


Chapter 13

Building the Great Wall Abroad: China's Security Engagement in Africa

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ABSTRACT

While China's economic influence in Africa has been widely studied, its security-related activities have received less scrutiny. This chapter positions China's security initiatives as a critical but underexplored dimension of its African policy. This chapter explores China's growing security engagement in Africa, framing it as an extension of its domestic principles of stability and strategic defense, symbolized metaphorically by the "Great Wall." It investigates how China's security policies in Africa align with its broader geopolitical and economic objectives. Through an analysis of military cooperation, peacekeeping missions, arms trade, and the establishment of overseas military bases, the chapter evaluates the implications of China's security engagement for Africa's governance, development, and global security dynamics. In doing so, the metaphor of the "Great Wall" is employed to symbolize China's efforts to project stability, safeguard its interests, and expand its strategic influence beyond its borders.

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INTRODUCTION

At the 9th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Chinese President Xi Jinping explicitly linked China-Africa security cooperation to the “Global Security Initiative”¹ (GSI), by affirming:

China is ready to help Africa improve its capacity in safeguarding peace and stability independently, prioritize Africa in implementing the Global Security Initiative (GSI), promote mutual reinforcement of high-quality development and greater security, and work together with Africa to uphold world peace and stability (The State Council, 2024).

Underscoring the commitment, Xi announced concrete steps under the “Partnership Action for Common Security”, stating:

We [China] will give Africa RMB1 billion yuan of grants in military assistance, provide training for 6,000 military personnel and 1,000 police and law enforcement officers from Africa, and invite 500 young African military officers to visit China. The two sides will conduct joint military exercises, training and patrol, carry out an “action for a mine-free Africa,” and jointly ensure the safety of personnel and projects (The State Council, 2024).

Complementing the GSI, Beijing’s Global Development Initiative (GDI, launched in 2021) also plays a key role in shaping China-Africa cooperation. Closely aligned with the African Union’s (AU) “Agenda 2063,”² the GDI reflects a shared development vision — Steve Lalande, AU’s Director of Partnerships Management and Resource Mobilization noted: “Together [Africa and China] we can transform the ambitious goals of the GDI into concrete results that enhance the quality of life of all Africans and Chinese citizens alike, and also people of the world” (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2024). Taken together, the GSI and GDI reflect a significant broadening of China’s engagement in Africa, evolving from a largely economic focus to a more strategic, multidimensional partnership.

China’s security interest in Africa has become increasingly prominent, reflecting its broader strategic and geopolitical objectives on the continent. This shift is evident in the “2021 Dakar China-Africa Action Plan” (2022–2024), adopted at the 8th FOCAC Summit. The plan expanded China-Africa cooperation to include military and police collaboration, counterterrorism, and law enforcement—marking a notable evolution in Beijing’s Africa policy and introducing a formal ‘security’ dimension to its engagement. This development aligns with China’s broader economic and infrastructure agenda in Africa, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has provided a further boost to China’s security calculus in Africa. Since its launch in 2013, 53 African nations except Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), have joined the BRI, and by 2023, they had received US\$21.7 billion in deals involving ports, railways, and renewable energy (Kluiver, 2024). Beyond

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