in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Oil was discovered in the area around Hilala (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022).

In the 21st century, information and communication technologies (ICT)

have become a critical factor in economic development. Africa has a significant technological gap that cannot be bridged without assistance from developed economies. Cooperation between the PRC and African countries in the ICT sector is carried out within the framework of the Digital Silk Road (DSR), a component of the BRI that helps less developed countries improve telecommunications networks, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, surveillance capabilities, and the construction of cross-border and transcontinental fiber-optic networks, and undersea cables.

In its document «Plan of Actions on Jointly Building a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in Cyberspace (2025-2026)», the Chinese government notes that: «China stands ready to strengthen cooperation with African countries in cybersecurity emergency response. We support and encourage CNCERT to reach out to more African CERTs for joint handling of cross-border incidents, experience sharing, and signing of cooperation documents. China is ready to invite African partners to attend World Internet Conference events, CNCERT International Partnership Conference and other activities to further enhance mutual trust through dialogue and exchanges. China is willing to conduct exchanges and cooperation with Africa in data security and cross-border data flows to jointly address related risks and challenges and promote secure and orderly cross-border flows of data» (Plan of Actions).

Conclusions

China's presence in Africa today goes far beyond traditional economic partnerships. It is transforming into a comprehensive model of strategic influence that encompasses trade, investment, defense, cybersecurity, and digital technologies. Beijing uses both soft power (education, loans, technical assistance) and hard tools (weapons, military bases, cyber surveillance), enabling it to impose its own rules of the game on the continent.

The PRC's military presence in Africa is significant. Africa hosts the largest

deployed PLA forces operating beyond China's periphery. PLA troops are deployed in Djibouti, participate in United Nations peacekeeping missions, and conduct counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. The PRC chairs multilateral forums such as FOCAC and the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, expands influence over African military leaders through a long-established professional military education program, and increases arms sales to African countries as Russian sales to the continent decline.

All this poses new challenges for African countries, including the risks of losing digital sovereignty, increased political repression, and economic dependence. At the same time, new opportunities for infrastructure development, security, and technological modernization are opening up. The dilemma for Africa is to balance the benefits of cooperation with the preservation of national sovereignty, human rights, and democratic institutions.

Moreover, China's growing influence in Africa is reshaping the regional security landscape and redefining global power balances. By combining economic incentives, military engagement, and digital technologies, Beijing establishes a comprehensive footprint that challenges the traditional dominance of Western powers. African states face the complex task of navigating between competing external actors while safeguarding their strategic autonomy.

In the long term, the sustainability of China-Africa cooperation will depend on how African governments manage these relations. Careful policy planning is required to ensure that engagement with China does not exacerbate political centralization, undermine transparency, or compromise democratic governance. At the same time, Chinese investments in infrastructure, defense, and technology can contribute positively to regional development if aligned with national priorities and robust regulatory frameworks.

China's engagement in Africa's security landscape serves to advance its strategic economic and political objectives by ensuring access to the continent's

mineral resources and consumer markets, while simultaneously reinforcing its influence within international organizations—an outcome that consolidates China’s status as a major global power.

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