

China's Involvement in Africa's Security Issues Between ideological principles and pragmatic considerations

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ABSTRACT

Due to the important distance between Africa and China, Africa is not a direct physical threat to the latter's national security. However, due to the growing economic expansion of the Chinese on the continent, the security issue has become a top priority to preserve their interests. So, terrorism, piracy, changes in political regimes and instability affected seriously the safety of their investments and led china to review its foreign policy, especially that of non interference. It has become by force of circumstances involved in Africa's security matters by concluding a number of Chinese-African agreements in different fields. With a pragmatic approach to preserve and protect its rising interests in Africa and its non interference principle, China has adopted the role of contributor in various security operations to settle the conflicts and has also projected to open a military base in the future to adapt the transformations occurring at the world level.

KEY WORDS: Africa, China, Security issues, interests, investments, agreements, non interference principle, conflicts settlement, military base project.

Introduction

Owing to the vast geographical distance between China and the African continent, Africa does not present direct physical threats to China's immediate national security. However, as China's economic activities and interests and personnel presence expand rapidly on the continent, the physical security of the Chinese investments and nationals present on the ground has become a top priority to China.

The number of Chinese citizens present on the African continent is steadily growing. According to available data, there were at least one million Chinese living in Africa as of October 2012. These people are subject to several security threats at the local level as well as the state level as a result of unstable political situations in some parts of Africa. There are different types of security threats to Chinese nationals present on the continent including criminal attacks such as robbery and kidnapping which is the most common and most damaging type of security threats to Chinese in Africa. There are also politically motivated attacks against Chinese as a retaliation for China's cooperation with local governments or for its exploitation of local resources: In April 2007, the exploration site of Zhong Yuan Oil Field was attacked by the anti-government Ogaden National Liberation Front in Ethiopia, with nine Chinese workers killed. The attack was against "any investment in Ogaden that benefits the Ethiopian government.", and in-May 2014, suspected Boko Haram militants kidnapped 10 Chinese workers in northern Cameroon on a Sino hydro hydroelectric project.⁽¹⁾

Threats to China's interests on the continent also include attacks against Chinese projects due to labour disputes and illegal activities by Chinese companies: In 2008, two Chinese were killed in Equatorial Guinea by Guinean workers protesting against their working

conditions⁽²⁾, and in 2014, two people were killed and nine others wounded in Madagascar during clashes between the Chinese managers of a sugar factory and their Madagascan employees.⁽³⁾

China's interests in Africa have also faced the piracy threat with the attacks of Somali pirates against many Chinese vessels, making of the piracy phenomenon on the Somali coasts a serious concern for Beijing.

Regime changes and domestic political instability in some African countries have also created a serious threat to the safety of Chinese investments and nationals. This was the case during the military coup of Liberia in 2003, when China had to evacuate 36 overseas Chinese and to support "major financial losses".⁽⁴⁾ More recently, the Libya conflict caused the biggest security challenge for China on the continent obliging it to evacuate 36 000 Chinese nationals who were present in the war zone.⁽⁵⁾ The Chinese People's Liberation Army dispatched four military aircraft and one navy vessel for the mission. In addition to this inconvenience, the Chinese companies assumed losses estimated at \$20 billion due to uncompleted contracts originally concluded with the Gadhafi government.

All these events convinced China that with increasing engagement come increasing complexity and risk, a phenomenon Beijing has only recently been confronted to. China has begun to devote more attention to the issue, however, with scholars and policymakers beginning to discuss the issue of how to protect Chinese citizens from violent acts in Africa such as kidnappings and acts of terrorism.

This paper aims at determining the nature of China's security engagement towards the African continent by demonstrating how security threats to Chinese economic interests and nationals in different countries have served as a wake-up call to Beijing that internal instability in Africa is also intrinsically a China's problem, leading China to review its foreign policy principles and especially that of non-interference, and to become effectively involved in Africa's security issues.

Revision of China's non-interference principle

Non-interference is an important pillar of China's foreign policy. Since its inception by Zhou Enlai, Chinese Prime Minister, in 1953 as part of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the notion of non-interference has been closely associated with China's self-image in world politics as a country that had regained sovereignty and independence after a century of foreign aggressions, and that refuses interference in other countries' internal affairs. Non-interference continues to characterise China's vision of a multipolar world constituted of independent sovereign states that conduct their domestic and foreign policies free from great powers interference in their internal affairs.⁽⁶⁾

However, the extent to which non-interference is, also today, serving the national interest of China is increasingly being questioned, due to the fact that China's national interest is also changing. In 2014, China became the world's largest trading power, and in 2012 it ranked third in terms of outbound direct investments. China's presence overseas is also a human one. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the number of Chinese nationals travelling abroad each year reached 100 million in 2015.

The significant expansion of China's overseas interests put non-interference under greater strain and led to a calling into question of this

sacred principle adopted in a different international context in which China had few economic and security interests to defend beyond its borders.

An important turning point occurred in 2004 when President Hu Jintao first mentioned the notion in a public speech urging China's diplomatic work to "enhance the capability of protecting interests overseas". President Hu Jintao's final report to the 18th Party Congress as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) mentioned, for the first time, the protection of nationals overseas as a new foreign policy priority. The 2013 Chinese Defence White Paper went further, declaring for the first time that the protection of overseas energy resources and Chinese nationals overseas is a major security concern and a task for the Chinese military.⁽⁷⁾ In a major speech on foreign affairs in 2014, President Xi Jinping underscored that "We should protect China's overseas interests and continue to improve our capacity to provide such protection."⁽⁸⁾

In order to protect its growing interests in Africa, China is engaged in deep security collaboration with African countries. During the 5th Ministerial Meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing in July 2012, then-President Hu Jintao launched the Initiative on China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security. Aside from supporting the AU's own peacekeeping operations inside Africa, China made the commitment to provide financial support to the AU standing army and to train security officials and peacekeepers. During Xi Jinping's first overseas trip to Africa, the new Chinese leader also promised to "constructively participate in Africa's peace and security affairs."⁽⁹⁾

The FOCAC Fifth Ministerial Action Plan (2013-2015) included these goals in addition to several others. The plan states that China will support African countries' efforts to combat illegal trade and circulation of small arms and light weapons. China agreed to contribute within its means to Africa's conflict prevention, management, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. It pledged to continue support for UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and implied it stood ready to mediate African hotspots. China has pledged to strengthen cooperation with Somalia, the AU, and relevant African sub-regional organisations in combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden. China also showed its readiness to increase cooperation in fighting all forms of terrorism (FOCAC, 2012).⁽¹⁰⁾

It is also important to notice, within this context, that China's first-ever defence white paper on military strategy issued in May 2015 asserts a new global scope for China's security interests and new flexibility in protecting them: "the national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time span that at any time in the country's history."⁽¹¹⁾ It further added: "In response to the new requirement coming from the country's growing strategic interests, the armed forces will actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China's overseas interests..."⁽¹²⁾

During the sixth FOCAC IN December 2015, President Xi Jinping outlined the "China-Africa peace and security program", repeating an earlier pledge that "China will provide 60 million U.S. dollars in free assistance to the African Union to build and maintain its army, both its regular army and crisis response, as well as support UN peacekeeping in Africa."

China's new Africa policy paper also pledged more military cooperation, including technological cooperation, joint exercises, personnel training, and intelligence sharing. China's goal is to build up African capabilities, so that the countries on the continent – as well as organisations like the African Union – can ensure their own stability.⁽¹³⁾ These official Chinese documents constitute a strong evidence of the pragmatic shift in China's principle of non-interference, to serve its increasing and changing economic and strategic interests on the African continent.

From non-interference to active involvement in internal African conflicts' resolution

China has until recently avoided to get involved in the African conflicts in part because such involvement would contradict its principle of non-interference. However, its increased engagement with Africa, and its growing interests make it unavoidable to be also involved in the continent security issues including participation in conflicts resolution. The Sudan's conflict constitutes in this context the most relevant example.

The case of Sudanese conflicts

China and Sudan developed deep economic ties in the 1990s, when China helped develop Sudan's oil sector. When the Sudanese party (the National Party Congress, or NCP, then known as the National Islamic Front) accessed to power in 1989, the country found itself isolated from the West. To develop its oil sector, Sudan needed to find a non-Western partner and this opportunity attracted China's interest. The state-owned China National Petroleum Company's (CNPC)

strengthened its involvement in Sudan and became the biggest foreign actor in the Sudanese oil industry. It owned a 40% stake (the largest) in Sudan's Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC), and has an operative stake in six of eight Sudanese oil fields online, as well as majority interests in two other blocks under exploration. CNPC played an active role in oil field services and construction, and built two pipelines in Sudan.⁽¹⁴⁾

In 2011, when the secession of Sudan was consecrated, Sudan was China's second largest provider of crude oil in Africa after Angola supplying 5 % of China's total crude oil imports. After the shutdown of South Sudan's oil sector in early 2012, combined imports from South Sudan and Sudan dropped to less than 1 %. Political instability and security threats in the region have also had a negative effect on the operations of Chinese National Oil Companies. According to some Chinese sources, CNPC had invested around \$7 billion by 2012 and holds plurality or majority stakes in three of the five largest oil consortia operating in the two countries. While the majority of oil reserves are located in South Sudan, most of the refineries, pipelines and export terminals in which Chinese companies have invested are located in Sudan.⁽¹⁵⁾

The important economic interests that China developed in Sudan explain its particular and unprecedented involvement in the different Sudanese conflicts beginning by the Darfur one where China initially backed the regime of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. In a 2005 interview, the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister, Zhou Wenzhong, remarked: 'Business is business. We try to separate politics from business . . . I think the internal situation in Sudan is an internal affair, and we are not in a position to impose upon them.' China adopted the

same attitude in the UN Security Council, abstaining from voting on six UN Security Council resolutions that tried to impose financial and travel sanctions on Sudanese leaders.

The stand that China's took in this conflict exposed it to harsh international criticism threatening to tarnish its image in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.⁽¹⁶⁾ In addition to the international community criticism, Chinese operations and workers in Sudan faced several threats and were, several times, victims of attacks perpetrated to protest against China's stand in favour of Khartoum's regime. Consequently, China began to moderate its position and to take on a more active role as a mediator in Darfur, encouraging dialogue and economic development, and appointing a special envoy, Liu Guijin, to enhance 'mutual understanding through communications and talks'. At the 2008 handover ceremony for a 20 million yuan (\$2.9 million) aid package to Sudan, Liu expressed China's commitment 'to working closely with the Sudanese unity government and the transitional authorities in Darfur for the benefit of the people, for the end of people's suffering and for a long-lasting settlement of the Darfur issue'. In addition, China supported the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission to Darfur, which was followed by the establishment of the AU/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). In November 2007 and July 2008, China sent a total of 315 engineering corps personnel to Sudan to serve with UNAMID.⁽¹⁷⁾

It should be noted that this international pressure did not negatively impact bilateral economic and political relations between China and Sudan. China maintained its strong support to the Government of Sudan, especially after the indictment by the International Criminal

Court of Sudanese President Ahmad al-Bashir in 2009. Furthermore, trade volume reached a historical record of \$11.5 billion in 2011.⁽¹⁸⁾

In addition to its role in the Darfur's conflict, China assumed a particular role as a mediator in the conflict between South Sudan and Sudan. Indeed, before the independence of the Republic of South Sudan, China adopted a policy of 'one country, two systems' to deal with South Sudan under the sovereign framework of Sudan.⁽¹⁹⁾ China established relations with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) only after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) by the SPLM and the Sudanese government in January 2005, which prepared the way for the eventual independence of South Sudan in 2011.⁽²⁰⁾ To respond to the international community scepticism given China's strong support for the government in Khartoum, China showed its willingness to collaborate with the US to achieve the full implementation of the CPA.⁽²¹⁾

Despite the international community efforts, tension continued between South Sudan and Sudan, causing the interruption of the flow of oil through pipelines from oil fields in South Sudan to export terminals on Sudan's Red Sea coast between January 2012 and March 2013, impacting negatively the Chinese energy interests in the region. Liu Yingcai, the head of the CNPC led Petrodar consortium, was accused of collaborating with the Sudanese government to confiscate South Sudanese crude oil, and in February 2012 he was expelled from South Sudan. In an effort to avoid complicating this uncomfortable situation, the Chinese Ministry of foreign affairs refused to openly support CNPC or intervene and CNPC has since then intensified its corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in South Sudan, financing social projects

in Juba and training for petroleum specialists and scholarships in China for talented local students.

The tensions in the region did not stop at this stage, but another internal conflict broke out in South Sudan in December 2013 between forces loyal to South Sudanese President Salva Kiir and a breakaway SPLM faction led by former Vice-President Riek Machar. As a consequence of the turmoil, South Sudan's oil production fell by 45 000 barrels per day to 200 000 barrels per day, and Chinese NOCs were forced to evacuate approximately 400 Chinese oil workers.

Despite the fact that it was a domestic conflict, China intervened and its ministry of foreign affairs immediately took a proactive role. China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, called for a ceasefire and a political dialogue between the two sides. He announced that he was 'ready to directly engage' with the parties to the conflict and met with their representatives during ceasefire negotiations in early January 2014 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, conducting an active shuttle diplomacy between the two sides. He also called on the South Sudanese Government to protect Chinese citizens and their property in the country.⁽²²⁾ China's Special Representative Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, started shuttle diplomacy between South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, the UK, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development : IGAD, the USA and the African Union (AU), among others, in order to promote a peaceful solution to the conflict. As a continuation of such efforts, Ambassador Zhong has visited South Sudan many times since the end of 2013, meeting with both governmental and rebel groups.⁽²³⁾

By May 2014, China had contributed 341 troops and 13 police officers to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Despite a

ceasefire agreement on 23 January 2014 and a peace deal on 9 May 2014, the fighting has continued. By March 2014, oil output had already fallen by about one-third since the beginning of the conflict.⁽²⁴⁾

China's dealing with the previous Sudanese conflicts highlights its willingness to exert its influence to restore peace in order to preserve its interests. The South Sudan case in particular illustrates China's changing assessment of national interest versus non-intervention. When the conflict began to threaten its interests, China intervened to mediate the situation although the conflict was a domestic one. This reflects the reality that Beijing's ever-widening economic interests on the continent increasingly involve greater diplomatic intervention,⁽²⁵⁾ putting limits to its non-interference principle in dealing with international conflicts.

China's approach to peacekeeping operations: From abstention to participation with infantry battalion

China's approach to peacekeeping operations is built on the fact that any peacekeeping intervention must be based on the following unavoidable principles: an intervention can be legitimate only with the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); state sovereignty must be respected and the consent of the host country must be obtained; many crises must be considered as internal problems and not as threats to international security; and force must be used only in case of self-defence. In addition to these principles, China has always been very careful to obtain the consent of regional organisations before taking part in any mission. Within the respect of these principles, China has become increasingly involved in peacekeeping missions described by the Chinese government as a relevant effort to help Africa obtain peace and security. Between 2003 and 2013, China deployed UN

peacekeepers to Mali following the French intervention, sent police forces to Liberia, and was deeply involved in obtaining a ceasefire in South Sudan.

As of 30 June 2015, China was deploying 2468 peacekeepers, 174 policemen, 21 experts in seven of the nine UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, more than any other permanent member of the UNSC, and was the sixth largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget⁽²⁶⁾. The vast majority of Chinese peacekeepers are deployed in Africa: China has at present military personnel involved in Cote D'Ivoire, Darfur, the DRC, Liberia, Republic of South Sudan, Western Sahara and particularly in Mali where its involvement presented a particular characteristic: while China has used to send engineers, logistical and medical personnel in some previous missions such as in Liberia and in the DRC (but also Cambodia and Lebanon outside Africa), in Mali China has deployed security forces to the UN mission.⁽²⁷⁾ More importantly and in January 2015, China pushed further the limits of its non-interference policy by sending an infantry battalion of 700 members to the UN peacekeeping operation in South Sudan, the first time China had sent an infantry battalion on a peacekeeping mission. For the first time in its history, China has sent a large scale contingent of combat troops to join a UN peacekeeping mission.⁽²⁸⁾

China's role infighting piracy in the Gulf of Aden

China's overseas maritime trade is highly dependent on vulnerable sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Approximately 60 % of all commercial vessels that transit through the Strait of Malacca are Chinese flagged. China currently relies on just five SLOCs for roughly

90 % of its overseas trade. In 2010 it was reported that each year over 2000 Chinese commercial vessels were transiting the Gulf of Aden ⁽²⁹⁾

It is why, the Chinese military forces launched on December 26, 2008 a vast and extensive naval anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden. The People's Liberation Army Navy has deployed nearly ten thousand personnel on 37 warships with 28 helicopters in 13 task forces. Over the course of more than 500 operations, these forces have protected more than 5000 commercial vessels—Chinese and foreign in nearly equal proportion, the latter flagged by more than 50 nations. They have “successfully met and escorted, rescued and salvaged over 60 ships.” Beijing has rightly been recognised for this contribution, and Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the United Nations asserted this recognition by stating: “The escort in the Gulf of Aden provided by the Chinese naval task force is a strong support in cracking down on Somali piracies for the international community which reflects China's important role in international affairs.”⁽³⁰⁾

During the year 2014, the PLAN's 17th and 18th naval escort taskforces, comprising various amphibious landing ships, missile frigates, and supply vessels, were sent to the Gulf of Aden. In December 2014, China dispatched the PLAN's 19th naval escort taskforce to Somalia, and in April 2015, it sent the 20th taskforce. In late March and early April 2015, various Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels evacuated Chinese and foreign citizens from Yemen after the outbreak of the Saudi-led aerial bombardment campaign.⁽³¹⁾

What seems to be important to notice is the strong correlation between where Chinese antipiracy warships have docked ashore and Chinese-funded port development. Chinese firms are reportedly

engaged in maritime port construction in many countries the PLAN has called on during antipiracy operations. Such developments could intensify as part of Chinese President Xi Jinping's New Silk Road, or "One Belt, One Road" initiative, an ambitious, two-pronged framework for economic engagement between China and other states along the continental Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.⁽³²⁾

While piracy in the Gulf of Aden has been in the centre of antipiracy efforts over the past decade, this phenomenon has been rising steadily in other regions, including Africa's opposite coast. As a consequence of the international community's protracted fight in the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Guinea has emerged as the world's most pirate-infested region where pirates increasingly target drilling platforms, oil tankers and other assets that often lack adequate protection. The Gulf of Guinea is further away from China than Aden. Nonetheless, Chinese commercial flows around West Africa, with local and international partners, are steadily increasing. Moreover, Chinese citizens have been attacked several times in the past five years in the Gulf of Guinea. In May–June 2014, Chinese warships completing Aden duties sailed to Cameroon, Nigeria and Namibia for bilateral exercises. Beijing has already provided Gulf of Guinea nations with substantial military assistance, training, joint exercise, and ships. China has already held bilateral discussions with Russia concerning Gulf of Guinea security, and expresses the possibility of Sino-American cooperation in this regard.⁽³³⁾

The benefits that China could realise from its involvement in antipiracy efforts in Africa are well expressed in Cam Roggeveen assessment: "Many Chinese view escort operations as only the beginning of a larger process in which China's military development

will increasingly mirror its rapidly expanding national interests. If indeed this proves true in practice, decades from now China's Gulf of Aden mission will be seen as the genesis of the nation's ascent as a global maritime power".⁽³⁴⁾

China's involvement in combating terrorism in Africa

Many Chinese projects in Africa are located in remote areas with minimum security guarantee from local authorities.⁽³⁵⁾ The protection of Chinese economic interests and the safety of its nationals on the ground became a real concern for Chinese government especially after the 2009 terrorist attack by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), targeting Chinese interests following unrest in Xinjiang. AQIM announced it would attack Chinese workers in North Africa and then launched one on a convoy of Chinese construction workers in Algeria.

Chinese nationals have been victims of other attacks by groups that oppose current African governments. A dozen or more Chinese nationals were kidnapped and subsequently released by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta in Nigeria's oil-rich south-eastern region. The Justice and Equality Movement in Sudan attacked Chinese oil company personnel on several occasions, kidnapping and killing a number of them. In 2007, the Ogaden National Liberation Front in Ethiopia attacked a Chinese oil exploration base, killing nine in a shootout with Ethiopian soldiers protecting the Chinese, and kidnapping others who were later released.⁽³⁶⁾ The last example is Al-Qaeda attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital Bamako on November 20, 2015 where 27 hostages were killed, including three Chinese nationals. The three killed were senior executives in the China Railway Construction Corporation, a state-owned firm. The attack was carried out by the jihadist groups al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) and Al-Mourabitoun.⁽³⁷⁾

It is why counterterrorism became a regular part of China's dialogue with Africa in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). China is deploying efforts to confront terrorism in Africa, and its Foreign Ministry is more aggressively issuing security alerts concerning potential terrorist attacks in Africa.⁽³⁸⁾ In October 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang met officials from the EU and reached an agreement to increase cooperation on extremism in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel.⁽³⁹⁾

China remains very cautious in its counterterrorism support in Africa, working closely with the UN, the African Union and individual African governments. It has, however, shown much less willingness to collaborate with Western governments,⁽⁴⁰⁾ and continues to express its refusal to participate to missions associated with Western political agendas, such as democratisation.

Chinese analysts have blamed the West as the source of African terrorism due to their colonisation, exploitation of African resources, and “meddling” in African affairs. Some have criticised Western support of anti-government forces in disposing African authoritarian leaders of which they disapprove, creating messes such as the one in Libya today ⁽⁴¹⁾.

Is China really projecting to open a military base in Africa?

Despite improved access to ports around the world, the call for permanent overseas supply points (or perhaps even bases) has only appeared over the past few years, indicating that replenishment (and logistics more generally) remains an issue for a substantial part of the PLAN leadership. Indeed, the PLAN's reliance on access to friendly ports and a stable political and security environment to support that

access severely limits China's maneuver margin meaning that a less stable or friendly environment would limit China's capabilities to accomplish different required tasks.⁽⁴²⁾

It is why Western, African, and Indian media widely commented on possible PLAN overseas naval facilities. Much of the commentary has centred on the Seychelles, Namibia, and Djibouti.

Chinese Defence Minister, Liang Guanglie, visited the Seychelles in 2011 when the government of Seychelles invited the PLAN to use its ports for resupply and recuperation as PLAN ships contributed to the anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden. Some media accounts advanced that Seychelles was offering China a military base. China rejected the idea that it had any intention to establish a military base, and précised that it would only consider the Seychelles for resupplying its ships. China and the Seychelles subsequently increased their military contact, but there is no evidence a Chinese base has been or is being built in the islands.

There have also been persistent rumours since 2014 that China is in discussion with Namibia concerning the establishment of a naval base at Walvis Bay. These reports have been categorically denied by Senior Namibian and Chinese officials. In 2014, the PLAN's escort task force visited Walvis Bay and in 2015 Chinese Defence Minister, Chang Wanquan, led a delegation of 15 PLA officials to Namibia where he donated US\$ 5 million of military equipment to the government. There is, however, no evidence that a naval base is being constructed in Namibia.⁽⁴³⁾

Nevertheless, the most likely location for the PLAN's first naval facility in Africa is Djibouti. It seems that China is striving either to obtain special port access or basing rights in this former French colony,

where US and French special operations forces operate from against terrorism in both Africa and the Middle East. The news broke when Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh told Agence France-Presse that talks were underway with the Chinese for what the article described as "a new military base."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Djibouti is home to military bases for the United States, Japan, and France, among other states. Its strategic location makes it an important hub for global navies that seek to combat piracy off the Horn of Africa, in the Red Sea, and in the Gulf of Aden. The United States uses its base in Djibouti, known as Camp Lemonnier, to stage covert operations involving Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) in Yemen, Somalia, and other nearby regions.⁽⁴⁵⁾ It is the only permanent US base on the continent.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Japan, meanwhile, stations just under 200 personnel there from its Maritime Self-Defence Forces for counter-piracy operations.⁽⁴⁷⁾ France also has a much reduced presence of French Foreign Legion and other troops in the former colony. The legion unit that was based there for almost 50 years left Djibouti three years ago and moved to Abu Dhabi.

In February 2014, China and Djibouti signed an agreement allowing PLAN ships to call.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Washington protested against the China–Djibouti pact and expressed concern over China's plans to build a military base in the Obock region. In the run-up to the deal, China Merchant Holdings, a sizable state-owned enterprise, purchased a large stake in the country's vital Port of Djibouti, spending \$185 million. China also offered to develop the port's facilities awarding the state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation a \$420-million contract to begin this work as well as to improve the infrastructure that supports the port's functioning, including a railway to Ethiopia and two international airports.⁽⁴⁹⁾

However, it is unclear whether what is being discussed with Djibouti is actually a military base or a port where civilian and military Chinese ships could replenish food and fuel. If China were to actually build a military base, with guarded and secure perimeters, an armoury, advanced communications and all that goes along with a military base, that would be a first for China. Traditionally, China has adopted the principle of “no overseas military bases” and criticised western powers for their neo-colonial pursuit of military bases and global power projection.

It remains important to notice however, that Chinese officials have right now neither confirmed nor denied the project. It is, however, worth noting that regarding Chinese sacred principle of “no overseas military bases”, the absence of any official denial will continue to nourish speculations about an actual Chinese project of opening a military base in Djibouti.

Conclusion

China’s pragmatic approach to the protection of its growing interests in the African continent has led to the revision of one of the most important principles of its foreign policy which is that of non interference, allowing it to contribute to the resolution of African conflicts even internal ones, to participate to international security operations on the continent, and to push the limits of its involvement until to project to open a military base in Africa, a variable which would have been unthinkable some years ago.

China is not radically different from the other states, and as in the case of all nations, it pursues its strategic self-interests in Africa and elsewhere, and has successfully been able to adapt the ideological principles it used to adhere to, to its evolving interests on the world stage.

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