

China's Growing Influence on Security in Africa: An Alternative Narrative Perspective

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Discourses on China's growing influence in Africa can be categorized into two groups—namely, the dominant/Western narrative that warns Africans to be wary and the emergent/Chinese narrative that encourages Africans to be accommodating of this relationship. What then is the view of Africans to China's rising influence on the continent? This article contends that what Africans think has not been given much thought in extant literature, hence the need to build an alternative narrative. Taking this approach provides an indigenous perspective to China's rapprochement with security in Africa. This article concludes that China's security ventures in Africa have had noticeable benefits for the continent, but there is need for Africa's governments to be cautious.

Keywords security, Africa, China, dominant narrative, emergent narrative, alternative narrative

Introduction

The bulk of the discourse on the China-Africa relationship has centered on economics, trade, and infrastructural development. China's influence on the continent, however, has spread rapidly across the four elements of national power—namely, diplomacy, information, military and economic. As Dyrenforth (2021) notes, China's influence includes diplomatic relations with African countries and the African Union, expanded military-to-military cooperation with African partners, the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, the proliferation of state-owned enterprises across the continent, and extensive investment via China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While much attention has been paid to diplomacy, economics, and infrastructural development, academic literature has given little consideration to China's influence on security in Africa, despite how tightly woven security is to the other three areas. This study not only contributes to filling that gap, but is also

necessary in light of Alden's (2011) prediction that engagement in Africa's peace and security is in China's interest and will increasingly become a focus for policymakers in Beijing. Consistent with this view, this research examines China's influence on security in Africa from the perspective of the *alternative narrative*.

In this research, the alternative narrative examines both the *Western/dominant narrative*—what Adichie (2009) terms the “single story”—and the *emergent/Chinese/Eastern narrative*. The alternative narrative expatiates events from an indigenous (minority status) perspective. The views of the indigenous collective have been ignored for too long, so what dominates academic literature and international media are the Western and emergent (Chinese) narratives. This schema pervades discussions even on issues unique to indigenous peoples and communities of the developing South. Accordingly, this article examines these two prevailing narratives: the dominant narrative, which warns of the dangers of China's growing influence in Africa's security realm, and the emergent narrative, which frames China as a partner in Africa's development. Adopting the alternative narrative, this article draws on past and recent events to present Africa's perspectives on China's growing influence.

This article contends that, given the West's exploitative relationship with Africa for more than five centuries, it is difficult to justify its warnings to Africa about the sinister motives behind China's overtures. This research further contends that China's cooperative gestures should be accepted yet directed toward building Africa's own capacity to reduce its reliance on external assistance and prevent Beijing from dictating the (foreign) policy trajectories of African states.

Methodology

Throughout modern history, Western paradigms and perspectives have dominated academic literature, exemplifying Adichie's (2009) argument about the “dangers of a single story” in reference to the dominant narrative. The dominance of Western perspectives draws on their authority from colonial times, modern advances in science (which often overlook scientific contributions from the much larger developing world), and control of global institutions like the United Nations (UN), the international media, and the Church—all of which promote Western influence over non-Western cultures and thought. As a result, indigenous thought, cultures, and scientific advances from other regions are seldom acknowledged and, in some cases, are forgotten. The dominant narrative ensures that non-Western practices are analyzed through the prism of Western lenses, with indigenous cultures consequently viewed as mundane when measured against Western paradigms, rather than on the intrinsic value they hold within local dynamics.

This applies to the literature on China in Africa, where the dominant narrative

highlights the dangers of China's increasing influence on the continent and warns Africans to be wary of and to resist China's burgeoning incursion. In recent years, an emergent narrative, advanced by China's elites and scholars, has sought to counter the dominant narrative. This narrative encourages Africa to welcome China's expanding influence on the continent. As China's influence in Africa has grown, so too has the emergent narrative.

Given these two overarching narratives, where is the African viewpoint? What do Africans really think of China's expanding influence? The African perspective on events on the continent constitutes the alternative narrative. Several authors have written in favor of this approach. Said (1978), wa Thiong'o (1986), and Adichie (2009) discuss the dangers of the dominant narrative in terms of how it constricts the worldview of global minorities, especially where Western paradigms and cultural experiences of societies in the Global South clash. Freire (1970), Smith (1999), Spivak, (1999), and Kessi, Marks, and Ramugondo (2020) emphasize the educational benefits of expanding paradigms beyond Western criteria to include relative truths and cultural epistemologies. Fricker (2007) conceives it as injustice when a people's experiences are misunderstood because they have been denied the power to produce knowledge on their own terms. Fricker advocates for global minorities be given a voice in knowledge production—a call that this research answers by examining China-Africa security relations from an African perspective. The alternative narrative is thus the expression of what Africans really think of China's influence, free from the bias of Western perspectives and the cajoling endearments of China's soft diplomacy. Through the lens of the alternative narrative, this study analyzes China's influence on Africa's security. The article first evaluates the dominant narrative and subsequently the emergent narrative about China's influence in Africa.

The Western Narrative

Africa has long been synonymous with conflict, especially during the Cold War, when the world's rival power blocs engendered proxy wars on the continent (Adebajo 2011; Cilliers and Sisk 2013). With the major powers of the West emerging victorious at the end of the Cold War, Africa's leaders were compelled to transform their states in line with Western norms, and democracy swept across the continent. Since accountability was often a condition for much-needed developmental aid from the West, many Africa's leaders became responsive to the needs of their people. Consequently, by the turn of the century (1995-2006), African leaders were compelled to address the needs of their people and there was a marked reduction in violent conflict on the continent (Curtis 2012, 2).

With the West's declining engagement in Africa, due to the global economic recession, the refugee crisis in Europe, and conflicts in the Middle East, China

has risen to fill the gap, and according to the Western narrative, its *laissez-faire* concern for good governance has negatively impacted Africa's peace. Gehrold and Tietze (2011, 91) argue that Beijing is simply trying to ensure it has all the resources it needs. The dominant narrative contends that China's approach to providing economic relief for ailing African states negatively impacts security, as evidenced by the rise in conflict on the continent since 2011 (see Conley-Zilkic 2016, 2; Gebrehiwot and de Waal 2016, 1).

Furthermore, with China as an alternative partner to African states, the West loses its leverage on the continent. According to this Western narrative, China's economic intervention in Africa, which is devoid of clauses that demand accountability (Mlambo, Kushamba, and Simawu 2016), makes it the preferred partner for many African leaders who stand to benefit from such low standards of responsibility (Gerson 2011). As such, the Western narrative holds that many conflicts are products of high-handed leadership, as civil strife continues to increase on the continent. China's policy of non-interference in Africa's domestic affairs, the argument goes, encourages government corruption and oppression, which exacerbates poverty, widens the gap and distrust between leaders and their people, and fuels conflict (Nkwanyana 2021).

China's willingness to ignore the enforcement of international sanctions or multinational control mechanisms toward repressive African governments, and equipping them in the process, arguably undermines Africans' hopes for a better life (Emmerson and Solomon 2019). The claim that Africa has witnessed an increase in conflict since 2010 (see World Peace Foundation 2016) coincides with China's stature as a dominant player on the continent. With Russia's arms sales to Africa declining by 44%, China became the leading exporter of weapons to the continent (Malyasov 2024). China's increased arms sales perpetuate and exacerbate conflicts and tensions between and within states, especially when these weapons end up in the possession of violent non-state actors or repressive regimes, thereby worsening conflicts and insurgencies (Enuka 2011; *Africa Defense Forum* 2024). Given the dangers of China's growing influence in security and other areas, as outlined by the Western narrative, African governments are warned to be wary and to take steps to check China's expanding influence on security. It is from this perspective that Krukowska (2024) cautions that ignoring China's increased assertiveness and security undertakings in Africa poses a future threat to the West.

The Chinese Narrative

China's narrative in Africa can be categorized into the following four themes: a shared colonial legacy with Africa; Chinese exceptionalism; China as a champion of multipolarity; and Western incompetence and hypocrisy. Through these

themes, China weaves a narrative that positions Africa as a collaborator and itself as the partner of choice over the West (Akukia et al. 2025). China's narratives about Africa emphasizes mutual benefit, non-interference, and a South-South, win-win cooperation (Soulé et al. 2024). These themes collectively have four major objectives: to promote a positive view of China; to promote Chinese culture and support for its policies; to counter foreign narratives and influences; and to legitimize China's claims over contested issues such as human rights and control of the South China Sea (Akukia et al. 2025). China's emergent narrative is deployed beyond the influence of books and academics. Having invested massively in Africa's digital space, China uses the services of its digital media, such as China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Startimes, as well as institutional and diplomatic outlets like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), to push its narrative of mutual benefit for the continent (X. Li and Y. Li 2024; Cissé and Pihl 2025).

China's relationship with Africa grew consistently from the mid-1950s and led to the formation of FOCAC in 2000 and China's Africa Policy Paper, released in 2006 and 2015. The economic ties forged as the relationship grew resulted in China becoming Africa's largest trading partner by 2009, with emphasis on a win-win approach for all parties (Ye 2021; Gariba 2023). Since the establishment of FOCAC, collaboration with Africa has generally occurred through the Forum or bilateral agreements, with cooperation on security being a vital component of this relationship (Mudavanhu 2022).

It was inevitable that China would become Africa's largest trading partner. This outcome was a natural consequence of China's adoption of Angola's Resource-for-Infrastructure scheme, also known as "R41," developed between the 1980s and the 1990s. Angola's R41 was a form of barter trade in which, in exchange for natural resources or resource rights, foreign countries would build infrastructure such as roads, rails, and hospitals. Angola used this method of trading its natural resources to compensate for its infrastructural deficit after twenty-seven years (1975-2002) of war and instability (Carvalho, Kopiński, and Taylor 2021; Baker 2023). The provision of services by foreign countries also included supplying weapons and training the nation's security forces, which were considered non-public infrastructure (Baker 2023). By adopting this approach from the 1970s with African countries facing huge infrastructural deficits—and providing interest free loans and grants from the 1950s to today—China gradually became the trading and development partner of choice among African states (Corkin 2013).

China's approach to Africa was based on the premise that it was mutually beneficial (Sandy, Jun, and Qian 2013; *Xinhua* 2024). In consonance with this objective, China's first infrastructure project in the early era of its involvement on the continent was the Tanzania-Zambia railway, built between 1970 and 1975 at a cost of US\$406 million, covering approximately 1,860 km. At the end of the Cold

War, China's policy toward Africa evolved into a 21st Century trade framework of profit-based joint ventures, mutual economic benefits, neutrality, self-reliance, and respect for autonomy and non-interference (Baker 2023; Gariba 2023). Reflecting the sentiment of the emergent narrative, Li Anshan (Johnston 2014) notes that China's policies on Africa may change, but the underlying principles remain consistent.

Having presented China's policy approach toward Africa from the emergent narrative, this article now turns to China's influence on security on the continent (Baker 2023).

China's Security Policy in Africa

With its growing influence on the continent, China is also deepening its role in security in Africa as it has become increasingly involved in the provision of arms, participating in peacekeeping, conflict mediation, training of military personnel, and the establishment of military bases. These activities are tied to China's Global Security Initiative, which President Xi Jinping described as "a new and better approach to global security" (Freeman 2024). On the extent of security interactions between China and Africa, Bayes (2020, 20) notes,

Beijing is actively seeking a greater peace and security role in Africa. As Chinese interests and exposure have grown on the continent, security issues have become steadily more important within FOCAC interactions and outcomes. The 2012 FOCAC established the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security, while the 2018 FOCAC elevated peace and security to one of the eight "major initiatives" to be pursued in Sino-African relations between 2018 and 2021. The FOCAC 2018 Action Plan pledged that "China will increase defense and security assistance to Africa, and the two sides will enhance cooperation and strategies and experience sharing." The Action Plan also announced the launch of 50 "security assistance programs," including a China-Africa Peace and Security Fund.

Significantly, all but one country (Eswatini) attended the inaugural summit of the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in 2000 (Ze Yu 2022). This strong attendance demonstrated how influential China had become in African security affairs, making it only a matter of time before China established a military presence on the continent.

Despite projecting and promoting its military capabilities in Africa, the efficiency of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) remains technically doubtful. Apart from minor skirmishes with neighbors, the PLA's last major combat operation was the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979, nearly half a century ago. This lack of combat experience has been termed the "peace disease," which casts doubt on the PLA's efficiency (Wen 2015; Jones 2019; Van Oudenaren 2022).

Van Oudenaren (2022) contends that the peace disease debilitates soldiers by leaving them only faintly aware of the enemy, increasing abandoned military equipment, reducing skills in operating military machinery, and contributing to a general degradation in professionalism among the military's top brass as they become more pleasure-seeking (see also Tian and Chen 2023). In pursuance of the Five Principles of Peace—namely, mutual respect for others' sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in others' internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran 2014)—this lack of combat experience is a logical consequence. Nevertheless, given China's need for external power projection in far-away places and its significant investments and growing expatriate population in these places, the capability to protect them has become an indispensable necessity.

China has been active in Africa's security through peacekeeping, conflict resolution, arms supply, and the use of defense attachés. The 2018 China-Africa Policy Paper (*Xinhua* 2021) states,

Through various means such as port calls and joint exercises and training, China has provided strong support to African countries in strengthening national defense and the armed forces, and to countries in the Sahel region and those bordering the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea in upholding security and combating terrorism in their regions. China has launched assistance programs and helped train African military personnel under the Belt and Road Initiative, and in areas of law and order, UN peacekeeping missions, fighting piracy and combating terrorism.

Given these events, authors not aligned with the dominant narrative consider it alarmist. This criticism of the dominant narrative considers that, long before the turn of the 21st Century, China has been both present in Africa and influential in trade on the continent, yet it was never a part of the four waves of conquest and plunder perpetrated by the West—from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to 21st-Century neo-colonialism (Brautigam 2011; Abidde 2021). More recently, for example, Beijing was not privy to the plundering and proliferation of Muammar Gaddafi's sophisticated arms stockpiles in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan Revolution, which found their way into the hands of armed groups and jihadist organizations across parts of North and West Africa (Small Arms Survey 2015). Notably, this event was masterminded by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and has contributed to the destabilization of Africa's Sahel region (Coleman and Job 2021).

China, in protest, abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (S/RES/1973 2011), which authorized military intervention in Libya. Being a member of the Big Five, China could have vetoed the resolution and, by extension, prevented NATO's attack on Gaddafi. Instead, its abstention

paved the way for the attack of an African ally. One school of thought contends that Libya and Gaddafi were simply not priorities for China, given China's minimal investments in Libya and the fact that both the African Union and the Arab League (to which Libya belonged) had sanctioned the attack. From this perspective, China opted to not stand in the way of the big powers (Richburg 2011; Dean 2011). The other view contends that China's abstention was consistent with its policy of neutrality and non-interference in civil matters (Junbo and Méndez 2015). Whichever perspective is correct, China's decision in this matter underscores its self-interest over mutual benefits.

The Alternative Narrative: Assessing China's Security Footprints in Africa

As China's continental and global influence grows, so too have its policies and principles in relating to Africa, sometimes moving away from the original policies. For instance, on the issue of non-interference, China has subtly influenced the external policies of African states, using its leverage to ensure that most sever ties with Taiwan, which it considers a renegade province (Kironksa 2022; Gariba 2023; Gargiulo 2024). Such influence on African affairs by China will undoubtedly continue.

As Africa's largest trading partner, it was only a matter of time before China became more involved in security on the continent, as it was ill-advised to leave its assets to the protection of poorly equipped militaries in many of Africa's fragile and unpredictable governments. By virtue of its investments, China has over one million citizens in Africa, providing good justification for a stake in the continent's security. Having such a stake in security on the continent allows China greater influence at state, regional, and continental levels (Bayes 2020). Despite its security imprints on the continent, China has exercised its influence much more through mediation and peacebuilding and has avoided been drawn into hostile military engagements, whether directly or indirectly. This has ensured that unlike the big powers of Europe and the US, China has remained on the periphery of African security, opting instead to assist from the fringes while making its economic gains and enhancing its reputation.

China's Security Imprints through Peacekeeping

China has increasingly invested in security on the continent, beginning with its role in peacekeeping in April 2007, when China's President Hu Jintao intervened in Sudan's Darfur crisis and convinced an uncompromising President Omar Bashir to concede to a UN peacekeeping contingent in Sudan (Cabestan 2018). Since then, China has sought to increase its mark on security in Africa through peacekeeping and other means. China consolidated its role in 2012 through the

formation of the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security initiative (Alden 2014).

Notably, after ranking fifth in 2014, China became the second-largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping by 2019, paying 10.25% of the UN peacekeeping budget, second only to the US at 27.89%. As of 2024, China remained in this position with 18.68%, while the US contributed 26.94% (Congressional Research Service 2019, 2024). From its first deployment of twenty military personnel in 1990 to assist in monitoring elections in Namibia under the UN Transition Assistance Group (Gill and Huang 2009; Saferworld 2011), China has deployed approximately forty thousand troops to UN peace operations between 1990 and 2019, of which over 80% were in Africa. In 2019, China had 2,517 peacekeepers in Africa—twice as many as the other four UN Security Council members combined. In 2024, of a total of 2,267 peacekeepers, China deployed approximately 2,000 to Africa (Shah 2024). Across these deployments to Africa, China has recorded sixteen deaths (Cabestan 2018; Zürcher 2019; *Xinhua* 2020). Through such commitment, China indicates its readiness to act as a more responsible power broker on the continent and in global affairs. In September 2015, President Xi announced at the UN Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping that China would provide \$100 million in military aid to the African Union.

At the launch of the China-Africa Peace and Security Initiative in September 2018, China fulfilled its promise of \$100 million in military aid pledged three years earlier and provided an additional \$80 million in military aid to assist the African Union in building its peacekeeping capacity. China also provided approximately \$42.3 million to support the construction of the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force, made up of the West African Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (*Xinhua* 2021). China's peacekeepers are sometimes deployed to some of the toughest locations, owing to the fact that the country places few caveats on the troops it pledges—a practice that the UN appreciates. As a result, China has gained greater recognition as a major player in the peacekeeping arena (Zürcher 2019).

Furthermore, Chinese peacekeepers have received accolades for discipline and commitment to the cause of peacekeeping. It is in this regard that some 332 Chinese peacekeepers, including sixteen women, received the prestigious UN medal for their service to the cause of durable peace in South Sudan. The UN Peacekeeping (2023) report notes,

For Blue Helmets serving for peace with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), personal reward remains second to helping conflict-affected populations feel safe. However, 332 dedicated women and men from China deployed as engineers and medical peacekeepers to this young nation's Western Bahr El Ghazal state recently received the prestigious UN medal for their unceasing efforts to improve the lives of communities here.

With this growing reputation, and with Africa's support, China is gradually re-writing the UN's approach to peacekeeping. As Bayes (2020) and Coleman and Job (2021) point out, there has been a gradual shift in UN peacekeeping from the Western approach of pushing for the establishment of democratic regimes toward a Chinese approach focused on ensuring regime stability, and from the model of the liberal international order (LIO) toward a decentralized model in which regions have greater influence over UN peace operations decisions. Coleman and Job (2021) contend further that, China endorses globalized UN peacekeeping but proposes a non-liberal (and non-Western led) notion of "developmental peace" to guide it. The complementarities between African and Chinese priorities raise the possibility of a profound challenge to LIO peacekeeping. There has been good reason for this clamor.

NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011, which ousted Muammar Gaddafi, was approved by the UN and spearheaded by the US, France, and Germany. Although Russia and China did not veto the action, it turned China against the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) principle that underpinned the intervention and weakened African states' support for the same tenet. African heads of state argue that R2P was used as excuse for regime change rather than for the protection of civilians, which was its original purpose (Cocodia 2024). Alongside African leaders, China has expressed disdain for the intervention, and together they have advocated for a "protection of civilians" approach that focuses on facilitating ceasefires, prompting conflict prevention, and supporting peaceful resolution of conflict (Cabestan 2018; Zürcher 2019; Coleman and Job 2021). Such Western disregard for the African approach—and China's respect for it—has drawn African leaders closer to China.

While China's stance with African states seems noble, the alternative narrative acknowledges that its motives are not entirely altruistic. China incurred significant losses from the actions of the UN and NATO in Libya and has consequently sought to prevent a repeat. This same reason has prompted China to intensify its security role in Africa. As Cabestan (2018, 719-20) notes,

The Libyan crisis had two consequences for China. The first was a growing awareness that it needed to better protect its nationals and interests abroad following the ill-prepared but successful evacuation of some 36,000 Chinese from Libya and the loss of 50 Chinese projects, the total contractual value of which amounted to around US\$18.8 billion. The second was the growing risk of radical Islam's dissemination in the Sahel region, where Chinese companies are increasingly present: after Gaddafi's fall, Libya's southern borders became more porous, facilitating the movement of terrorist organizations into Niger, Mali, Mauritania and even Burkina Faso.

The spread of the crisis to these states (Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso) would further endanger Chinese lives and businesses and place greater pressure on Beijing. To avoid this, an immediate solution for China would be

to have more military presence on the ground (through peacekeeping), while a long-term measure would be to establish military bases from where deployments can be rapidly made. To this end, with a military base already in Djibouti, Beijing is further considering bases in Angola, Kenya, Seychelles, and Tanzania, and there are existing plans to build one in Gabon. China's 2015 defense white paper identified the protection of its overseas interests as a strategic task for the PLA. Its 2019 defense white paper, meanwhile, stated that the PLA was actively developing overseas logistical facilities to address deficiencies in overseas operations and support for contingencies, including overseas evacuation (Miller 2022; Dalton 2024).

China's losses from the undue interference of the West in Africa's domestic affairs has shaped its security focus in Africa. Thus, while China's support for the African/regional cause is welcomed by Africans, it ultimately serves to secure China's own interests. Moreover, such sacrifices would not be made if they did not enhance China's influence in Africa (Bayes 2020). This influence extends to the UN, where China hopes, through Africa's support, to change the current Western approach of pushing for the establishment of democratic regimes to a Chinese approach focused on ensuring regime stability.

Supporting the argument that China's support for Africa serves as a springboard to greater influence over UN security approaches, Coleman and Job (2021, 1466) note,

[China's support for African actors] would also enhance China's own influence, given its increasingly close relationship with the AU and African regional organizations, and its aspiration 'to build an identity as an economic partner and an ally in addressing the multifaceted security challenges on the continent. In 2017, China endorsed 'respecting African countries' ownership to solve African security problems as the precondition and foundation for supporting Africa-led peace operations... China's interests in empowering African influence over UN peace operations in Africa also serves its own broader positioning in global affairs.

It can also be argued that China's burgeoning peacekeeping role is necessary to keep its troops active in light of the peace disease that affects the PLA. Peacekeeping deployments offer several advantages for the PLA, namely field and battle experience, theaters to test new Chinese weapons, opportunities for information and intelligence gathering in mission areas and beyond, and diplomacy and conflict management. The diplomacy and conflict management skills that peacekeepers are trained in are sometimes used to serve the national governments of peacekeepers to help keep aggrieved regions quiet, even when the causes of grievance are justified (Sotomayor 2014; Cunliffe 2017; Cocodia 2017). Given China's experience with its own regions where grievances run high, the conflict management and diplomacy skills of its peacekeepers become valuable tools for keeping the peace internally. Once again, China's commitment to Africa

attends to its own interests.

Arms Supply, Security Programs, and Strategies in Africa

China is currently the leading arms supplier in Africa, having overtaken Russia, and the reasons for this are obvious. The Russia-Ukraine war has diverted Russia's attention from supplying arms to Africa to its war with Ukraine, and international sanctions placed on Russia's exports have also affected its weapons sales. China stepped in to fill this gap, leveraging its economic influence in Africa, support for greater relevance of African states in international affairs, and flexible pricing in arms sales (making them more affordable) to its advantage (Hull and Markov 2012; *Africa Defense Forum* 2024; Kushnikov 2024). China's arms sales to Africa have been on the rise since 2010. Between 2017 and 2020, China's weapons sales to Sub-Saharan Africa tripled those of the US (Bartlett 2023). In 2021, for example, Nigeria purchased 34.4% of its military equipment from China, 6% from Russia, and just over 2% from the US. As observed by the *Africa Defense Forum* (2024), China's efforts were initially focused on East and Central Africa, but the waning influence of France in West Africa has allowed China to project its influence into the region. The consequence of these developments, as noted by the US Department of Defense (in Hull and Markov 2012), is that China has become the leading supplier of arms to at least twenty-one African countries (*Africa Defense Forum* 2024; Malyasov 2024). Weapons sold to these countries include drones, rockets, artillery, armored vehicles, aircraft, space systems, radar, and electronic warfare systems. Given the peace disease of the PLA and the multiplicity of conflicts in Africa, the continent effectively becomes a testing ground for China's weapons.

Africa has become a driver of China's war economy, and Chinese weapons manufacturing companies are spreading across the continent. As noted by the *Africa Defense Forum* (2024), "Norinco, China's largest weapons producer, opened a new sales office in Senegal in August 2023. The company, which supplies small arms, artillery and armored vehicles, already had offices in Angola, Nigeria and South Africa, and there are plans to establish offices in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali."

The West is uncomfortable with these developments and warns that, if they continue, conflicts in Africa could escalate into inter-state wars beyond the reach of peacekeeping mediation efforts (Hull and Markov 2012). Critics also argue that the presence of Chinese weapons in the hands of violent non-state actors shows that China has been reckless in its arms sales and uses its clout in the UN to hinder investigations into its dealings (Lynch 2012). In Sudan, for example, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces used Chinese suicide drones to attack Sudan Armed Forces military bases in April 2024 (*Africa Defense Forum* 2024).

Arguments from Bromley, Duchatel, and Holtom (2013) contend that China recognizes that the illicit transfer of arms destabilizes nations. Consequently, China has more to lose if weapons proliferate, given its investments on the

continent, as was already demonstrated with its economic losses in Libya. As such, China has stressed its commitment to preventing and combating the illegal sales of small and light weapons. In cases where weapons from China have been found in the hands of violent non-state actors, it is likely that corrupt practices by government and military officials, or the sponsorship of rebel groups by neighboring states are responsible for such proliferation. Such occurrences are not new in Africa or elsewhere.

China's Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Technology Dominance in Africa

On the issue of cyberspace technology, which is crucial to modern security, China has been accused of sponsoring hacks or cyberespionage on African governments' systems to glean information or even blackmail officials to gain a competitive edge over rivals. At the same time, Africa owes its digital revolution to China's cost-effective yet high-quality equipment and service delivery (Gariba 2023). Being a defining force of Africa's evolution enables China to shape the policies and trajectories of African states, thereby becoming more involved in their internal affairs (Kovacs 2023). Such influence becomes inevitable when the majority of African governments invite China to assist with their security challenges. The fields of cooperation under China's International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace have expanded to include online security. Consequently, Sino-African cybersecurity cooperation has emerged as a key component of China's new strategic alliance with Africa (Mudavanhu 2022). Huawei has been at the forefront of China's initiatives in Africa, responsible for over fifty percent of Africa's 3G network and seventy percent of 4G networks, making China the dominant player in this area. These projects include the (ibid.):

- Burkina Faso: A EUR80-million project commenced in July 2021 to build a 650 km fiberoptic network will connect all of the country's major cities to a new Huawei-powered Smart City platform.
- Senegal: The Huawei-built *Diamniadio National Datacenter* opened in June 2021, and the Senegalese government moved all government data and digital platforms from foreign servers to the new national data center.
- Cameroon: The US\$15-million Zamengoe National Data Centre was built by a Chinese consortium, including Huawei.
- Zambia: As the primary project supplier for the Smart Zambia initiative, Huawei built the US\$75-million Zambia National Data Center and is slated to build an estimated US\$365-million computer assembly plant at the same site.
- Cape Verde: A 720 km submarine cable system, developed by Huawei Marine Networks (now HMN Technologies), was completed in January 2022, and with landfalls in Cape Verde and Senegal, can incorporate other countries in the Economic Community of West African States.

These investments are part of a direct development plan under the Digital Silk Road initiative, which itself is part of China's BRI that was launched in 2013. The Digital Silk Road seeks to connect BRI priority countries through cross-border optical cables and communications networks. As of 2022, forty of Africa's fifty-four states had signed the BRI agreements (Nkwanyana 2021; Mudavanhu 2022).

In response to these developments, the dominant narrative argues that China intends to use its dominance in this sector to promote its model of authoritarian governance, which relies heavily on surveillance technology. To lend credence to this claim, certain repressive regimes (such as Uganda) that acquired these technologies for the purpose of controlling crime have expanded their use to track government critics (Jili 2020). Gorden Moyo (in Langa 2024), director of the Public Policy Research Institute of Zimbabwe, warns, "We need to understand the honey we get from China and the sting that digital technologies from China have on Africa because this has a visible impact on civil liberties." Similarly, Samantha Hoffman (in Nkwanyana 2021) argues that:

Beijing's technological expansion is particularly worrisome because of the areas it focuses on. The ability of smart cities technologies to enhance and streamline service provision can obscure their invasiveness and advancement of political control, eliciting cooperation from users who are focused on immediate and tangible benefits rather than (typically) less immediate drawbacks.

China has made access to funds easier for African leaders to develop capacity and infrastructure. Ideally, this should have a positive effect on the quality of governance, since it offers these leaders some leverage to plan and improve the lives of their people. China cannot be held responsible when African leaders fail to use these funds responsibly or to meet the terms of contracts. It should also be noted that loans from the West did not improve governance or quality of life on the continent, as infrastructural deficits and poverty have persisted since independence, long before the advent of China's economic forays into Africa (Nicholas 2015; Lumumba 2024; Actionaid 2023).

Training Programs and Smoke Screens

China, Tanzania, and Mozambique commenced a trilateral counterterrorism exercise, "Peace Unity-2024," in early August 2024. This marked Beijing's renewed focus on military diplomacy in Africa. The drill involved PLA ground units, the PLA Central Theatre Command, and a naval flotilla from the PLA Southern Theatre Command. Conducted on both land and sea, the exercises aimed to strengthen the military capabilities of the forces involved and to build closer ties

between the participating countries (Martin 2024; Massango 2024).

China's expanding naval presence in the region, tied to its BRI, has included port calls and joint exercises with local naval commands. However, the establishment of Chinese-operated ports and logistical hubs has raised alarm over long-term strategic control, potentially undermining the sovereignty of African host states (Brewster 2018). At the same time, Chinese fishing vessels have been reported to engage in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in West African waters. In 2017, Ghanaian authorities expressed concerns over the increased presence of Chinese fishing vessels engaged in IUU fishing in their territorial waters. Interestingly, Chinese naval vessels were conducting "friendly port calls" and joint training exercises with Ghana's navy at the same time. The timing and proximity of these visits raised suspicions that the presence of Chinese naval ships was intended to deter local enforcement efforts against the Chinese fishing vessels. Other cases have been reported elsewhere. In 2016, for example, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Fisheries reported a rise in IUU fishing by Chinese fleets, coinciding with routine port calls by Chinese naval vessels in Freetown (Belhabib, Sumaila, and Pauly 2015; Environmental Justice Foundation 2022).

China has been accused of focusing significantly more on training programs for military officers from across the continent than on joint military exercises. The criticism here is that China's military priorities suggest its aim is to build influence with Africa's military, both now and in the near future. Even when joint military drills are conducted, China always has an objective—whether mutually beneficial or self-serving. This research shares the view of Frimpong (2025) who maintains that although China's engagement is self-interested, its soft diplomacy interventions—ranging from mediating in West Africa, to peacekeeping in the DRC and supporting African Union security efforts—complement local initiatives. Thus, African leaders should be willing to steer their course while leveraging Chinese assistance.

Concluding Thoughts

Contrary to what the dominant narrative implies, citizens of African nations can discern for themselves China's intentions. The dominant narrative of the West has been overtly critical of China's growing influence on the continent and the apparent approval from Africans (Campbell et al. 2012; Krukowska 2024). Through all the criticism, however, the West bears greater responsibility for Africa's exploitation. For five hundred years it ruthlessly exploited Africa—an abuse that remains prevalent under policies that are albeit less brutal but equally devastating. As such, the West possesses no moral standing to warn Africans of China's overtures toward a second colonization.

The need to examine the popular narratives, due to their biases, is made

evident in the following extract from the United States Institute of Peace (Freeman 2024):

Beijing's growing security focus comes out of its recognition that exposure to risk resulting from intrastate conflict could result in high economic losses. China drew many lessons from the conflict in Sudan and oil-rich South Sudan's independence in 2011. Since then, China's security involvement on the continent has been expanding, becoming a routine facet of FOCAC and China's activities in Africa... Beijing's growing security focus comes out of its recognition that exposure to risk resulting from intrastate conflict could result in high economic losses.

This is a classic example of the dominant construct that Adichie (2009) warns of—a narrative crafted to absolve the West of blame, and which has dominated international media and much of academic literature. The conflict in South Sudan began in 2013. China made its focus on security in Africa known in 2012 with the formation of the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security initiative (Alden 2014). China's focus on security was necessitated by the Western intervention in Libya in 2011, where China lost US\$18.8 billion in investments and had to hurriedly evacuate over 36,000 Chinese nationals. NATO's interference in Libya made the Sahel more unstable, thereby placing more Chinese investments and citizens at risk. The alternative narrative would therefore aver that China's incursion into security in Africa was necessitated by undue Western interference in Africa's domestic affairs, which left China's interests exposed to consequences for which Beijing was not responsible. Any responsible government would take proactive steps to protect its citizens and interests, and based on the power it projects, China acted accordingly.

In view of the push by the West to discredit China's presence in Africa, it is worth recalling the sentiment expressed by Tanzania's first president, Julius Nyerere, directed to the US and its Western allies, in which he argued: while we are friends and partners, please do not choose for us who will be our enemy; let us decide ourselves (African Union 1963, 146-7). The West has directly or indirectly been linked to the majority of Africa's wars, but none has been linked to China. Africa's bitter colonial history under Europe, especially in Belgian and Portuguese colonies, continued into post-colonial times. The US Central Intelligence Agency and the White House, for example, were prime actors in the 1961 assassination of Congo's Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and the sequence of events that marked the beginning of decades of poverty, dictatorship, and war—a crisis that reverberated far beyond the Congo (Reid 2023; Lawal 2024). Israel's role in the blood diamonds trade and Congo's crisis (Jay 2023); the role of the US, France, and Belgium in Rwanda's genocidal civil war (Chossudovsky 2003; Dallaire 2004); the assassinations of presidents, coups, and proxy wars of the Cold War era; and the rabid exploitation from colonial times to the present, as

evidenced by the reasons behind the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi, are all tied to Western interventions to keep Africa poor (Nicholas 2015; Chihombori-Quao 2019). These actions (and more) have undermined governance and the quality of life on the continent, not China's influence. China may have influenced certain decisions, but its approach so far has steered clear of dictating governance styles in Africa, and this will likely continue into the near future. There is no doubt that Africa is still conflict-prone, largely due to Western exploitation-based interference, distrust among African states, inept leadership, and the lack of political will to get things done right.

China's dealings have been beneficial for Africa just as much as they have been for China. It is also acknowledged that African leaders have not made good use of the opportunities offered by China, which gives Beijing a lot more leverage for exploitation—and this is what currently persists on the continent. At the same time, what China has offered in terms of development and security assistance has been a much better deal than what the West offered in its five hundred years of interaction with Africa. Africa should accept this assistance, but with the aim of bridging the gap with the rest of the world and standing independently, rather than being constantly propped up by external aid. Here, the alternative narrative agrees with the dominant narrative about Africa's need to be cautious of a second colonization, but this time from the East.

Although echoing both the Western narrative's warning that Africa should be wary of China's incursions into the continent and the Chinese narrative's characterization of Beijing as a benevolent partner in African development, the alternative narrative centers the African perspective. The West has plundered and controlled Africa's resources and politics for over half a millennium. It is thus understandable why the West may find it difficult to let go of its power on the continent or to allow another power to share in this exploitation. To ensure that it remains Africa's preferred partner, the West took on the role of thinking for Africans, which is embodied by the dominant narrative. The alternative narrative, expressed by authors such as Adichie (2009) and Nwosa and Otobo (2020), asserts that Africa has come of age and must have its voice heard in global affairs. This alternative narrative is not a midpoint between the views of the dominant and emergent narratives of the West and China, respectively, but rather reflects how global, national, and local minorities—the poorly represented—view issues that directly affect them.

Whether viewed from a benevolent or self-interested perspective, China has undeniably done well for Africa. However, in relation to the tenets of its Five Principles of Peace, China's relationship with Africa has evolved from that of a benevolent partner with shared colonial experiences to an influential partner whose benevolence is tied to greater influence and who sometimes interferes in the foreign policies of African client states, contrary to its tenets of non-interference. The unwillingness of many African leaders to take responsibility

for their own development has given China greater leverage in this relationship that extends to security issues. China's deep involvement in peacekeeping in Africa stems from the fact that the continent remains conflict ridden, which requires the presence of peacekeepers across its five geopolitical regions. The shortfall in the security capacity of most African states has led China to willingly fill the gap through the provision of cybersecurity tools, military hardware, and training programs for military officers—all of which further China's influence on the continent and provide leverage to shape policy directions of African states. However, as is noted in discourses that are rooted in the alternative narrative, African leaders must be wary, for it is unhealthy for external powers to dictate internal affairs; Africa's experience with the West provides more than enough evidence in this regard. So, whatever China offers today should be used to build capacity and self-sufficiency, reducing long-term reliance on China. It is wise to keep Beijing as a strategic ally, but not as a power upon which the continent depends for the long term.

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