



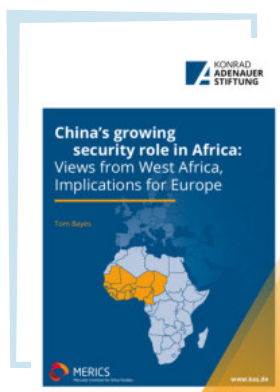
China's growing security role in Africa

Suggestions for a European response

Tom Bayes

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This paper is based on a comprehensive study by Tom Bayes, *China's growing security role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*, published jointly by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in June 2020.

I. Context

As it emerges as a global security actor, Beijing is actively pursuing a greater role in African peace and security – which it established as a priority area for Sino-African ties in 2018. In recent years, China has stepped up military diplomacy, training and arms sales on the continent (becoming the second-largest supplier); mediated conflicts; and expanded its role in UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) both quantitatively and qualitatively. Beijing has also located its first overseas military base on the continent, in Djibouti.

Coupled with its considerable economic and diplomatic influence on the continent, China's growing engagement with African security raises new challenges and opportunities for Africa and its existing security partners, including European actors in the EU and NATO.

This MDPD paper on democracy and development draws on fieldwork in eight African countries, including interviews of senior military officers, government officials, politicians, researchers and civil society actors, as well as foreign diplomats and officials of international organisations.

II. Beijing's motives



The drivers of China's increased security engagement in Africa are both practical and political:

- **Protecting economic interests:**

China's development – and thus regime stability – depends on international trade flows. Over 10,000 Chinese companies operate in Africa, acquiring resources and selling industrial outputs. Chinese economic interests proliferate, often in risky environments. Their protection has become a priority of China's defence and foreign policies – including as one of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) 'eight strategic tasks'.

- **Protecting Chinese citizens:**

Upwards of one million Chinese citizens live in Africa. As they have become caught up in conflict or fallen victim to terrorism, their protection, too, has become a new priority for Beijing. Chinese propaganda increasingly stresses the Party-State's role as the protector of Chinese people overseas, buttressing regime legitimacy. Tangibly, Beijing has conducted non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs), notably deploying PLA assets for the first time to evacuate 40,000 Chinese from Libya in 2011.

- **Boosting military modernisation:**

China's military is modernising to meet Xi Jinping's goal of a 'world-class military' by the PRC's centenary in 2049. African arms sales provide financial and feedback inputs to Chinese weapons development. African deployments, including UNPKOs, joint exercises, NEOs, and humanitarian missions, meanwhile help alleviate what the PLA's official newspaper dubs its 'peace disease' – the institutional degradation and erosion of deployment skills resulting from its lack of combat exposure since the failed invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

- **Strengthening Sino-African ties:**

Through enhanced security cooperation, Beijing aims to rebalance and deepen China-Africa relations, away from purely commercial exchanges. This mitigates the pushback in some African countries against China's economic role and – as Chinese analysts have noted – allows Beijing to better compete with Western actors that retain important African security roles. China's leaders also present boosted security cooperation as an important building block of a 'China-Africa Community with a Shared Future' (中非命运共同体) in a context of renewed strategic competition in Africa.

- **Building international influence:**

Beijing intends its greater contribution to African security to demonstrate China is a 'responsible great power' and thus build its international influence, notably in the UN. China has become the second largest financial contributor to UNPKOs and the largest troop contributor of the UN Security Council's permanent members, providing a broad range of personnel (medical staff, engineers, combat units, helicopter teams, etc.). State media dub China 'the backbone of UN peacekeeping'. Beijing hopes to leverage these efforts as further fuel for its already growing influence throughout the UN system, both defensively (to ward off criticism of its domestic and international behaviour) and proactively, to reshape global governance norms to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) liking.



**CHINESE PROPAGANDA
INCREASINGLY
STRESSES THE PARTY-
STATE'S ROLE AS THE
PROTECTOR OF
CHINESE PEOPLE
OVERSEAS**

III. China's growing security activities in Africa



China has no history of military intervention in Africa and no existing network of military bases and mutual defence agreements. Instead, Beijing stresses that its security engagement is non-interventionist and remains – like others – focused on building African capacity for ‘African solutions to African problems’. China’s growing peace and security role in Africa takes the following forms:

- **Expanding cooperation with the African Union (AU):**

China is deepening its security partnership with the AU, notably operationalising the China-Africa Peace and Security Initiative and China-Africa Peace and Security Fund, both announced in 2018. Through this partnership, Beijing is pledging support to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and African Standby Force (ASF). APSA’s subsidiary structure points toward greater cooperation with Africa’s Regional Economic Communities (RECs) – as APSA’s sub regional building blocks. Beijing has indeed offered some support to RECs, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in West Africa. However, Beijing’s security support to ECOWAS remains limited – likely tempered by the norms disconnect between Beijing and an historically interventionist and increasingly pro-democratic ECOWAS.

Beijing has also begun supporting novel security groupings outside of APSA, such as the G5 Sahel. It has provided budgetary funding for the G5 Secretariat, military materiel for the member militaries, but no funding for the joint force. Tellingly, Beijing conditioned its support on Burkina Faso first ending ties with Taiwan. Subsequently, G5 officials have struggled to win Chinese funding for infrastructure development programmes, otherwise a major area of Chinese activity, notably through the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing’s lack of engagement in this area points to its preference for independent actions readily identifiable as Chinese, rather than pooling its activities in multilateral programmes.

- **Military diplomacy:**

Beijing is raising its profile as a security partner through increased military diplomacy, including more defence attachés, high-level exchanges, port visits, and a series of security cooperation agreements with African partners. In 2019, Beijing hosted the first China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, intended as a recurring format bringing together military leaders from China and over 50 African nations, raising the visibility of China’s security role.

- **Arms provision:**

China is the second-largest arms supplier to Africa; two-thirds of African militaries now use Chinese arms. Small arms and light weapons (SALW) remain central, but China also increasingly supplies major weapons, including naval vessels, jets, helicopters, tanks, and combat drones.

Chinese producers offer African militaries an opportunity to enhance their capabilities at accessible prices. However, African military interviewees expressed frustration at the unreliability of some Chinese weapon systems following multiple malfunctions.

Beijing has also made numerous donations of lethal and non-lethal military equipment to individual African militaries, RECs (including ECOWAS), and multilateral missions (such as AMISOM, the AU’s mission in Somalia) – strengthening both African capabilities and Sino-African ties.

- **Training:**

Military training is a central component of China’s security offer to Africa. Beijing shares this focus on capacity-building with other international partners – though its approach differs significantly. Beijing prioritises a large and growing military education programme in China for the African officer corps, funded by Chinese government scholarships. In-country training is comparatively marginal – though there are small-scale instances of drill and combat skill training by the PLA in Africa. China has also begun joint exercises with African militaries, principally in the maritime domain. These remain moderate in scope but are likely to grow. Unlike the US, France, Russia and others, China has yet to embed military advisers within African militaries, ministries and presidencies.

China’s approach suggests prioritisation of elite cultivation and influence building in Africa. Chinese courses are positively perceived by African military interviewees – though Chinese training lacks the prestige of Western military institutions among African officers. African interviewees also doubted the relevance of the PLA’s experience and expertise, notably on counter-terrorism (CT).

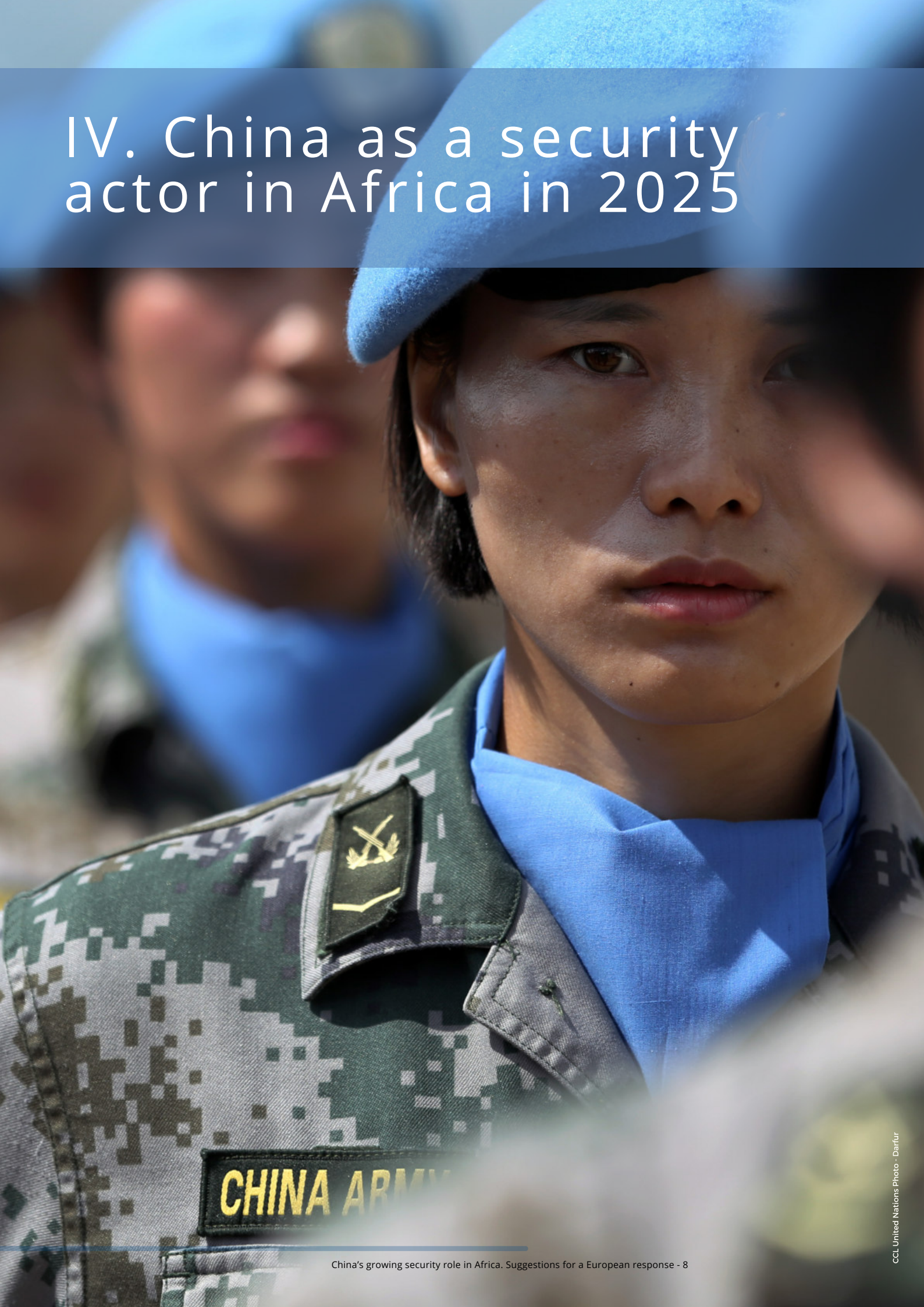
- **UNPKOs:**

Beijing's most active contribution to African security is deployment within UNPKOs. China has substantially expanded its role in UNPKOs in the last decade, both in terms of dollars contributed and boots on the ground. This includes ongoing deployments in Mali (MINUSMA), South Sudan (UNMISS) and the DRC (MONUSCO). Beijing's anti-interventionism remains strong – if more nuanced than previously. Beijing opposes the civil and political rights interventions of 'multidimensional' peacekeeping and its diplomats have sought to cut funding to UNPKOs' human rights actions. Chinese analysts point to a new, Chinese approach to peacekeeping, centred on regime stability and economic development.

- **More military bases in Africa?**

China broke with its long-standing opposition to 'imperialist' overseas military bases by establishing a base in Djibouti. Chinese leaders now describe such bases as 'necessary infrastructure' in regions where Chinese interests are concentrated. The Djibouti base supports Chinese involvement in counter-piracy operations, NEOs and UNPKOs. It provides aerial access to the whole continent – but only delayed naval access to the Atlantic coast. This, together with Beijing's sustained interest in Gulf of Guinea piracy, has encouraged speculation regarding further facilities. A few credible reports have suggested potential sites in Namibia, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Chinese companies are involved in numerous harbour projects around Africa, and China may acquire an additional base or dual-use facility in the future.

IV. China as a security actor in Africa in 2025



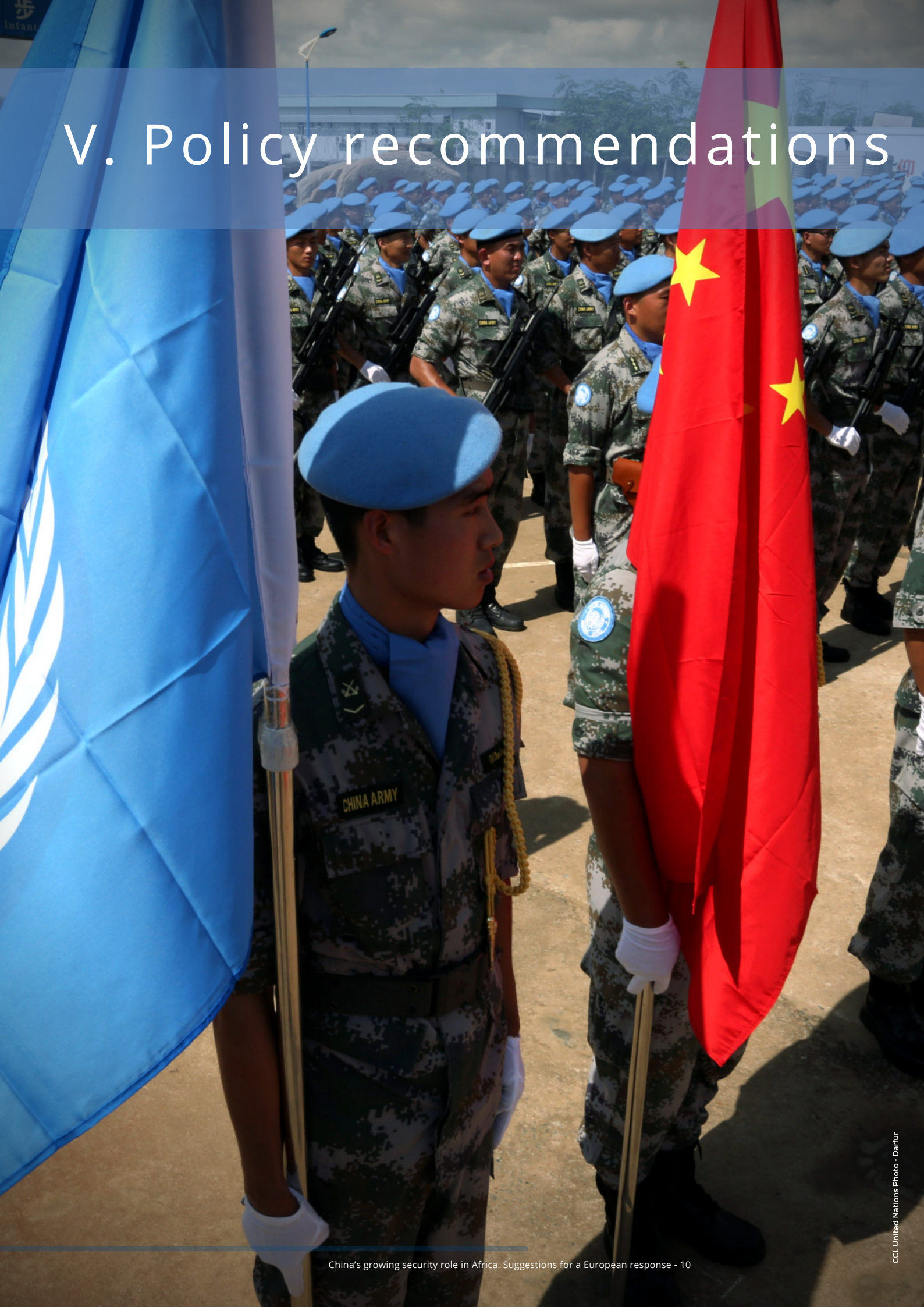
CHINA ARMY

Although China's peace and security role in Africa will continue to grow to 2025 and beyond, it will remain fundamentally limited. Beijing will continue to expand provision of arms and training, likely including more joint exercises, but nonetheless focusing largely on military education in China. Beijing's non-interference policy, unwillingness to deploy troops, and lack of relevant military experience will limit its impact as a security actor. It will continue to stand aloof from democratising and civil-society led peacebuilding efforts – though it will identify its economic role (most importantly the Belt and Road Initiative) as contributing to peace. Beijing will, however, seek to leverage visible, autonomous activities to raise its stature as a security partner, for example advertising financial and weapons donations. This – coupled with its rapidly growing economic and diplomatic weight in the region – will magnify its security role beyond its moderate substantive impact, contributing to Beijing's diplomatic goals in Africa and beyond.



**CHINA'S PEACE
AND SECURITY
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WILL CONTINUE TO
GROW TO 2025
AND BEYOND**

V. Policy recommendations



As China adds a greater security role to its already considerable economic and diplomatic weight in Africa, **all European actors**, including within the EU and NATO, will increasingly have to take China into consideration on African security. China's emerging security role demands ongoing monitoring and analysis – as well as communication and coordination amongst European partners. Europe and China – along with their African partners – have a clear shared interest in a peaceful and prosperous Africa. This suggests that some cooperation, or at minimum coordination, may be possible. Engagement with China on African security should be sought and sustained at political and working levels – and used to forge mutual understanding and encourage China to make further substantive contributions to African security, in a transparent, multilateral manner, and in line with its considerable resources and influence on the continent. Specifically, China should be encouraged to join multilateral fora, such as the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea, and provide funding to the G5 Sahel's development activities.

However, an increasingly ideologically assertive China, deepening its influence in Africa that risks undermining liberal democratic development, while also leveraging its expanded African security role to shape global political norms and outcomes in favour of the Chinese Communist Party, presents risks for European interests and values. These risks must be accounted for in European security engagement with China, in Africa and elsewhere.

Nonetheless, even as it grows, China's security role in Africa will remain limited in the near future, both in its scale and modus operandi. It is not a peer competitor to the European contribution to African security, at least in aggregate. As such, it does not demand any fundamental restructuring or expansion of European actors' own security activities (and any competitive dynamic with China is likely to be counterproductive). European actors should instead continue to work closely with likeminded African partners and sustain their security capacity building and peacebuilding efforts.

The European Union identifies China not only as 'simultaneously (in different policy areas) a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, [and] an economic competitor' but also a 'systemic rival', increasingly wielding its influence worldwide in ways that run counter to European values and interests.

A larger security role will deepen that influence in Africa. The EU and China nonetheless remain strategic partners with shared interests in a stable, prosperous Africa. The EU must therefore assess where Beijing's growing African security role stands in 'the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China', which, in the EU's assessment, 'has shifted over time'. In June 2020, the EU reiterated that it 'wants to further build on cooperation with China on African issues, in full respect of the principle of African ownership.' In the African security domain, specific areas providing opportunities for more active partnership include anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, NEOs, and humanitarian missions. China has already demonstrated its interest in such exchanges, including joint training and exercises with European militaries relating to UNPKOs, military medicine and logistics, and NEOs. However, any European participation in such activities must account for the possible risks to European values and interests, and those of Europe's likeminded partners in Africa and East Asia. Consequently, European stakeholders, most likely coordinated by the EU Military Staff, should urgently devise a code of European guidelines for engagement with the PLA, delineating acceptable and counterproductive areas of exchange, the better to achieve a 'realistic, effective and coherent engagement with China, based on [the EU's] values and interests'.



**ALL
EUROPEAN
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CHINA INTO
CONSIDERATION
ON AFRICAN
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The European Council of heads of state and government is the appropriate forum for the high-level political and strategic decisions to form the basis of these principles. Preparations for the postponed EU-China Leipzig Summit, when it is eventually held, or subsequent summitry in a similar format, are an opportunity for this discussion, within a broader consideration of EU-China relations.

Working level Council formations should be used to coordinate and exchange views on China in Africa. The precedent of joint meeting of COAFR and COASI (the working parties on Africa and Asia, respectively) should be repeated, with China's security activities in Africa specifically on the agenda.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) plays a crucial coordinating and information-sharing role. Recent efforts to strengthen and institutionalise information sharing between China-and Africa-facing teams within the EEAS and the other institutions should be sustained and replicated in member states' foreign ministries. The EEAS is also a channel for exchange with China on African security. The EU-China Africa political dialogue, led by the EEAS' Managing Director for Africa, should be fully exploited to seek mutual understanding and, where possible, facilitate coordinated responses to African security crises.

For **NATO**, much depends on its own evolving China policy and nascent engagement in Africa. These two strands are not separate. China will increasingly shape security developments in Africa, which will in turn influence its security profile closer to home – including by honing its military capabilities. As such, full consideration of the implications of China's emerging security role in Africa must feature in NATO's ongoing strategic 'reflection process' led by the panel of 10 experts appointed by Secretary General Stoltenberg.

NATO allies must enhance intelligence and analysis pooling on China's security activities in Africa. Allied Command Transformation and the Southern Hub should support efforts to understand China's growing role. As both China and NATO act to enhance their security partnership with the AU, NATO's liaison office (and allies' own missions) to the AU in Addis Ababa should play an important role in monitoring developments.

NATO structures for exchange with China – including high-level and military staff talks, and the proposed NATO-China Council, if it is created – should be used to discuss Africa and enhance mutual comprehension and trust.

In the recent past, NATO and China have conducted some technical and working-level exchanges, including mutual vessel visits in the context of anti-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden and Chinese participation in NATO Defence College trainings. Options remain for future active engagement such as on human security and anti-piracy, where politically and strategically appropriate. However, for this assessment to be made, NATO needs a clearer China policy.

Individual EU & NATO member states must use their resources – including diplomatic missions and military attachés – to monitor China's evolving security role in Africa. This will be especially important within the United Nations, where Beijing seeks to convert its expanding role in UNPKOs and African security into political capital capable of shaping political norms and outcomes in its favour. While China's contribution to UNPKOs should be welcomed, European members should be vigilant to attempts to weaken UN peacekeeping norms. This is best supported by a sustained, substantive European contribution to UNPKOs, both through financing and provision of high-end capabilities to individual missions. European members of the Security Council must also strengthen coordination with African counterparts – much as China is doing – to coordinate responses to African security crises.

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