

# To What Extent Has China's Security Policy Evolved in Sub-saharan Africa?

Written by Tania González Veiga

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As former Chinese Ambassador to UN Chen Jian stated, "in the past, unrest, civil war, military coups and so on, which took place far in the other side of the earth, have no direct association with Chinese interest, China can hold detached attitude towards them" (Xuejun, 2017), however, as China's economic involvement and global role in Africa have deepened, the country has become increasingly entangled in African domestic affairs and conflicts (Stahl, 2016).

The social, economic and political instability of many African countries hinders their ability to supply natural resources to China. Furthermore, Chinese migration in Africa, accelerated in the late 1990s, has added a new complexity factor to Chinese-African relations as Chinese citizens living in Africa have increasingly been exposed to crime (Alden, 2014). Although traditionally China's engagement in Africa has been mainly visible in the economic area due to the country's search for natural resources, over the recent years China has understood that in order to develop a long-lasting and profitable relationship with Africa it also needs to directly take action in Africa's unstable security environment.

With this aim, this paper provides an overview of the evolution of China's security policy in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), an area of the African continent with a high concentration of Chinese nationals. First, the paper analyses China's global foreign policy in order to understand China's security policy in SSA. Later on, the study presents an overview of the security threats that China has faced over the last years in SSA to then show how, as a consequence of these security threats, China had no other choice but to adapt gradually its security policy in SSA. Finally, the essay concludes by assessing the current Chinese security approach in the region and envisaging its evolution in the future.

### China's Foreign Policy & Security Challenges in SSA

In order to understand China's security policy in SSA since the 1950s and the gradual shift that the policy has suffered with China's increasing presence in the African continent, it is first necessary to understand China's foreign policy. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence from 1954 represent a guideline for China's relations with other countries in regards to the Chinese presence in foreign territory. Among these principles, Chinese leaders have put a particular emphasis on the principle of sovereignty and non-interference, which invokes that interference in other country's domestic affairs (including security) is illegitimate, defending mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty (Stahl, 2016).

However, the non-interference model does not mean that China never engages with other actors in international peace or conflicts as it often participates in peace operations abroad (Xuejun, 2017). Traditionally, China has supported peace through development with the belief that economic development is the most important precondition for achieving sustainable internal peace. In other words, with development more effective governance might follow, but it is a luxury to talk about good governance while people are starving (Kynge & Zhang, 2007). In this regard, the Chinese concept of developmental peace opposes the Western concept of liberal peace in which preventive diplomacy, peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations are associated to humanitarianism and the principle of

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responsibility to protect (R2P).

Consequently, China's foreign policy has been strongly criticised by Western developed powers on the grounds that China is being inhumane by not interfering in domestic disputes in those SSA countries where there is Chinese presence. Other Western concerns over the Chinese approach of non-interference in SSA include the lack of credibility of China's commitment to developmental peace. In this sense, traditional aid donors like the USA and the EU claim that China's aim is, above all, to satisfy its insatiable domestic demand for energy and raw materials and pursue hegemony in the region (Duchâtel *et al*, 2014).

Although China's engagement in SSA is driven by the principle of sovereignty and non-interference and characterised by a focus on economic interests (Cooper Ramo, 2004), in recent years there has been a growing number of cases in which China has been directly exposed to security threats in SSA, putting at stake Chinese economic interests and the country's reputation.

According to Alden (2014), China's economic activities and personnel's expansion in SSA have brought three top security challenges. The first one is the reputational security, which refers to the local and global image of the Chinese state. Especially China's lack of transparency in deals with governing elites and its support for arms proliferation by making deals with states such as Angola, Botswana and Namibia in exchange of natural resources have exacerbated tensions between China and the international community. "In addition to its arms exports, China has also been criticised for providing other forms of support to governments in countries where there is conflict or serious human rights concerns" (Curtis & Hickson, 2006).

The second security challenge is called the firm-level security, which makes reference to the maintenance of China's economic interests in the region. As Alden argues, both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and Chinese small and medium-size companies have been inevitably involved into local disputes due to the insecure environment of most of the SSA countries where Chinese companies operate. In Nigeria, for example, oil facilities are regularly attacked by rebels and militia groups. On the other hand, according to him, the misconduct of many Chinese firms in SSA, such as the Zambian case with the Chinese Non-Ferrous Metals Mining Corporation in which constant violations of local labour laws and acts of violence against workers took place, has pushed some African governments to close Chinese corporations.

And the third challenge is the security of citizens, which refers to violent incidents, crimes and kidnappings affecting Chinese nationals in SSA. Chinese workers kidnapped in southern Nigeria in 2007, China National Petroleum Company's workers kidnapped in Sudan in 2008, the Chinese national killed in South Africa in 2009 and the Chinese worker at Geo-Engineering Construction Company killed in Nigeria in 2012 (Sun, 2014) are just a few examples of the numerous security threats that the Chinese government has been encountering with the increase of Chinese migrants in the region. Particularly, "domestic political turmoil and regime changes inside African countries have created the most serious threat to the safety of Chinese investments and nationals" (Sun, 2014). Should the Chinese government fail to protect its nationals in SSA, the social unrest of locals (intensively spread through social networks) would put into question the government's legitimacy and undermine the prestige of the Chinese Communist Party.

## China's Changing Involvement in SSA's Security

In the light of the increasing security threats to Chinese citizens and interests in SSA since the beginning of the 21st century, it seems logical that China's practice of non-interference has been reconsidered by the Chinese government. Over the last years not only the EU but also some African civil groups have started to exercise pressure on China to adapt its security policy approach in the region. Chinese leaders have also realised that the price for operating in certain African countries is high (Stahl, 2011). As a result, although still operating under the sovereignty principle, the Chinese government has begun to apply the principle of non-interference with a more flexible approach by adopting a gradualist engagement in selective areas of SSA's security. In this sense, one of the biggest challenges for China has been to conciliate its economic interests with its escalating security involvement in the region (Alden, 2014).

This gradual shift towards a more flexible approach on the issue of sovereignty is clearly visible in China's role as a

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permanent member of the UN Security Council. While being a permanent member, it is indeed difficult for Beijing to adopt a distant position on security issues without being strongly criticised by Western and African powers. In fact, China has become the UN Security Council resolutions' sponsor by establishing peacekeeping operations (PKOs), founding peacekeeping training centres, and directly participating in PKOs –although its participation has been limited to non-combatant roles. Having become the largest contributor to PKOs of all permanent members, “China currently has around 1,500 peacekeepers participating in UN PKOs, which is more than 15 times as many as about 10 years ago” (Stahl, 2016). According to Breslin, “a key Chinese goal is to empower the UN as the only legitimate decision making body when it comes to finding global solutions to either transnational problems or cases of domestic state failure” (Breslin in Alden, 2014); however, it is important to acknowledge that China's veto power in the UN Security Council is ultimately a means of protecting its global interests.

Another indicator of China's changing security approach in SSA is seen in the country's increasing support to multilateral security initiatives over the last years, especially as a way to increase its maritime presence globally. In this regard, China's contributions to combat piracy in the coast of Somalia are a landmark as they constitute the first expeditionary deployment of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and one of the best examples of shared Sino-European cooperation in Africa (Stahl, 2011).

Finally, it is also important to highlight the increasing security initiatives that China is carrying out in the region along with the African Union (AU) as a means to foster the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), mainly through personal exchanges and training in the fields of conflict prevention and resolution, post-conflict reconstruction and development. Furthermore, China-AU increasing support is symbolised by the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security launched at the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2012, for which the Chinese government provides financial and technical assistance in the areas of peace and security (Stahl, 2016).

Yet according to Guo Peiqing, Professor at the Ocean University of China (2017), on a strategic level, China should still insist on a non-interference and no-strings-attached approach, whereas on a tactical level, China needs to meet changes by adapting to changes, participate in local affairs in foreign countries and coordinate with Western countries to promote political stability (Peiqing in Duchâtel *et al*, 2014).

This adapted version of China's non-interference policy model takes a pragmatic approach as its point of departure. Indeed, Chinese economic interests in SSA still rule the foreign policy of China; however, the Chinese government has eventually understood that economic interests should not override China's overall interests. As a result, in this attempt to conciliate China's economic interests with its escalating involvement in security matters in SSA, the concepts of constructive involvement and creative involvement have emerged in the Chinese policy narrative.

On the one hand, the concept of constructive involvement is frequently applied by China in those instances in which China's interests and capabilities are aligned with the purpose of the involvement. In such cases, China is willing to provide concrete policy advice and establish high-level diplomatic contacts with different political forces in order to reinforce communication and cooperate with regional organisations. In this sense, China has already been constructively involved in Africa through three main channels –by sending special envoys to undertake direct mediation, by supporting UN or regional-led mediation initiatives and peace operations, and by promoting peace and impartial dialogue (Shaye in Duchâtel *et al*, 2014).

On the other hand, the concept of creative involvement, conceived by Wang Yizhou in his analysis of China-Africa relations, has been labelled as China's new policy. As Yizhou argues (2011), creative involvement does not contradict the Chinese non-interference model since significant internal affairs are still decided by the country concerned and its people. In this case the role of external states, he claims, is limited to help other governments to preserve their legitimacy over internal affairs. In this respect, creative involvement opposes the USA interventionism in the sense that any action is dependent on the consent of the different parties involved, the support from the UN and other regional organisations, full exploration of all diplomatic means and prudence towards the use of force.

One can argue, however, that even though such theoretical narrative has started to emerge, China's concrete involvement in SSA's security affairs is yet to be detailed. Indeed Yizhou includes in his study some specific policies

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to be implemented in SSA, like the establishment of civilian-military ports in friendly countries and some theoretical trends such as good governance and human rights compliance. However, the study does not specify when China should get involved in foreign security issues, nor provide a detailed overview of China's potential involvement in such issues (Yizhou in Duchâtel *et al*, 2014). Last but not least, China should also take into account Western states' interests if this pragmatic and collaborative approach is to dominate Chinese future foreign policy in SSA so that bilateral and multilateral collaborations among countries can be established.

## The Future of China's Security Policy in SSA

China's security policy in SSA has certainly evolved towards a less static version of its longstanding non-interference approach, showing flexibilities and adaptations when needed. But China is not altruistic. China's increasing economic interests in the region over the 21st century have often challenged China's non-interference principle, particularly when it comes to the protection of Chinese nationals in SSA's conflict zones. As long as China continues its economic activity in insecure regions of SSA, frictions among its principle of non-interference, its economic interests and its duty to protect Chinese citizens abroad are likely to continue emerging. In the presence of dire security threats, China has had no choice but to recalibrate its foreign policy in SSA; however, the country has been very vigilant in its adaptation. After all, non-interference remains crucial for "Chinese core interests – especially for regime survival and territorial integrity" (Duchâtel *et al*, 2014). In line with this, China continues reluctant to intervene militarily in foreign territory, mainly focusing its security policy on developmental peace, capacity-building programmes, peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations (Benabdallah, 2016).

Because of China's energetic interests in the region, the Chinese presence is likely to remain in unstable SSA countries in the near future, and China will use all the instruments at its disposal to cope with the challenges that arise –constructive involvement, bilateral and multilateral institutional cooperation, etc. Since maintaining its non-interference principle is a matter of survival for China, the biggest challenge of the regime is, and it will be, to find balance among its diverse needs. For this reason, a drastic shift in Chinese foreign policy in SSA is not likely to happen in the short-medium term. If anything, it is only the protection of Chinese nationals in the region what may lead Chinese foreign policy to greater interventionism in SSA.

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