



The Militarization of China's Presence in Africa: Strategic Reorientation or Pragmatic Response?

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Abstract

Amid rapid transformations in the international system, this study seeks to analyze the strategic dimensions of the shift in China's soft-power instruments in Africa, with particular emphasis on how "development" is being reformulated as a façade for an agenda of soft geopolitical militarization. It further examines how China deploys conventional economic and developmental tools within an intentional dual-use framework that simultaneously serves developmental objectives as well as security and strategic ends. The study reaches several findings, the most significant of which is that this growing entanglement between development and militarization does not signal a rupture with China's traditional approach. Rather, it constitutes a natural extension of a "geo-security protection of interests" logic, especially in security-fragile environments such as the African Sahel and the Horn of Africa. This shift unfolds within a regional and international context marked by intensifying competition between established powers (France and the United States) and rising actors (China, Russia, and India), thereby rapidly reshaping influence maps across the African continent.

Keywords: China–Africa Relations; Soft Power; Dual-Use Development; Geo-security; Militarization of Infrastructure

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Introduction

Africa has long constituted one of the most salient geopolitical arenas of intense competition among major powers, owing to its strategic resources, vital maritime corridors, and security vacuums susceptible to external penetration. In this context, China's presence on the continent has emerged as one of the most noteworthy developments over the last two decades not only in terms of its geographic reach, but also with respect to the structural transformations in the nature of the influence instruments being deployed.

Since the beginning of the third millennium, China's approach has been anchored in the notion of a development partnership, reflected in extensive investments in infrastructure projects and major economic initiatives under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This model has presented itself as an unconditional alternative to the Western paradigm, premised on mutual benefit and non-interference. Yet China's footprint has not remained confined to a purely developmental register; rather, it has increasingly acquired expanding security and military dimensions. The most prominent manifestations include the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti (2017), the growing activity of Chinese private security companies, the conclusion of defense agreements, arms transfers, and even the use of civilian instruments for security functions.

This phenomenon unfolds within a more complex strategic environment characterized by intensified great-power competition for influence in Africa and by escalating security challenges confronting many African states—conditions that provide fertile ground for legitimizing new forms of non-traditional military positioning. This, in turn, underscores the need to analyze the interpenetration of economy and security, and of development and militarization. The issue extends beyond merely understanding Chinese behavior,

assessing the extent to which Sino–African relations are shaped by historical legacies, or examining the shift from soft to hard influence. It also entails evaluating the implications of this transformation for: the national sovereignty of African states; the interests and reactions of other international actors that view China as a competitor within their traditional spheres of influence in Africa; and the broader consequences for African peace and security.

Against this backdrop, the study advances a research problem centered on the following overarching question:

Does China’s military and security expansion in Africa constitute a functional extension of its developmental policies, or does it reflect a strategic shift toward a new pattern of soft geopolitical hegemony?

To address this core question, the study disaggregates it into the following sub-questions:

- What theoretical frameworks and historical contexts explain China’s orientation toward strengthening its military presence in Africa, and how does this orientation fit within China’s broader geopolitical grand strategy?
- What are the principal instruments and mechanisms through which China consolidates its military turn in Africa, and how are they distributed between hard means (such as military bases) and non-traditional means (such as the militarization of ports and developmental assistance)?
- How do regional and international powers respond to the growing escalation of China’s military presence in Africa, and what are the potential implications of this presence for regional security and the national sovereignty of African states?

Accordingly, the study proceeds from a central hypothesis:

If the transformation of China’s influence tools in Africa—from economic and developmental instruments to strategically oriented dual-use tools with military and security functions constitutes a deliberate trend within Chinese foreign policy, then this transformation contributes to reconfiguring China’s geopolitical positioning within the African space.

To analyze this phenomenon, the study adopts a three-part structure intended to provide a multi-level synthetic reading:

- The first section examines the strategic context of China’s militarization, focusing on theoretical frameworks and the political history of Sino–African relations.
- The second section analyzes the tools and mechanisms underpinning this transformation, from military bases to the militarization of ports and assistance.
- The third section investigates regional and international interactions vis-à-vis this expansion and its repercussions for regional security and national sovereignty in African states.

Section I: The Strategic Context of the Militarization of China’s Presence in Africa

China’s expansion in Africa reflects a broader transformation in its strategic doctrine, unfolding within a trajectory of geopolitical repositioning across the Global South. This shift cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the historical roots of Sino–African relations, which were founded on solidarity and mutual interests since the era of national liberation. With the intensification of security challenges, China has moved toward deeper engagement in issues of security and stability, with the aim of protecting its interests and consolidating its position as a power competing with the West. This section addresses the foregoing as follows:

1. The Study’s Theoretical Framework: The Militarization of Development and the Legitimation of Influence

Despite the growing academic interest in China's rise in Africa over recent decades, most scholarship has remained confined to single-explanation approaches that have failed to capture the nature of the phenomenon and the entanglement of its dimensions. Offensive realist approaches, for instance, have viewed China's presence as an extension of major-power competition, treating Africa as a new arena for struggles over influence and resources within the broader redistribution of power at the international level. Institutional liberalism, by contrast, has emphasized frameworks of cooperation and economic and institutional integration, yet has often overlooked the asymmetric power relations embedded in these interactions.

Conversely, the dependency school has offered a critical reading of Sino-African relations as a reproduction of the center-periphery pattern, albeit through a new "Southern" formulation. Meanwhile, "new militarization" approaches have foregrounded the expanding security character of China's presence through the widening of military influence, participation in peacekeeping operations, and the construction of logistical bases.

However, reliance on any one of these approaches in isolation yields a partial understanding of the trajectory of China's ascent, because the phenomenon is inherently complex: it combines strategic interests with economic dimensions, and interweaves the logic of partnership and development with the requirements of security and influence. Hence the need for a multi-theoretical reading that draws jointly on elements of these perspectives in order to construct a more comprehensive analysis of how China interacts with Africa as a geopolitical, economic, and cultural space open to transformation. This integrative approach aims to transcend stereotypical explanations, highlight the implications of China's presence in reshaping global power balances, and redefine Africa's position as an emerging actor contributing to the dynamics of the new international order.

1.1 China's Expansion in Africa from the Perspective of Offensive Realism

Offensive realism constitutes one of the most important revisionist contributions within realist theory. It is an umbrella that covers at least three theories in the fields of international politics and foreign policy, and it appears to accept most of Kenneth Waltz's ideas as well as a significant portion of classical realism's assumptions (Lamy, 2001, p. 185). Among its most prominent theorists are John Mearsheimer and Fareed Zakaria.

John Mearsheimer articulated a theoretical proposition grounded in five basic assumptions, as follows (Elman, 2007, p. 18):

- There is no world government.
- All states possess a capacity and propensity to use force against other states.
- No state can be certain that other states will not use force against it.
- All states seek to preserve their territorial integrity and domestic autonomy.
- States are rational actors.

Offensive realism thus posits that states continuously seek to increase their influence, not merely to preserve it—that is, they actively and dynamically maximize power and security, not through passive or purely defensive competition, but by deploying economic, military, and diplomatic power to achieve strategic superiority.

Applied to China, the argument is that Beijing invests in Africa not only for economic reasons, but also to pursue deeper strategic objectives: controlling vital resources, enhancing political influence, and strengthening its position within an anticipated multipolar international system (Gu & Dinkelbach, 2022, p. 16). This is reflected through multiple instruments: economic tools (massive investments and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative), diplomatic tools (reinforcing the "One China" policy and securing political support in international forums), and military tools (the establishment of a

military base in Djibouti). This combination reflects an offensive strategy aimed at entrenching durable influence that secures China's security and economic interests beyond traditional Western hegemony.

In addition, China's policy in Africa relies on a blend of soft power (cultural, developmental, and economic diplomacy) and hard power (military presence and strategic investments in energy and natural resources). This indicates complex strategies aimed at effective control over the continent's geopolitical space and its economic and political power—consistent with the principles of offensive realism, which emphasize the necessity of military and economic presence to secure national interests (Devecioglu & Akçomak, 2024, pp. 13-14).

Strategically, China seeks through its presence in Africa to transform the international system from a unipolar dominance (the United States) to a multipolar order—an orientation that aligns with the realist view that struggles over power and influence among major powers constitute a decisive factor shaping the contemporary international system.

In sum, China's presence in Africa may be viewed as a practical manifestation of offensive realism in international relations: China deploys diverse instruments of power to consolidate its status as a rising power, benefiting from the anarchic and competitive environment of the international system in order to advance its strategic interests in an economically and politically vital continent.

1.2 China's Expansion in Africa in Light of Institutional Liberalism

Institutional liberalism is an extension of functional integration studies, complex interdependence research, and studies grounded in transnational phenomena approaches that flourished in the 1970s, especially in the works of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye during the 1970s and 1980s, and that continued to gain prominence during the 1990s (Roche, 2004, pp. 89-90). The justifications advanced by these scholars were not confined to shared commercial gains; they also emphasized the declining centrality of the state in favor of other transnational actors. Accordingly, international relations are to be understood as a "spider-web" network of diverse actors connected through multiple interactive channels (Barton, 1972, pp. 36-37).

Within this context, China engages with African regional institutions such as: The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation¹ (FOCAC), the China–Africa Development Fund² (CADFund), and the Permanent Committee for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and the African Union³, in addition to African regional blocs with which China establishes bilateral cooperation channels, such as: SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA, IGAD, and others. China also provides loans, infrastructure, and development projects in exchange for guarantees in energy and resources—reflecting a model of complex interdependence that institutional liberalism regards as a means of reducing conflict and maximizing benefits. According to institutional liberalism, such behavior signals an effort to build long-term institutional relationships rather than merely short-term control. Yet a key theoretical challenge remains: whether these institutions are used to enhance shared stability or to consolidate unilateral influence under a cooperative façade an important debate in critical studies of Chinese influence. Moreover, from another angle, institutional liberalism draws attention to how the absence of strong African security institutions and interactive regional organizations has rendered the

¹ Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

Established in 2000, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation is an official, multilateral intergovernmental platform that brings together China and all African states maintaining diplomatic relations with Beijing (with the exception of states that recognize Taiwan). It aims to deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Africa and to promote cooperation in areas including trade, investment, infrastructure, agriculture, health, education, and security. FOCAC convenes every three years, alternating between China and an African host country.

² China–Africa Development Fund (CADFund)

Established in 2007, the China–Africa Development Fund is an investment instrument created by the China Development Bank to support Chinese enterprises investing in Africa. It seeks to encourage Chinese investment across sectors such as agriculture, industry, natural resources, and infrastructure.

³ Institutional cooperation with the African Union Commission

This refers to the institutional cooperation framework between China and the African Union Commission, formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2015. The cooperation focuses on continental infrastructure development, energy and transport connectivity, and the promotion of African economic integration.

militarization of relations a preferred option, as an alternative to cooperative dialogue. In other words, institutional liberalism views the militarization of Sino–African relations as a “failure of cooperation” or a consequence of ineffective institutions. It does not justify militarization; rather, it treats it as a threat to development and peace.

1.3 The Militarization of China’s Presence in Africa

Immanuel Wallerstein alongside other writers such as Paul Baran, Fernand Braudel, and Raúl Prebisch is among the prominent scholars concerned with examining and understanding uneven development worldwide and the effects of the global economy. He aspired to formulate world-systems theory. The modern world-system, in his view, is an instance of a world economy: Wallerstein argues that the capitalist world economy constitutes a system that produces progressively unequal distribution, organized around a core in which certain modes of production are relatively monopolistic and yield high returns (Wallerstein, 1996, p. 305). These modes concentrate in the most intense and dense nodes of capital accumulation, and such concentration strengthens state structures that, in turn, strive to ensure the continued monopoly of these production patterns.

Within his theory, Wallerstein also delineated another economic zone in his description of the world economy namely the semi-periphery (semi-periphery), situated between the core and the periphery. He argues that the semi-periphery plays an intermediary role within the world-system, exhibiting certain traits characteristic of the core and others characteristic of the periphery (Wallerstein, 2000, p. 53).

Against this backdrop, world-systems theory offers a structural interpretation: China—according to this perspective practices militarization in Africa as part of an attempt to move from a “semi-peripheral” state to a core state, thereby initiating the formation of a hegemony–dependency configuration. This transition requires coercive instruments to protect the flow of raw materials and African markets.

Accordingly, the relationship between the two sides will remain, for long periods, relations of dependency especially in the economic domain encompassing both collective dependency and individual dependency. In addition, world-systems theory holds that the state (such as China) is not fully free, but constrained by the global economic structure, and thus turns to militarization as an instrument to entrench its economic hegemony (Jones & Yeo, 2022, pp. 6-7).

1.4 China’s Presence in Africa within the Framework of “New Militarization”

The concept of “militarization” in contemporary international relations is no longer confined to its traditional manifestations—such as the movement of military units, the establishment of bases, or the deployment of heavy weapons systems. Today, we observe a structural shift toward what is termed “new militarization,” which denotes a pattern of non-declared security utilization whereby the military dimension is embedded within civilian structures in a dual-use and concealed functional manner. This enables their use for security and military purposes when necessary without requiring an official announcement or an explicit presence of armed force (Muekalia, 2004).

In this context, China’s presence in Africa represents a salient model of this transformation. China’s instruments are not limited to formal military bases—as in the case of Djibouti. Rather, its strategy is also manifested in the construction of dual-use infrastructure such as (Thee, 1980, pp. 15-16):

- Commercial ports designed so they can be readily converted into naval bases.
- Special economic zones managed by companies with security linkages.
- Private logistics and security firms that can be employed, when needed, to reinforce China’s presence.

New militarization theory suggests that the security discourse is not implemented through armies alone, but through civilian tools that are capable of being militarized. In this sense, ports, transport networks, investment companies, and even development initiatives become indirect means of reshaping Africa’s

geopolitical space, while preserving the image of economic cooperation—consistent with the discourse of “mutual benefit”.

This argument intersects with structural approaches such as Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, which holds that developing countries (as is the case for many African states) are re-integrated into the world-system from a position of dependency whether that dependency is toward the West or toward rising powers such as China. Here, hegemony is exercised through infrastructure and economic projects rather than direct military occupation sometimes referred to as “infrastructure colonialism”.

Within this framework, “new militarization” constitutes a technical mechanism of structural enablement through which sovereignty and Africa’s geographical space are reshaped via dual civilian/military tools, within a logic of quiet strategic power, far removed from the classical form of overt violence.

2. The Historical Evolution of Sino–African Relations

The contours of China’s engagement in Africa began to take shape as early as the Bandung Conference in 1955, which established a solidaristic vision among countries of the “Global South” in confronting Western hegemony. This conference played a foundational role in shaping China’s political discourse toward Africa, based on principles of non-interference, equality, and South–South cooperation. The relationship then witnessed gradual development through the Cold War era, before transforming after 2000 into an institutionalized strategic partnership through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Tseng, 2008, pp. 85-86). Sino–African relations are among the most developed relationships in the post-colonial world. They have passed through multiple phases, beginning with ideological solidarity in the 1950s and evolving gradually into a comprehensive strategic partnership in the third millennium. The historical trajectory may be divided into four pivotal phases:

2.1 From Bandung to the End of the 1960s (1955–1969): Ideological Beginnings

Sino–African relations began in a symbolic yet effective manner through the Bandung Conference (1955), which brought together Asian and African states on the basis of resisting colonialism and building a third global bloc. China, under Mao Zedong, supported national liberation movements and regarded Africa as an important ideological ally within its Cold War struggle against both Western imperialism and the Soviet Union. China provided technical and military assistance to countries such as Algeria, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, and the Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA) was constructed with Chinese assistance in the 1960s (Thomas, 2013, pp. 216-218).

2.2 The 1970s and 1980s: Tactical Engagement

With China’s restoration of its seat at the United Nations in October 1971, African votes played a decisive role in this diplomatic achievement. In response, China intensified its activities across the African continent, supporting dozens of agricultural, health, and educational projects. It maintained the slogan of “non-interference in internal affairs” as a means of reinforcing its moral standing, without undermining its balance between the Western and Soviet blocs, and it built relationships with both socialist and capitalist regimes alike (Muekalia, 2004, p. 9).

2.3 The 1990s: Economic Opening and Strategic Transformation

This phase witnessed a decline in ideological support in Sino–African relations, as China emerged as an economic actor seeking resources and energy. Several factors pushed China to strengthen its alliances with African states, especially after it found itself ostracized by the West following the suppression of the Tiananmen protests in 1989. This period witnessed the emergence of what became known as China’s “pragmatic approach,” focusing on trade and resources rather than ideological discourse—an approach further reinforced by high-level diplomatic visits between both sides that multiplied throughout the 1990s (Chen, 2022, pp. 14-17).

2.4 Post-2000: The Official Institutionalization of Partnership—FOCAC

The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 as an institutional framework to develop Sino–African relations. It represented a qualitative shift from dispersed bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership, particularly through its focus on investment in vital sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture, education, and finance.

FOCAC expanded as its sessions convened in successive years (2003/2006/2009...), and since its establishment, the number of Chinese embassies in Africa has increased significantly, making China the country with the most extensive diplomatic representation on the continent. Accordingly, it may be argued that the evolution of Sino–African relations embodies a fundamental transformation: from ideological support and anti-colonial solidarity in the mid-twentieth century, to a multi-dimensional partnership with strategic, economic, political, and security characteristics in the twenty-first century (Shelton & Paruk, 2008, p. 16). Within a multipolar international system and the decline of traditional Western influence, China has become a pivotal actor in Africa—raising academic and geopolitical questions regarding the drivers of this penetration and its effects on African sovereignty and regional stability (Ochieng, 2022, p. 49).

Section II: The Transformation of China’s Instruments of Influence in Africa: Geopolitical Objectives, Mechanisms of Militarization, and Manifestations of Security Presence

The transformation in China’s instruments of influence in Africa constitutes a key indicator of a broader redefinition of China’s strategic roles across the Global South. Within an international context marked by escalating security challenges and the declining effectiveness of classical soft-power tools, China has increasingly relied on dual-use mechanisms that combine developmental functions with security content. This section aims to analyze these mechanisms and to examine how China has re-engineered its instruments in order to pursue geopolitical objectives through non-confrontational security positioning, through the following components:

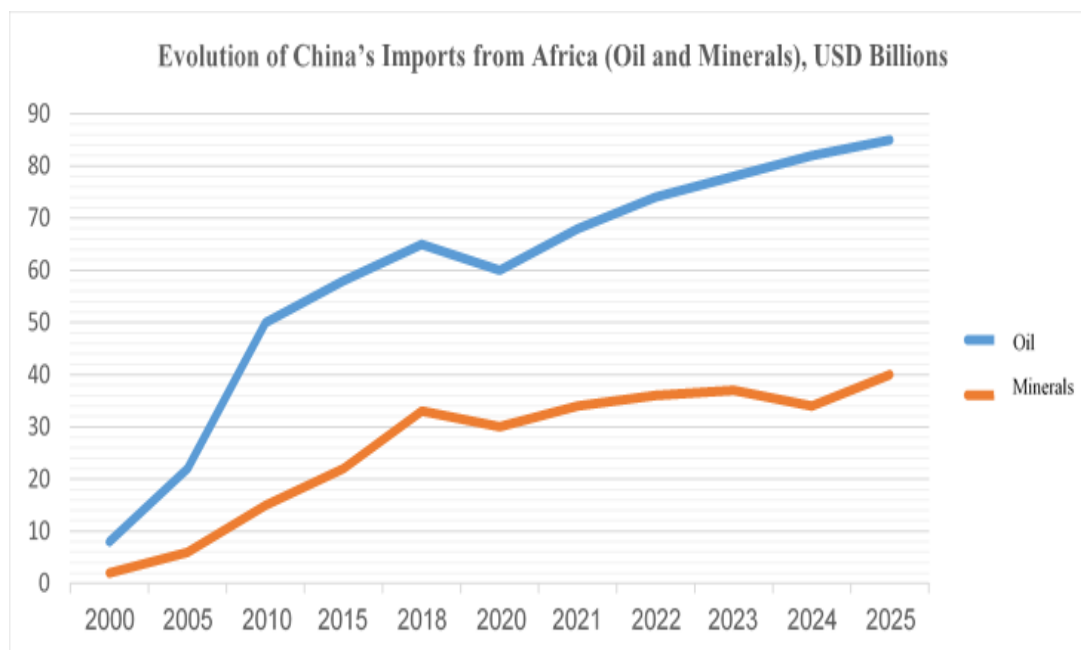
1.2 China’s Geopolitical Objectives in the African Space

China, through strengthening its non-traditional military presence in Africa, seeks to achieve a set of objectives ranging from economic to geopolitical and strategic, foremost among which are:

- **Securing commercial supply lines**

China imports substantial quantities of oil and minerals from Africa, reflecting the continent’s continued importance within Beijing’s external resource strategy. In value terms, China’s oil imports from Africa increased from USD 8 billion in 2000 to USD 78 billion in 2023, with projections suggesting they could reach USD 85 billion by the end of 2025. Over the same period, mineral imports rose from USD 2 billion in 2000 to USD 72 billion in 2023, and are expected to climb to approximately USD 80 billion by end-2025. This upward trajectory indicates not only the expansion of China–Africa trade linkages, but also the growing strategic centrality of critical minerals—such as copper, cobalt, manganese, and iron—within China’s industrial upgrading and energy-transition agenda. Importantly, these trends should be interpreted within a broader shift in China’s external sourcing patterns, whereby African oil has become relatively less dominant compared to supplies from Russia and the Middle East, while Africa’s role as a supplier of strategic minerals has gained increasing weight. As a result, the security of supply chains, transport routes, and extraction infrastructure has become intertwined with China’s evolving geopolitical positioning on the continent. The curve presented in the following figure illustrates these dynamics in a consolidated form.

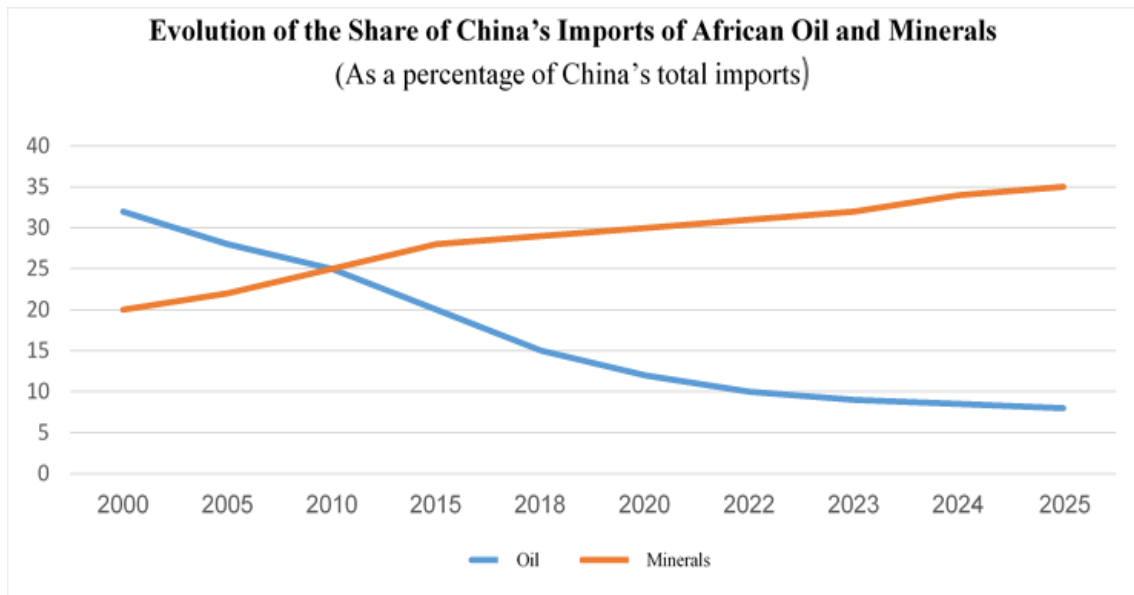
Figure 1: Evolution of China’s oil and mineral imports from African countries (USD billions), 2000–2025



Source: Author’s compilation based on World Bank data (WITS database) and International Monetary Fund data.

However, despite the marked rise in the monetary value of China’s oil imports from Africa, their relative weight within China’s overall oil import structure has steadily diminished. This decline is largely explained by Beijing’s growing reliance on alternative suppliers—particularly Russia and key Middle Eastern producers—whose geographic proximity, established long-term supply arrangements, and evolving energy partnerships have gradually reduced Africa’s share in China’s crude sourcing mix. As a result, Africa’s contribution to China’s oil imports dropped from roughly 29% in 2004 to below 9% by 2025, indicating that the central trend is not simply “more imports,” but a reconfiguration of import dependence and strategic exposure. At the same time, this shift has been accompanied—indeed, increasingly driven—by a reorientation toward strategic mineral imports, which have gained importance as critical inputs for advanced manufacturing, infrastructure expansion, and the global energy transition. Minerals such as copper, cobalt, manganese, and iron are increasingly framed within a logic of resource security and supply-chain control, rather than conventional commodity trade. In this context, several African exporters—most notably Angola, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others—have become more significant in China’s long-term calculations not only as suppliers of raw materials, but as nodes within wider processing and logistics networks. As Deberdt and DiCarlo (Deberdt & DiCarlo, 2024, p. 1498). Consequently, the decline in Africa’s oil share is occurring in parallel with a growing emphasis on minerals, reinforcing the argument that China’s engagement is increasingly structured around future-oriented strategic commodities. These dynamics are reflected in the following figure.

Figure 2: The share of China’s oil and mineral imports from Africa as a percentage of China’s total imports, 2000–2025



Source: Author's compilation based on data from China's Ministry of Commerce.

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from China's Ministry of Commerce: <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn> (<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn>)

Given the intensifying international competition to secure stable and sustained access to critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and neodymium—essential for advanced technologies and the energy transition, control over resources is no longer measured solely by territorial possession or military influence. It has increasingly become linked to control over supply chains, and over the processes of manufacturing and refining/processing. Within this strategic framework, China has expanded the scope of its cooperation with African states in the minerals sector. According to the Chinese Loans to Africa (CLA) database, Chinese state-owned banks, private financial institutions, and Chinese firms provided no less than USD 18 billion in loans to African states to finance mining projects during the period 2000–2017, of which USD 17.6 billion went to Angola alone (Müller, 2023, p. 185). Accordingly, China seeks to secure the continuous flow of vital natural resources from Africa to its markets and factories, and to ensure that supply chains are not jeopardized during periods of unrest or civil war. This policy falls within a broader orientation known as “resource security” (Müller, 2023, p. 188), which has become a pillar of Chinese foreign policy in recent decades. This extends beyond commercial transactions to a multi-dimensional strategy encompassing infrastructure, financial diplomacy, and political alliances—thereby making China's presence in Africa exceed mere economic partnership and reach the level of engineering the continent's economic and political geography.

- **Consolidating a globally oriented maritime strategy**

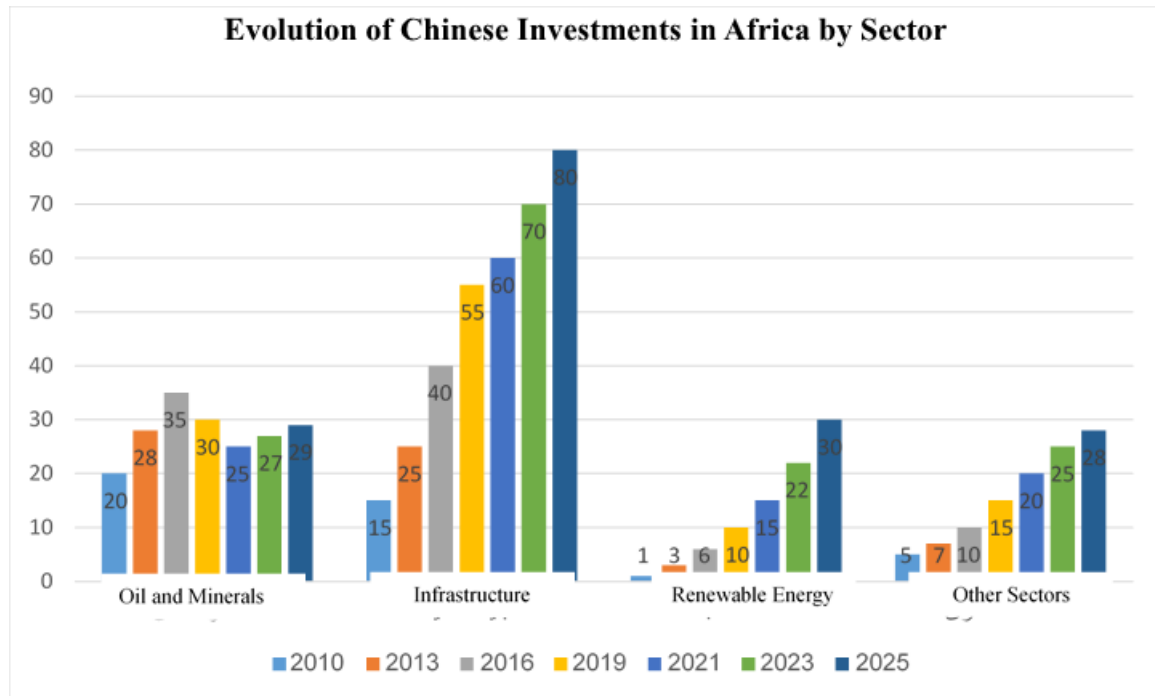
China views Africa as part of the maritime extension of the New Silk Road; therefore, it seeks to build a “String of Pearls” extending from the South China Sea to Africa through the creation and development of strategic ports and logistical facilities. This enables China to monitor maritime corridors and secure influence across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The Djibouti base, moreover, ensures China's ability to monitor the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden, both of which are vital passages for global trade (Cabestan, 2020, p. 732).

- **Protecting strategic investments and building sustainable zones of influence beyond Asia**

Through the militarization of its presence in Africa, China seeks to protect its strategic investments—especially those related to the Belt and Road Initiative—within a broader effort to build sustainable zones of influence beyond its Asian neighborhood. This has driven China to invest more than USD 150 billion in

African infrastructure projects, including railway networks, ports, power stations, and industrial complexes—projects that hold critical value for the Chinese economy and its global expansion plans (Mrdaković, 2023, p. 173).

Figure 3: The evolution of Chinese investments in Africa by year and sector



Source: Author’s compilation based on World Bank data (WITS database) and International Monetary Fund data.

Yet these large-scale investments often take place in security-fragile and politically unstable environments, as in Nigeria, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where threats stemming from armed groups, piracy, and local unrest are widespread (Jash, 2025, p. 16). This renders China’s military presence in Africa a key instrument for safeguarding Chinese companies, projects, and workers against attacks or extortion by militias and terrorist groups, and for deterring potential threats—whether civil conflicts or attempts to obstruct infrastructure projects that constitute major arteries of the BRI. It also strengthens China’s long-term influence by entrenching a strategic presence that enables it to protect its economic interests and the corridors of energy and critical minerals, amid intensifying international competition over African resources.

Accordingly, the militarization of China’s presence in Africa cannot be separated from the broader objective of protecting the Belt and Road Initiative and consolidating China as a global power capable of protecting its interests beyond its traditional boundaries.

• Reshaping the global balance of power

The objectives of militarizing China’s presence in Africa extend beyond protecting investments and securing maritime corridors. This step is also part of a strategy of pre-emptive deterrence vis-à-vis competing major powers—most notably the United States and France, both of which maintain extensive military presence across the continent (Le et al., 2025, p. 279). China thereby seeks to reshape African power balances in ways that limit traditional Western influence, particularly in sensitive regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. Given Africa’s strategic importance as a reservoir of critical minerals required for the global energy transition, China’s military positioning aims to prevent Western powers from

monopolizing supply chains, to ensure resource security for major initiatives such as the Belt and Road, and to establish a foothold that grants operational flexibility for rapid power projection. This approach allows China to maneuver strategically within international legal frameworks, expand influence without directly provoking the West, and retain the capacity to shift from soft power to hard power when necessary (Hazra & Bhaskar, 2023, p. 506).

2.2 Military and Security Manifestations of Chinese Influence in Africa

China's presence in Africa has undergone a smooth transition from a purely economic character to an increasing integration of security and military dimensions. This is manifested in China's establishment of its military base in Djibouti in 2017—its first overseas base—intended to secure navigation routes in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea and to support logistical operations on the continent⁴. Within this context, the phenomenon of the militarization of certain strategic ports has emerged, through which China seeks to enhance its naval deployment capabilities and secure supply lines within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

China's expanding security presence also includes the growing spread of Chinese private security companies that provide protection for projects and infrastructure linked to Chinese investments, alongside escalating arms sales and military training programs that strengthen Beijing's influence over African militaries. In addition, areas of military and technical cooperation have expanded through the exchange of expertise, the transfer of defense technology, and participation in joint exercises. This trajectory raises concerns about the potential conversion of other facilities and ports into military bases, with implications for naval power balances and the security of commercial sea lanes. Examining cases such as Lamu, Port Sudan, and Bagamoyo, alongside the Djibouti base, provides a lens for understanding the overlap between economic development considerations and China's strategic objectives in Africa.

• The military base in Djibouti

The Chinese military base in Djibouti, officially inaugurated in 2017, constitutes China's first permanent overseas military facility and represents a qualitative shift in Beijing's strategic approach toward Africa and vital maritime corridors (Gu & Dinkelbach, 2022, p. 23). The base is located at a strategic site on the Doraleh coast near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, enabling China to monitor one of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints and linking it directly to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal (Abid et al., 2023, p. 28). Although official discourse justifies the base as supporting anti-piracy operations and humanitarian relief, the reality points to broader roles related to rapid military deployment, the protection of Chinese economic interests, and balancing U.S., French, and Japanese influence in the region. The base is equipped with advanced facilities, including a pier capable of receiving a Type 075 amphibious assault helicopter carrier, in addition to aviation facilities and electronic surveillance infrastructure, and it reportedly hosts between 1,000 and 2,000 Chinese troops, with an accommodation capacity ranging between 2,000 and 5,000 troops (Donelli, 2022, pp. 52-53). Within the Belt and Road context, this base forms part of the "String of Pearls" strategy aimed at expanding China's maritime influence across the Indian Ocean toward Africa—reflecting China's transformation into an increasingly prominent geo-military actor within African and international spaces.

• The militarization of ports

China has significantly expanded its investments in maritime infrastructure, prioritizing the acquisition and development of seaports in strategic locations in ways that serve dual purposes—military and quasi-military. This approach forms part of the "String of Pearls" strategy, which seeks to establish a network of logistical hubs and forward deployment points stretching from East Asia to the African continent. Prominent examples include: the Ream naval base in Cambodia; Coco Island and the Kyaukpyu port in

⁴ Following the launch of the Maritime Silk Road in 2017 within the Belt and Road Initiative, China significantly intensified its investments across multiple parts of Africa. Chinese companies have taken a leading role in reconstructing ports and/or establishing new port facilities. Across sub-Saharan Africa, China reportedly has a presence in 46 ports.

Myanmar; Chittagong port in Bangladesh; Hambantota port in Sri Lanka; Malé port in the Maldives; Gwadar port in Pakistan; Khartoum Port and Port Sudan in Sudan; and Bagamoyo port in Tanzania.

Within the current Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), China places foreign ports at the center of its strategic priorities, emphasizing the construction of a “connectivity framework” based on six corridors and six routes, as well as a number of states and ports within the Belt and Road project. The African dimension acquires particular significance, as three of these corridors pass through East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) (Le et al., 2025, p. 276), Egypt and the Suez Canal region, and Tunisia—highlighting Africa’s pivotal role in reshaping China’s strategic geography. This vision reveals a systematic endeavor to transform Africa into an anchoring point in China’s project of building a “strong maritime power,” moving beyond economics toward the consolidation of an implicit security and military presence through the militarization of port infrastructure and its integration into China’s broader grand strategy of great-power transformation (Nantulya, 2025, p. 04). Below, the study addresses selected ports that constitute practical embodiments of this strategy, illustrating the extension of Chinese influence along strategic maritime routes:

- Lamu Port

Lamu Port constitutes a central component of the LAPSSET project (the Lamu–South Sudan–Ethiopia Corridor), which aims to connect the port to an integrated network of roads, railways, and pipelines, with an estimated cost of approximately USD 25.5 billion (Le, 2016, p. 110). Implementation included the construction of the first three berths with Chinese financing since 2015, with the port becoming operational in May 2021. Despite the project’s civilian character, heightened security concerns emerged due to attacks attributed to Al-Shabaab, prompting Kenyan authorities to strengthen security measures and deploy military forces around the port. The port is viewed as a geostrategically significant site within China’s maritime vision, with the possibility of evolving into a naval support point in the future, although it is not currently an official military base.

Lamu’s strategic effect derives from its geographic location on Kenya’s northern coast along the Indian Ocean, near international sea lanes linking East Africa to the Gulf and South Asia. This location grants it importance as a logistical hub capable of servicing regional and international trade, and of strengthening the connection of Africa’s hinterland to global markets through LAPSSET (Le, 2016, p. 137). It also enables China within the context of its investments to expand the scope of its maritime presence in the western Indian Ocean, thereby contributing to the protection of supply lines and commercial interests, and providing a potential foothold in the face of other international naval actors in the region.

- Port Sudan

Since the early 2000s, China’s relationship with Port Sudan has evolved gradually in a manner that reflects the port’s transformation from a primary oil outlet into a strategic pillar within the Belt and Road Initiative. During 2000–2005, the oil partnership began with the entry of Chinese companies such as CNPC into Sudan, alongside the construction of a pipeline linking inland oil fields to the port and the establishment of storage and export facilities. During 2006–2010, Chinese investments expanded through agreements to enlarge berths and warehouses, and oil exports to China grew to exceed 60% of Sudan’s total oil exports, along with the development of roads and railways connecting Khartoum to the port (Le, 2016, p. 59).

However, 2011–2014 witnessed a decline in export volumes due to South Sudan’s secession, yet Port Sudan remained the primary outlet for South Sudanese oil in return for transit fees, while China played a mediating role to ensure continued flows (Ranganathan & Briceño-Garmendia, 2011, pp. 3-5). Beginning in 2015–2018, Beijing moved to diversify cooperation by incorporating Port Sudan into Belt and Road maps, financing modernization projects, and investing in fisheries and industrial zones. During 2019–2022, Port Sudan’s geopolitical dimension intensified amid growing international competition in the Red Sea, as China continued technical and logistical support despite political unrest (Nantulya, 2025, p. 03). Finally, during 2023–2025, a strategic maritime partnership took shape aiming to make Port Sudan a regional trade hub within China’s African port network, with expanded Chinese presence in infrastructure and logistics projects serving Beijing’s Red Sea expansion.

Given Port Sudan’s strategic value, China constructed a railway line of 782 km linking the port to Khartoum, at an investment cost of USD 1.1 billion, which entered service in 2014. This linkage is not intended solely to facilitate trade; it also provides advanced logistical capacity that could be leveraged to support rapid deployment operations and secure supplies in the event of the port’s military use. Within extension plans, the project seeks to link the port to other African states, reaching N’Djamena in Chad, thereby expanding Chinese influence and reinforcing its strategic presence along the Red Sea coasts and deep into the continent (Raza & Khan, 2024, p. 766).

• **Bilateral military agreements**

At the bilateral level, China has woven a broad network of bilateral military and security agreements with most African states. This has been reflected in the presence of military attachés representing more than half of these states in Beijing; conversely, China maintains at least 19 defense attaché offices across the continent. These agreements are not merely symbolic; they extend to training, arms provision, technical support, and intelligence cooperation, making them a lever for enhancing Chinese influence and safeguarding its investments and strategic interests (Lammich, 2025, p. 03). In this manner, Chinese military diplomacy becomes a fundamental instrument for reshaping power balances in Africa enabling Beijing to compete with traditional powers and to entrench its presence as an alternative security actor.

It is worth noting that China’s security and military agreements with African states are not uniform, as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Comparative Table of China’s Security and Military Agreements in Africa.

Country	Key year/phase	Areas of agreement	Main objectives	Impact on China’s influence
Djibouti (Cabestan, 2020, p. 03)	2017: The inauguration of China’s first overseas military base.	Logistics base; force training; support for anti-piracy operations	Securing trade routes in the Red Sea; protecting Belt and Road investments	A permanent military foothold that enhances Beijing’s capacity to project power in the Indian Ocean
Nigeria (Nantulya, 2025, pp. 04-06)	2016–2020: defense agreements and military cooperation	Arms supply; officer training; counter-terrorism (Boko Haram)	Supporting counter-insurgency operations; enhancing air and naval capabilities	Reinforcing Nigeria’s dependence on Chinese technology and weapon systems
Zimbabwe (Ndawana, 2025, pp. 07-10)	Since 2005, with expansion after 2015	Arms sales; training; security cooperation	Circumventing Western sanctions; ensuring political loyalty	Greater political and economic leverage through security support
Tanzania (Nantulya, 2025, pp. 03-05)	Historically since the 1960s (renewed cooperation 2010–2020)	Naval training; border-security projects	Supporting the protection of ports and BRI-related infrastructure	Strengthening influence in East Africa and the Arabian Sea
Ethiopia⁵	Recurrent security	Peacekeeping; police training;	Enhancing stability around the African	Positioning China as a “provider of public

⁵ “China, Ethiopia agree to augment military cooperation” — a statement by the Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia outlining agreements in areas such as military training, military medical support, high-level exchanges, and

	agreements (2016–2019)	intelligence support	Union headquarters; protecting commercial interests	security” rather than a direct military influence
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Source: Compiled by the author based on the cited references.

The table above indicates that China adopts a multi-level approach to consolidating its military–security influence on the continent, without resorting to the large-scale, conventional deployment pattern historically associated with Western great powers.

In Djibouti, the most explicit model of direct military entrenchment emerged through the naval base established in 2017—an exception that reflects China’s awareness of the geostrategic significance of the Red Sea and international shipping lanes. By contrast, in states such as Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, China’s trajectory points toward bilateral security cooperation based on low-cost arms transfers, training, and logistical support, thereby increasing these states’ reliance on Chinese technology and expertise. Ethiopia, meanwhile, represents a distinctive case in which China has focused on presenting itself as a “provider of stability” in the heart of the continent, particularly given the presence of the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa. In Sudan and South Sudan, the security–economy nexus becomes especially pronounced, as military cooperation has been directly linked to the protection of China’s oil interests.

Regarding the indirect components of China’s military strategy in Africa, these roles are reflected through peacekeeping operations (e.g., the DRC, Mali, and South Sudan), as shown in the following table:

Table 2: China’s Participation in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa.

Country Mission /	Start of Chinese participation	Type of participation	Strategic objectives	Impact on China’s influence
South Sudan (UNMISS) (de Coning & Osland, 2020, pp. 09-10)	Since 2011	China’s largest contribution: infantry troops, engineers, military doctors	Protecting Chinese oil investments and ensuring stability	Enhanced China’s image as a “security provider,” not merely an “economic investor”
Mali (MINUSMA) (de Coning & Osland, 2020, pp. 10-11)	Since 2013	Combat troops; logistical support units; field hospitals	Counter-terrorism in the Sahel; protecting trade routes	Demonstrating China’s commitment to global security and expanding its presence in West Africa
Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (Nations, 2024)	Since 2003 (expanded after 2010)	Medical units; military engineers	Promoting stability in a minerals-rich area crucial to China	Strengthening influence by combining economic investment with security contribution
Darfur/Sudan (UNAMID) (Lammich, 2025, p. 16)	Since 2007 until 2020	Military police forces; engineers	Protecting Chinese oil companies and infrastructure	Consolidating relations with Sudan as a strategic partner

participation in peacekeeping missions. The report is available on the official website of the Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia

Liberia (UNMIL) (Chávez Mazuelos, 2023, p. 87)	2003–2018	Medical units; support for security maintenance	Improving China's image as a contributor to stability after civil war	Enhancing China's soft power in West Africa
Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) (Montenegro, 2021, p. 420)	2004–2017	Military observers	Supporting stability after internal conflict	A symbolic role that reinforced China's diplomatic presence

Source: Compiled by the author based on the cited references.

China's participation in peacekeeping operations in Africa (Mali, Liberia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Darfur) reveals the contours of a security strategy aimed at expanding Chinese influence through multilateral instruments, rather than through traditional large-scale military presence.

In South Sudan, China played a central role by deploying combat units, military engineers, and field doctors—reflecting its concern with protecting oil investments and stabilizing the commercial operating environment. In Mali, China's participation in MINUSMA constituted one of its largest military contributions outside Asia, focusing on counter-terrorism in the Sahel and securing trade routes, thereby reinforcing China's image as a global security actor. In the DRC, China's involvement through MONUSCO was closely linked to ensuring stability in a resource-rich area of strategic importance to the Chinese economy. On the other hand, China's contributions in Darfur under UNAMID emerged as a means to protect oil infrastructure and sustain partnership with Khartoum, while its involvement in Liberia assumed a symbolic and humanitarian character through medical units and support for local security—enhancing China's soft power and reshaping its image as a contributor to post-conflict stabilization.

Section III: China's Military Presence in Africa within the Context of International Competition: African and Major-Power Responses and Implications for Regional Stability and National Sovereignty

China's security presence in Africa constitutes a strategic development that reflects the transformation of Beijing's foreign policy from an emphasis on instruments of economic soft power toward an increasingly systematic deployment of security and military influence in the service of its global interests. This shift unfolds within an international context characterized by growing competition among major powers to reconfigure positions of influence on the African continent, rendering Africa an open arena for multidimensional geopolitical interactions. Within this framework, China's security footprint functions as a consequential variable in regional balance structures, as it raises debate regarding the extent to which it aligns with African development priorities and the limits of its impact on the national sovereignty of host states. It also reflects China's repositioning as an international security actor seeking to consolidate its legitimacy within collective security arrangements, in the face of the traditional influence models of Western powers. Accordingly, analyzing China's security presence in Africa necessitates a comprehensive approach that connects the logic of international competition with local-actor responses and the implications of this complex interaction for regional stability and the concept of sovereignty on the continent. This section addresses the foregoing through the following:

3.1 African States' Interaction with China's Military Expansion

African states' responses to China's military presence in Africa have ranged between cautious welcome and strategic interest, alongside latent concern about Chinese influence. Some African political regimes perceive China's military presence as a "welcome counterbalance" to Western pressures, while others fear a "soft militarization trap" that could result in the erosion of sovereign control over security decision-making. This can be addressed as follows:

- **Welcome and support**

Some African states have viewed China's military expansion as an opportunity to secure both security and developmental gains. Djibouti, for example, hosted China's first overseas military base under the justification of combating piracy and protecting maritime corridors. This represents the most explicit case of establishing a permanent Chinese military structure on African soil (Cocodia, 2024, p. 12). The Djiboutian government considers the base part of its broader strategy of attracting international powers—similar to its hosting of U.S., French, and Japanese bases—while generating rental revenues, creating employment opportunities, and strengthening connectivity to international trade routes.

- **Pragmatism and balancing**

Several African states seek to diversify partnerships and avoid dependence on a single actor; accordingly, they balance among China, the West, and Russia by allowing a limited degree of military cooperation without entering into clear strategic alliances (Mrdaković, 2023, p. 180). They have largely confined cooperation to training agreements, arms procurement, and exchange programs. Tanzania and Kenya, for instance, maintain historically rooted security relations with China, with gradual expansion in training and joint activities linked to ports and Chinese projects (Lammich, 2025, p. 11). Zimbabwe has been supplied with equipment and training, while Angola, Nigeria, and Egypt maintain arms and training relations within multi-purpose partnerships. In other words, these states view partnership with China as a means to strengthen limited military capabilities or to meet internal security needs—especially as they benefit from competitively priced equipment, technical support, and training programs. At the same time, they seek to preserve diplomatic balance vis-à-vis the West and Russia, and may use China's presence as a bargaining card in negotiations with Western or regional partners.

- **Concern and restraint**

There is apprehension among certain African elites and civil-society actors that China's military expansion may serve as a precursor to more entrenched political or economic influence—particularly if linked to sovereign debt exposure or long-term security contracts. Such dynamics may entail loss of control over ports and sovereign spaces through long concession contracts, or the transformation of ports into instruments within geopolitical competition, alongside increased exposure to attacks (as in the case of Lamu) (Le, 2016, p. 109). Certain media and research reports have also warned that China may utilize its military presence primarily to protect its own economic interests, rather than to provide genuine security assistance to host states (Hazra & Bhaskar, 2023, p. 505).

3.2 Major-Power Positions toward China's Military Presence in Africa

China's military presence in Africa is among the most salient manifestations of the transformation in the global balance-of-power equation. It is no longer confined to economic and investment dimensions, but has expanded into the security and military domain. This presence has generated divergent reactions among major powers, as it is perceived as a challenge to their strategic interests in the continent and to their traditional spheres of influence. These responses have not remained at the level of framing China's presence as a "threat," but have been translated into multi-dimensional practical measures that can be summarized as follows:

3.2.1 The United States

The United States approaches China's expanding military presence in Africa as a troubling strategic shift that affects the core of the balance of power on the continent. The opening of China's military base in Djibouti in 2017 is widely viewed as clear evidence of Beijing's transition from a conventional economic actor to a global military power seeking to consolidate an overseas footprint. This shift has fueled growing concern among decision-makers in Washington regarding the potential erosion of entrenched U.S. influence in Africa and the possible threat to freedom of navigation in vital corridors, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

In response, Washington has adopted a dual strategy combining containment and competition. On the one hand, it has reinforced its military presence by expanding the activities of the U.S. Africa Command

(AFRICOM) and intensifying security training and counter-terrorism programs with a number of African states, thereby sustaining on-the-ground influence and limiting Chinese penetration into strategic infrastructure. AFRICOM reports (2025) emphasize that the proximity of the U.S. base in Djibouti to the Chinese base carries strong symbolic significance, reflecting an undeclared competition over influence in the region (Miliken, 2025).

On the other hand, the United States has sought to mobilize soft-power and economic-diplomacy instruments to offer alternatives to Chinese influence through initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) (Yu, 2024, pp. 144-148), which aims to provide transparent developmental financing grounded in principles of good governance and equitable partnership. It has also employed political and media discourse to warn African states about the “risks of dependency” on Chinese projects, focusing on what it terms “debt traps” and the militarization dimensions of investments (Sun, 2025, p. 21).

Nevertheless, despite the breadth of this approach, it is not without challenges. Some analysts argue that Washington’s threat assessment may exceed empirical realities on the ground, and that its warning discourse is often used to justify renewed U.S. repositioning in the continent. Even so, it remains clear that U.S. strategy in Africa rests on a mixture of flexible deterrence and constructive competition in an effort to preserve its role as a central security actor in a continent witnessing a reconfiguration of geopolitical balances driven by China’s expanding presence.

3.2.2 The Russian Position

Unlike the cautious U.S. stance, Russia’s strategy toward China’s military presence in Africa is characterized by a more pragmatic and adaptive posture rather than a confrontational one. Moscow—while viewing Beijing as a strategic partner in counterbalancing Western global influence—recognizes that Africa constitutes a space of indirect competition between the two, as each seeks to expand its influence without entering into open conflict. Russia does not treat China’s base in Djibouti as a direct threat to its interests; rather, it sees it as part of a multipolar competitive landscape from which it can benefit to expand its own presence on the continent (Narbone, 2023, p. 50).

In practice, Moscow has pursued a policy of “balancing through cooperation,” strengthening its military and security footprint through bilateral defense agreements, arms deals, and the deployment of private military company elements—most notably the Wagner Group (prior to its later restructuring) (Adisa & Abdelsalam, 2025, p. 577). This has enabled Russia to secure footholds in strategic areas such as Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic, making it an influential security actor in sensitive files that had previously been dominated by Western influence.

At the same time, Russia’s position toward China’s expansion can be described as a Competitive Partnership, whereby Moscow seeks coordination with Beijing in international forums and certain major economic projects, while ensuring that China does not monopolize African political decision-making. This has pushed Russia to launch the Russia–Africa Forum mechanism since 2019, reinforcing its presence as an independent actor offering an “alternative model” of cooperation—one that is neither based on Western conditionality nor on the Chinese pattern of “interest-bound investments” (Lanfranchi & de Bruijne, 2022, pp. 12-13).

Despite strategic coordination in international arenas, Russo–Chinese relations in Africa remain constrained by realist limits: Moscow fears that excessive Chinese economic and military expansion could marginalize Russian influence in a space it regards as one of its competitive arenas vis-à-vis the West. Accordingly, Russia seeks a delicate balance between tactical cooperation and strategic competition by reinforcing direct security influence in unstable states on the one hand, and adopting a discourse centered on respect for African sovereignty and rejection of dependency on any external power on the other.

Thus, Russia’s stance toward China’s military presence in Africa transcends the binary of “alliance versus conflict” toward a pragmatic positioning within a shifting international system: Moscow recognizes that direct confrontation with Beijing could weaken their shared front against the West, whereas flexible

coordination provides strategic room to enhance Russian influence and expand its role as a non-Western security actor within Africa's evolving geopolitical space.

3.2.3 The European Union's Position

The European Union's position toward China's military presence in Africa is characterized by a degree of duality between strategic concern and cautious openness to cooperation. On the one hand, Europeans view China's expansion into African military and security domains as a factor that could reshape the continental balance of power and threaten traditional European interests—especially in regions that constitute the historical extension of European influence, such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, the EU recognizes that China has become an actor that cannot be ignored in the management of major African issues, particularly those related to development, maritime security, counter-piracy, and peacekeeping missions.

European official discourse—especially in the EU Global Gateway document issued in 2023—expresses a desire to compete with Chinese influence through economic and investment instruments rather than by entering into direct military or geopolitical confrontation. Brussels seeks to offer a “values-based investment” model in contrast to what it frames as “interest-conditioned financing,” emphasizing support for stability and sustainable development. Nonetheless, EU institutions do not conceal concern about the expanding security dimension of China's presence, particularly in ports and infrastructure that could be repurposed for future military uses.

On the ground, the EU has opted to project itself as a “legitimate” security actor through its training and advisory missions in Mali, Niger, and Djibouti, within a “security through partnership” policy that combines military and developmental dimensions. Chatham House reports (2024) indicate that this approach aims to limit Chinese and Russian influence by strengthening African self-capacities for security governance, thereby sustaining European presence without direct confrontation with other major powers. Brussels also views Chinese competition as an opportunity to recalibrate its approach to Africa beyond the inherited colonial-era framework, seeking a more balanced and comprehensive relationship that mobilizes traditional instruments—such as development assistance and environmental policies—as means of maintaining influence through normative legitimacy rather than direct military control. However, this approach is not free of contradictions: Europe is sometimes accused of reproducing patterns of dominance through “softer” means compared to the United States or China.

Accordingly, the EU's stance toward China's military presence in Africa can be situated between strategic caution and managed competition: it does not seek to confront China militarily as much as it aims to redefine European influence within a geopolitical environment characterized by multiple actors and divergent security approaches. The EU thus remains an actor relying on normative power and economic diplomacy to preserve a foothold in Africa's transforming security order.

3.3 International Interactions around China's Military Presence in Africa as a Structuring

The interaction among China, African states, and major powers surrounding China's military presence on the continent reveals a complex mix of new security opportunities and escalating structural risks, pushing African security into a phase of “structural re-formation” that transcends the traditional concept of national sovereignty toward a multi-level competitive space—likely to cast shadows over the security and stability of African states (Mrdaković, 2023, p. 184). In other words, how have the interactions between China, African states, and major powers affected security and stability in Africa? This section addresses the issue as follows:

3.3.1 Implications of International Interactions over China's Military Presence for Domestic Security in African States

China's military presence in Africa has constituted one of the most prominent manifestations of transformation in the architecture of African security over the last two decades. China has moved beyond a “soft-power” logic grounded in economy and infrastructure toward a more explicit practice of hard power

through the establishment of military bases, the signing of defense agreements, and participation in peacekeeping operations. Yet these moves have not remained confined to China's own dimension; they have triggered a set of complex international interactions among major powers (such as the United States, the European Union, Russia, and European states) on the one hand, and among African states themselves on the other—producing deep transformations in the concept and practice of domestic security within many African countries (Adisa & Abdelsalam, 2025, p. 579).

This international competition has redefined national security priorities in many African states, which have found themselves confronted with a delicate equation combining the need to benefit from external security partnerships with the fear of falling into a circle of strategic dependency. On the one hand, China's presence has provided advanced military and logistical support instruments that have enabled certain regimes to enhance security capabilities and border monitoring, particularly in areas threatened by terrorism and piracy (as in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel). On the other hand, the intersecting alliances woven by major powers have contributed to weakening the autonomy of African security decision-making and to feeding internal contradictions between political elites and military institutions.

The danger of these interactions lies in the fact that they have not only shifted balances of power within the state, but have also altered the nature of domestic threats themselves. New patterns of hybrid threats have emerged, intersecting economic, security, and political dimensions, making domestic security more tightly connected to international politics than ever before. In this context, it can be argued that China's military presence—and the geopolitical competition it has generated—has reshaped African domestic security dynamics from a logic of “security against the internal threat” toward a logic of “security under international competition,” thereby requiring African states to rethink their security model in a manner that balances openness to external partnerships with the preservation of strategic sovereignty.

3.3.2 Implications for Regional Security

China's military presence in Africa, and the accompanying major-power interactions, have contributed to reshaping the regional African security environment, rendering the continent more exposed to the effects of multipolar international competition (Carrozza & Marsh, 2022).

Chinese investments in military infrastructure and the establishment of logistical bases have enhanced the capacity of some states to confront transboundary threats—such as terrorist groups and maritime piracy—thus contributing, to some extent, to stability in certain areas (Sun, 2025).

Nevertheless, the expansion of China's military and security presence in Africa, alongside growing interventions and competition by major powers such as NATO, the European Union, and AFRICOM, has contributed to reshaping African regional security structures in multiple ways—not only in terms of capacities and locations, but also in terms of the very logic of security itself. The multiplication of international actors and the overlap of their interests has complicated regional security networks. Western major powers—such as the United States and the European Union—have expanded military and training presence in strategic regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, generating direct and indirect competition over influence. This dynamic has contributed to the creation of “dual” or “multi-layered” security zones, where national security interests of African states intersect with foreign powers' calculations, thereby increasing the fragility of regional stability and complicating the efforts of the African Union and regional organizations to manage cross-border crises.

4 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth critical analysis of the nature of the transformation in China's use of soft power in Africa, through unpacking the mechanisms by which it is reproduced as a form of leverage with a “soft-military” character. The study has demonstrated how development—within China's policy framework—has been converted into a façade for a gradual and quiet form of geopolitical militarization, grounded in non-confrontational yet deeply consequential strategies.

Since the mid-2010s, the security and military dimensions of the People's Republic of China's presence in Africa have expanded from an initially economic momentum into a multi-form security footprint. This transformation has been managed through an official discourse that frames it as a response to piracy and as a means of protecting trade and investments; nevertheless, it is accompanied by strategic components that extend into competition with international and regional powers over trade routes and control of maritime chokepoints.

Moreover, the transformation in China's instruments of influence contributes to redefining the relationship between development and security in Africa, insofar as the militarization of soft power constitutes an alternative instrument for building influence without direct confrontation. In particular, this orientation enhances China's capacity to construct a parallel geopolitical space across the Global South and provides it with non-traditional instruments to protect its vital investments—while simultaneously generating implications for regional security and the national sovereignty of African states.

Accordingly, China's presence in Africa offers a contemporary model of economic and political hegemony within the framework of offensive realism. In this context, the struggle over influence and resources in Africa is not governed solely by considerations of shared development; rather, it involves clear competitive components over influence and the positioning of China as a significant international actor—thereby justifying its characterization as offensive, or even assertive, from a realist perspective in international relations.

The militarization of China's presence in Africa is therefore not merely a reaction to security necessities; it constitutes a major strategic instrument within China's project to build a multipolar international order. Through a military base, security partnerships, and flexible alliances, China is working to consolidate itself as a global power possessing the capacity to intervene and to safeguard its vital interests beyond its traditional Asian sphere.

This dynamic unfolds within a turbulent strategic context in which Africa is witnessing an escalation of security threats and an intense competition for influence amid shifting power balances among international actors. While traditional powers such as the United States and France seek to reposition themselves, China—alongside emerging powers such as India and Russia—appears as a pivotal actor reshaping the continent's geopolitical maps, thereby casting shadows over the domestic security of African states and their regional stability.

In light of the foregoing, it can be concluded that the growing overlap between development and militarization does not represent a rupture with China's traditional strategic discourse; rather, it reflects a functional evolution within the logic of "developmental security", aimed at protecting China's strategic interests and creating a geo-security depth in areas of vital investment.

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