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**China's Security Engagement with Africa &
The "Global South" Narrative**

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  In recent years, China has taken a more assertive role in global governance, aiming to position itself as a key player and potential emerging leader in the “Global South.”
-  Beijing is seeking to create a coalition of countries that support its vision of a multipolar world order, with Africa playing a central part in this strategy.
-  China’s military diplomacy and security engagement with African nations has served in bolstering its political and economic influence on the continent.
-  Beijing has evolved from being a norm-taker to a norm-shaper in its approach, promoting aspects of its governance model in Africa’s security architecture.
-  China’s increasing normative influence in African security presents challenges for the EU’s engagement on the continent, necessitating a reassessment of its approach to security cooperation with African nations.

Keywords

*China’s
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Introduction

In recent decades, China has actively sought to position itself as a pivotal partner and emerging leader within the Global South. Despite the lack of clear consensus on the definition of “Global South” or a definitive list of countries it includes, the term holds considerable symbolic value. It embodies a shared sentiment among developing nations, *characterized* by a “sense of economic or financial disadvantage, frustrations with Western paternalism and neo-colonial attitudes”, and a collective drive for a more equitable global governance architecture.

China’s *engagement with Africa* has emerged as a critical element of its *Global South strategy*. *Fostering stronger ties* with African nations aligns with Beijing’s aims to create a multipolar global order and new norms that advance its geostrategic, political, and economic interests. China’s strategy has notably evolved to include a more assertive role in shaping Africa’s security architecture. While initially focused on establishing itself as a reliable security partner, Beijing has gradually expanded its normative influence, *promoting military governance* models based on its Party-military model.

These dynamics present strategic implications for the EU, requiring a nuanced understanding of China’s growing role in African security to assess challenges and impacts on EU interests.

Strategically Harnessing the Global South

African countries have grown increasingly disillusioned with Western security engagement on the continent, often viewing it as driven by interventionist policies and strategies prioritizing external interests rather than addressing the root causes of instability in Africa. Furthermore, despite years of engagement, Western-led efforts have largely *failed to resolve* long-standing security challenges, a persistent source of *frustration* for local populations.

This mounting discontent has contributed to the rise of anti-Western sentiment and the surge of military coups across the continent. In March 2024, *Niger* and *Chad* announced the cancellation of their military cooperation agreements with Washington and demanded the withdrawal of U.S. troops. In *Mali* and *Burkina Faso*, repeated popular demonstrations have also called for an end to the French military presence. These movements culminated in the forced withdrawal of French forces from Mali in 2023, marking the end of France's decade-long *Operation Barkhane* mission. *Critics argue* that the operation largely served France's strategic interests, particularly its influence in former colonies and resource access.

These developments represent a significant setback for EU foreign and security policy, as they have fueled the desire among many African nations to seek alternative partnerships, including with China. Presenting itself as a *"natural member"* of the Global South, Beijing highlights shared historical grievances and the collective *struggle* against imperialism and colonialism to foster a sense of solidarity and strategically frame its partnership as based on mutual respect and benefits. Moreover, China's *non-interference policy* is frequently emphasized as *a critical distinction to the Western approach*, often criticized as paternalistic and interventionist. This approach resonates with African leaders who feel that the EU's approach tends to undermine African agency, while China has placed a strong *emphasis* on answering calls for greater support in developing "African solutions to African problems."

China's Early Engagement in African Security

China's evolving military engagement reflects a strategy aimed at gaining diplomatic legitimacy and protecting its economic interests through adherence to international norms. At the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, then-Chinese Minister of Defense, *Liang Guanlie*, emphasized China's intent to act as a responsible power in global security rather than an expansionist one. Aside from participation in *UN peacekeeping missions*, Beijing largely limited its military activities as deployments to what it considers as its own territory and maritime areas, signaling a commitment to established international standards rather than challenging them. However, as China's economic footprint expanded, its military strategy adapted, marked by China's growing involvement in Africa's security.

The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation ([FOCAC](#)) in 2000 formalized Beijing's relationship with Africa. FOCAC has since facilitated China's expanding influence through official channels, increasing its involvement in African security through UN missions and anti-piracy operations. Driven by growing economic interests, China's security activities in Africa became more pronounced. Since 2008, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has conducted [escort missions](#) in the Gulf of Aden to protect critical shipping lanes. In 2013, China sent combat troops to Mali as part of a [UN peacekeeping mission](#), and in 2015, it deployed an infantry battalion to South Sudan, where China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has significant oil investments. These actions highlight China's willingness to directly safeguard its overseas assets, and, if needed, evacuate them.

China conducted an evacuation operation in [Yemen in 2015](#), relocating 629 Chinese nationals and 279 foreigners to Djibouti. Subsequently, in 2016, China's defense ministry confirmed the construction of a [logistical support facility](#) in Djibouti. Officially intended to support anti-piracy patrols, this base also enables non-combatant evacuations, peacekeeping operations, and intelligence gathering. In 2023, China further demonstrated its capacity by [evacuating citizens from Sudan](#).

Beijing's Emerging Role as a Norm-Shaper in African Security

China has progressively assumed a more assertive role in African security, shifting from a norm-taker to a norm-shaper approach. This shift aligns with President Xi Jinping's broader goal of enhancing China's global influence and promoting an alternative governance model. The change of paradigm in Beijing's foreign policy has also brought about a "more flexible and pragmatic" interpretation of its long-standing [non-interference](#) principle, enabling more proactive stance in conflicts resolution.

While China has employed various strategies to influence the norms of peace and security governance on the continent, a key approach has been the establishment of defense dialogue platforms. In 2018, China unveiled the "[China-Africa Security Cooperation Initiative](#)", which provides financial resources and personnel for capacity-building within the African Union (AU), alongside participation in peacekeeping missions and anti-piracy operations. [The August 2023](#) summit saw China pledging increased support for "humanitarian aid, military education, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism assistance." In 2022, Beijing also [spearheaded](#) the creation of the Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa, focusing on security, development, and governance to "support regional peace and development through concrete action." Beijing has used both these platforms to advance its [Global Security Initiative](#) (GSI) – repeatedly emphasized as a [guiding framework](#) for cooperation. It is touted as a new pathway for African nations to effectively address security challenges at their root by tackling development and governance in parallel with security measures.

Another critical element of China's normative strategy is [Political military work](#), encompassing the activities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) aimed at "shaping the civilian environment to achieve the political, ideological, and military goals set by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)." This strategy contributes both to advance the strategic interests of the CCP and propagate the values and norms of the Chinese party-state. A key aspect of these efforts is Professional Military Education (PME), which includes training programs, military exchanges and capacity-building initiatives. China views PME as a strategic tool to [promote](#) its party-army model, where the [party has absolute leadership](#) over the military— a principle rooted in Mao Zedong's adage that "the party controls the gun." This ensures the military's loyalty to the ruling party, preventing shifts in allegiance or challenges to authority.

Many African ruling parties have embraced this approach, as it aligns with their priorities of consolidating and maintaining power while preventing military coups or insurrections. This has resulted in the adoption of similar governance structures in several African countries, where military leaders and government officials trained in China have been instrumental in embedding these norms. For instance, [Angola's MPLA](#) has adopted a model similar to China's, whereby high-ranking officers are closely tied to the ruling party. This has helped the MPLA secure the military's loyalty, consolidate dominance in Angolan politics and maintain long-term political stability. Similarly, the [Ethiopian National Defense Force](#) (ENDF) operates in close alignment with the ruling party, mirroring the CCP's control over the PLA.

The impact of Chinese military training programs in boosting China's political influence on the continent is evident in the rise of alumni to high-ranking functions within their respective institutions. The PLA Army Command College alone has trained at least 10 African heads of defense departments, eight defense ministers, as well as presidents, prime ministers and other national leaders. Notably, [Zimbabwe's](#) sitting president Emmerson Mnangagwa received military training in the PLA academy in Nanjing during the liberation war. His experience in China has influenced his leadership and governance style, and he has maintained strong ties with Beijing throughout his political career. General [Gabriel Jok Riak](#), former Chief of Defense Forces of South Sudan, also used his military training in China to strengthen South Sudan's military forces and deepen its strategic ties with Beijing.

Enhancing party-to-party diplomacy and outreach has also benefited China's security engagement in Africa. This includes the establishment of training programs that integrate ideological education promoting regime or party control in line with China's fused party-state model. A significant development in this strategy is the [opening](#) of the FLMSA's Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Academy in Tanzania in 2022. Funded by a 40 million USD grant from the CCP's International Liaison Department, it serves as a platform for China to "share its experience in governance more systematically with like-minded political organizations." While strengthening ties with current ruling African parties and elites, it also aims to shape

positive perceptions and understanding of China's political governance among the younger generation, poised to become the future political elites. As part of the training, professors from Renmin University delivered [lectures](#) on China's "Party history, Party-building and experience in state governance." An attending Namibian official has stated the Central Party School instructor [emphasized](#) that "party discipline should be above and outside the law."

Finally, China has further consolidated its political influence in Africa by promoting Chinese policing norms within African police forces. According to a report from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Between 2018 and 2021 over 2,000 African police and law enforcement personnel [received](#) training in China." The training typically includes instruction on Chinese policing techniques, which are heavily focused on maintaining public order, ensuring loyalty to the state, and suppressing dissent. Participants are exposed to the Chinese model of law enforcement, which integrates extensive surveillance, strict social control, and the prioritization of state security over individual rights. Many African countries have begun [adopting](#) Chinese surveillance technology, including facial recognition systems, mass surveillance cameras, and data analytics platforms, to enhance police and security forces' capabilities.

Implications for EU Stakeholders & Policy Recommendations

While the EU has traditionally held a strong role in Africa's security architecture, its relationship with African nations remains complex, shaped by historical legacies and a colonial past. The EU's approach has often fallen short of addressing core grievances, in particular calls for greater African agency. In this context, China's rapidly expanding influence in African security and normative efforts to shape the region's security architecture carries several strategic implications for the EU.

Firstly, China's deepening engagement is likely to accelerate the trend of African countries distancing themselves from European security partners. Following the path of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, other nations like Chad or Sudan might also be inclined to seek alternative partnerships. Secondly, while both EU stakeholders and China agree on the importance of a peaceful and stable Africa, Beijing's growing ideological and normative influence contrasts with the EU's value-driven approach. This divergence risks weakening the EU's diplomatic leverage to encourage democratic reforms while strengthening authoritarian trends. Military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have capitalized on Chinese support to [consolidate their power](#), indirectly enabling them to delay democratic transitions or intensify repression against dissent.

Furthermore, China's promotion of ideological education that emphasizes party or regime control could contribute to eroding democratic principles and proper civil-military relations. The training programs contain lessons on PRC practices which have, in some cases,

infringed or indirectly aided infringement of personal freedoms and individual rights. This includes, for example, training on [dual-purpose technologies](#) that could be exploited to access individuals' data in ways that expand state surveillance and control over citizens' personal lives.

China's consolidated influence in Africa is helping to build support for its normative efforts in international fora. In 2020, Beijing [introduced a resolution](#) at the Human Rights Council on "Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights", which was supported by all African nations. This resolution promotes human rights norms that are more aligned with China's views, including non-interference. This alternative approach to human rights poses challenges as it could contribute to reducing accountability for human rights violations.

EU stakeholders need to reassess their approach to security engagement on the continent to better address the calls from African leaders for more equal partnerships. This would entail boosting efforts to support the development of an African-led peace and security architecture and promoting initiatives that enhance African agency. Increased capacity-building support for the African security actors, including the AU, would enable more effective responses to regional crises, aligning with the EU's interests. Finally, despite divergences in approach, it is important for the EU to explore pragmatic cooperation with China in Africa to support regional stability and development where possible. Framing Beijing solely as a competitor or rival risks being perceived as undermining African agencies in choosing partners, thereby hindering opportunities for constructive engagement.



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