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## CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

*Security Initiatives and United Nations Voting*

Daniel Rice

*Daniel Rice is the China political and military strategy subject matter expert at the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation & Future Warfare at Marine Corps University in Quantico, VA, a non-resident fellow at the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies in Washington, DC, and the chief operating officer of Foreign Brief. He is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC, and the Hopkins-Nanjing Center in Nanjing, China. He is fluent in Mandarin Chinese.*

*This is the second of a two-article series by Daniel Rice analyzing the evolution of Chinese diplomatic, economic, and security engagements with African countries as part of the CCP's effort to expand its ambitions as a global leader for the developing world. The first article of the series was published in the February 2023 issue of MES Insights.*

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Gray Research Center  
2040 Broadway Street  
Quantico, VA 22134  
703.432.5260  
[www.usmcu.edu/mes](http://www.usmcu.edu/mes)

The People's Republic of China's relationship with Africa, relative to Western countries' relations with Africa, is comparatively new. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to exert greater leadership on the international stage and expand economic opportunities abroad, Africa has become one of the critical regions for China's future ambitions as a global leader. China's economic engagement abroad has also necessitated a need for security. In 2005, then-CCP general secretary Hu Jintao set new ambitions for China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in his "new historic missions," one of which clearly marked the PLA's role as defending Chinese overseas interests.<sup>1</sup> This new policy opened the doors for the PLA to begin building a small military presence in Africa, which is growing today. China's combined economic and military relations in Africa have also born fruit for the CCP in the form of soft power and leverage in international politics. However, the future of the Sino-African relationship hinges on a perceived "win-win" relationship between the various parties that ultimately requires continued Chinese investment on the continent—a variable that is subject to Chinese domestic and geopolitical realities.

### China's Business and Security Interests in Africa

As China's economic interests in Africa have grown, so too has its military presence.<sup>2</sup> Since 2008, to protect Chinese nationals and economic interests, China has participated in international antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>3</sup> Billed as China's contribution to international security, these operations helped build operational experience for overseas missions and paved the way for other military operations in Africa, namely civilian evacuations.

In 2011 and 2015, crises in Libya and Yemen forced mass evacuations of Chinese nationals living and working in those countries. However, at the time, PLA naval assets engaged in antipiracy operations were unable to meaningfully contribute to evacuation operations, in part due to a lack of supporting infrastructure for sustained overseas operations. The largest Chinese evacuation of its civilians—more than 30,000 from Libya in 2011—relied not on the PLA but on privately chartered aircraft and passenger ferries.<sup>4</sup> Although some military transports and one frigate were involved in the evacuation, the PLA lacked the capabilities to contribute on a larger scale.<sup>5</sup> In the 2015 evacuation from Yemen, the PLA Navy (PLAN) played a more pivotal role in the evacuation of 225 foreign nationals and roughly 600 Chinese nationals.<sup>6</sup> Following the two evacuations, China, using the narrative of supporting future such missions and its antipiracy operations, established its dual-use naval base in Djibouti.

China's dual-use Djibouti base appears to primarily serve as a resupply point for its regular antipiracy escort fleets. Equipped with one pier, a medium-size heliport,

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and supporting facilities, the base likely cannot sustain major military operations. Until its 2021 expansion, the pier at the Djibouti base was relatively small and unable to support larger naval assets. Following the 2021 expansion, however, the pier is now deep-water accessible, and it is speculated that it could support ships as large as an aircraft carrier.<sup>7</sup> Despite its potential capabilities, the Djibouti base is known to act as a critical resupply point for the PLAN's Type 903 replenishment oilers, which in turn resupply the naval escort missions operating off of the coast. The expanded pier and the Type 903 replenishment oilers have both facilitated the PLAN's operating continuous and successive naval fleets in the area as well as increasing the physical size of the ships in the escort fleets. In 2022, the first upgraded Type 052D guided-missile destroyer began operating in the escort fleets.<sup>8</sup> At 7,500 tons and outfitted with a 64-cell vertical launch system, the Type 052D, obviously overkill for antipiracy operations, has more than double the full-load displacement and firepower of the Type 054A guided-missile frigate that was primarily used in past escort fleets. The newer Type 052Ds not only represent a radical increase in PLAN firepower in the region but also have played a direct role in evacuation missions, namely the 2023 evacuation of Chinese nationals from Sudan.<sup>9</sup> A continued need for better and more sustained PLAN operations in the region will likely lead to larger and more robust escort flotillas operating out of Djibouti. Billed as integral to the PLA's ability to protect the CCP's overseas interests, the increased PLAN presence may further strengthen China's ambitions as a leader on the African continent.

China's dual-use base in Djibouti also reflects a new reality of Chinese basing overseas: the interconnectivity of the PLA with the CCP's economic projects through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Djibouti port is connected to larger projects in the region. The Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa is becoming more connected to Djibouti through an electrified railway, with an emphasis on freight, an expansion of its airport terminal, and Africa's first urban light rail.<sup>10</sup> These projects will connect Djibouti with larger areas of inland Africa. Like with the Djibouti base, China may elect to secure further basing at strategic ports that will act as focal points for trade coming out of Africa's interior and connect the ports to the continent's interior through its BRI-sponsored railway and road projects. There has already been much speculation on the location of China's next base in Africa, with Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Tanzania, Angola, and the Seychelles being mentioned as possibilities.<sup>11</sup> Wherever it chooses to pursue its next African overseas basing objective, it is clear that China is moving away from "noninterference" toward establishing itself as

an active military power in Africa.<sup>12</sup> Given the need for China to secure its economic interests and people in Africa, in the future it would make sense for China to establish a small number of these dual-use bases. However, given domestic considerations and China's determination to be perceived as a peaceful player in Africa, it is unlikely that these bases will resemble the large-scale military bases that some Western nations have built in other countries. Instead, Chinese bases are likely to look more like logistics support facilities, even if they have the capacity to support Chinese military power projection abroad.

### **Soft and Hard Power: Building Influence in the United Nations through Africa**

China's engagement in Africa is not just for altruistic purposes. For China, the ultimate goal is to increase its global influence by shaping the international conditions necessary for its rise on the global stage. To these ends, its economic investments through the BRI and security cooperation with African countries has been accompanied by extremely strong messaging promoting the Chinese model as an alternative to the Western development model. From Chinese slogans adorning the walls of Huajian factories in Ethiopia, to Chinese state-sponsored news and television series being beamed into Kenyan homes through the Chinese-owned satellite television company StarTimes, China's information campaigns have been extremely robust. Backed by BRI project dollars, China's influence in Africa has come to the forefront of the world stage and is having tangible results for the CCP in the form of United Nations (UN) voting.

Fifty-four African countries are represented in the UN, the largest individual voting bloc and equivalent to roughly 28 percent of the General Assembly's total voting power.<sup>13</sup> Africa also holds three nonpermanent seats on the current UN Security Council: Gabon, Ghana, and Mozambique. Yet, despite this large representation in the international body, Africa is rarely able to decide the outcome of UN resolutions. For the UN Security Council, power resides in its five permanent members: China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Permanent members hold veto power over resolutions as law stipulates that 9 out of 15 votes are needed for passing procedural resolutions on the Security Council, and all other matters require nine votes for as well as unanimous support from the permanent members.<sup>14</sup> In effect, this means that African votes on the Security Council alone are not enough to effect major procedural votes. Despite the weakness of the African bloc in the Security Council, in other UN votes African states have recently demonstrated more influence. During the March 2022 emergency session on

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condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, African voting on the resolution was split: 17 of the 35 countries that chose to abstain from casting a vote were African countries.<sup>15</sup> Notably, abstaining votes aligned with China, which had chosen to abstain due to the complicated nature of the China-Russia relationship. Among African nations that abstained from the vote, Algeria, Angola, and South Africa are also some of China's largest trading partners.<sup>16</sup>

African voting on the UN resolution against Russia might seem like a one-off instance, but there has been a growing trend of African countries voting at the UN in alignment with China, influenced by Chinese economic engagement on the continent. Post-2008, Chinese investment in Africa likely caused a 78-percent increase in China-Africa UN voting alignment.<sup>17</sup> Although this does not mean perfect alignment between African states and China, it does mean there has been a significant political reward for Chinese investment in Africa in the form of a trend of increased support for China from African states.

Chinese influence in Africa may also manifest itself in other ways, namely denial of U.S. access. One of the more unique cases of this comes with China's engagement in the island country of Mauritius off Africa's eastern coast, home to Diego Garcia. Diego Garcia, a former British colony in the Chagos Archipelago, houses one of the largest British and U.S. bases in the region. Known as a stopover point for long-range operations in the Middle East, Diego Garcia's ownership has posed a problem for the United Kingdom. Much of the international community recognizes Mauritius' claims of ownership over Diego Garcia, and the UN's special international maritime court has even ruled in favor of supporting Mauritius' claims, but the United Kingdom has—for valid reasons—been hesitant to relinquish control of the islands.<sup>18</sup> Some in the British parliament are concerned about whether Mauritius' control would allow China to quickly occupy the islands and build their own bases there, but the crux of the issue is less about whether China will occupy the Chagos Archipelago and rather more about whether the U.S. and British bases will be allowed to stay. With more than \$626 million in Chinese loans, Mauritius, if granted sovereign control over the Chagos islands, may elect to terminate the U.S. lease for access to Diego Garcia.<sup>19</sup> Under these hypothetical circumstances, if the UK and the United States refuse to leave, it would leave an indelible mark of “Western imperialism” in the region and play directly into China's rhetoric about the West. Speculation on the future aside, Chinese influence in cases like this poses a risk to securing strategic access to specific regions of the world.

## The Future of China's Engagement in Africa

The China-Africa relationship is a complicated story and its future is far from certain. At its core, China views African countries as drivers for its domestic economic growth and as potential ideological allies in the CCP's attempt to shape the global world order. With the rise of the BRI and China's “Going Out” policy, Chinese-African relationships were bolstered with tangible infrastructure projects backed by Chinese money and, increasingly, Chinese firepower.<sup>20</sup> These projects, in turn, have provided China with access to resources and an ideological edge as it strives to be seen as the leader of the “Third World.”<sup>21</sup>

China's economic interests and military presence in Africa are two sides of the same coin. Naturally, increasing amounts of Chinese investment has necessitated an increased military presence in the region. However, increasing Chinese economic and military influence in Africa has not come without its own issues. Perceived economic exploitation has caused pushback from projects' corresponding African hosts.<sup>22</sup> China's growing military presence in the region, despite its presumably benign nature, is also beginning to draw ire from democratic African countries and erode the notion of China as a purely peaceful player.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, China's economic momentum seems to be slowing while its military momentum is picking up. Right now, the China-Africa story seems to be at a turning point.

In 2015, the BRI was in full swing. Two years after the introduction of the initiative, the Chinese bureaucratic machine was pumping billions of yuan into promoting CCP general secretary Xi Jinping's flagship policy. Along with this tremendous flow of capital out of China, there was a significant corresponding increase in contract revenue back toward China. However, 2015 was the peak, and foreign direct investment outflows and contract revenues have been declining ever since. In 2015, Chinese construction contracts in Africa generated \$54.7 billion; and in 2015–16, China provided African countries with \$40.2 billion in loans.<sup>24</sup> As of 2020, Chinese loans to African countries returned to 2005 levels, with \$1.9 billion of loans in 2020 and \$2.2 billion in 2005.<sup>25</sup> Despite a natural tendency to write this off as “pandemic woes,” Chinese foreign direct investment through the BRI has been trending down since 2015–16.<sup>26</sup> These downward economic trends, coupled with an increase in talks of Chinese basing and a larger sustained naval presence in the region, beg the question: What is the future of China's engagement in Africa?

African countries are not passive partners in their relationships with China, and African countries tend to be quite realistic. Despite seeing the opportunity for development

through Chinese economic stimulus, they are unlikely to want to become the next battleground in U.S.-China competition. Chinese investment may dry up in the future. As BRI projects continue to stagnate and the PLA's military presence continues to grow, the China-Africa relationship is likely to sour. When this occurs, China's soft power on the continent may erode. Under these circumstances, African countries seeking their own right to self-determination for their future may look elsewhere for opportunities.

## ENDNOTES

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