Shifting Security Challenges in the China–Africa Relationship

ROSS ANTHONY, HARRIE ESTERHUYSE & MERYL BURGESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's involvement in African security has deepened in recent years, with growing multilateral engagements with the AU and the UN. China is also taking several measures to deal with non-traditional security threats – mainly issues of survival arising outside military sources, such as human trafficking, food and water security, terrorism, infectious diseases and energy security. This policy insights paper discusses three aspects of the China–Africa security relationship – Chinese citizens' physical security, pandemic diseases and environmental damage – to highlight some of the evolving challenges and the ways in which China responds to these. These responses illustrate China's deepening role across these fields and its increasing use of multilateral organisations in engaging with such issues.

INTRODUCTION

China's growing economic role in Africa has occurred in tandem with its growing security role. The expansion of Chinese investments in Africa, with the concomitant increase in Chinese

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personnel – particularly in conflict-prone regions – has compelled the state to play a greater role in protecting these interests. In the short term, this entails ensuring the safety of Chinese citizens and company investments. In the longer term, contributing to general peace and security issues (for example, through committing Chinese troops to UN peacekeeping missions) contributes to longer-lasting regional peace efforts, while also creating more stable conditions for Chinese engagement. As China has become an increasingly powerful actor on the world stage, there have been rising expectations from the global community for it to play a more engaged role in peace and security. China has contributed peacekeepers to a variety of multilateral UN missions in Africa, including in Namibia, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Chad and South Sudan. Within the non-traditional security realms, China has also become increasingly engaged in multinational organisations. For instance, in combatting piracy off the coast of Somalia, its People's Liberation Army Navy deployed a three-ship flotilla to the Gulf of Aden as part of a broader operation involving NATO, Iran, India, Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia and various other countries.

The future of Chinese security engagement on the continent depends not only on the nature of the threats but also on broader geopolitical relationships. China's relationship with other large powers will be a factor in how multilateral co-operation may evolve. Despite multilateral co-operation, China's policy of 'non-interference' has also entailed a parallel caution in engaging on the international stage – a situation that many in Beijing view as an arena dominated by Europe and the US. The rise of new multinational forums such as BRICS is, in part, a response to this perceived bias and may also have implications for future security engagements.

The question of how China engages in multilateral forums on African security is important because the way in which states think about security has expanded dramatically in recent years. Most 'non-traditional' security threats are, by their very nature, transnational. Climate change, terrorism, people smuggling, cybercrime, etc. all transcend national boundaries. Environmental issues in particular highlight why multilateral co-operation is vital.

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The following three sections offer a brief overview of criminal, security and health challenges within Africa – and Chinese responses to them. As these are effectively global problems, this policy insights paper highlights areas where multilateral co-operation is being pursued.

CHINESE CITIZENS' SECURITY

Providing security for Chinese citizens in Africa is a pressing issue, with the Chinese government increasingly obliged to come to their aid. Certain Chinese investments are located in volatile regions, such as South Sudan and the Niger Delta, making Chinese workers vulnerable to attack. Chinese social media platforms have been expressing concern over Beijing's inability to protect its

citizens abroad, making it an increasingly important domestic priority. China has adopted a variety of methods at the community, state and multilateral level to protect its citizens on the continent. At the local level, embassies offer expatriates procedural advice on emergency situations and classes on local culture. Communication between embassies and citizens is often carried out via social media platforms, which are also used to issue alerts. Some Chinese communities, such as in South Africa, have also set up a 'Chinese policing forum', which works with local police. Such engagements are important and may engender greater trust in the police, which is crucial in areas where police are known to extract bribes from Chinese nationals. Chinese companies based in Africa tend to hire local and international security outfits, but recently Chinese security companies have become involved. In 2014 the Shandong Huawei security firm entered into a partnership with HW Raid, a South African security company.

The Chinese government has also taken a more active role in engaging formally with host states such as Angola and Ghana, where Chinese nationals have made public appeals to their government to secure their human and legal rights when placed under arrest. In 2012, the Chinese mafia's presence in Angola led to the deployment of 30 police officers to Luanda by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security to work with local police; as a result, 37 Chinese citizens were arrested and deported to China. In 2015, 30 Chinese nationals, arrested in Nairobi for cybercrimes, were repatriated and now face trial in China. The role of Chinese criminal organisations – particularly with Chinese gangs targeting Chinese nationals – is significant; conversely, Chinese nationals are also targeted by local criminals, who bank on their hesitancy to report issues to the local police. These issues demand greater trust and co-operation between Chinese citizens and their embassies (which they are sometimes afraid to approach), as well as the state-level facilitation of transnational police co-operation.

Islamic militancy in Africa also has an effect on Chinese engagement, particularly in the multilateral realm. This has been most strongly signalled by China's 2013 contribution of troops to an ECOWAS/UN mission to counter al-Qaeda-affiliated Toureg rebels in northern Mali. This was the first time China put 'boots on the ground' in Africa, a move criticised for undermining its official 'non-interference' policy but which China defends as deepening its commitment to ensuring regional peace through multilateral organisations. With the rise of militant groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in East Africa, Chinese citizens have also been targeted. In northern Cameroon in May 2014, 10 Chinese employees from Sinohydro were kidnapped by Boko Haram, and later released. In East Africa, a Chinese woman was killed and her son injured during the al-Shabaab attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi.

In recent years, China has been subjected to domestic terrorist attacks in the Xinjiang region by Uyghur militants linked to Islamic extremist groups abroad. China has responded by engaging with the international community on the issue, with a specific focus on Africa. In October 2014, Chinese Premier

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Li Keqiang met officials from the EU and reached an agreement to increase co-operation on extremism in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel. Boko Haram's high-profile abduction of 200 schoolgirls from Nigeria in April 2014 saw China, along with France, the US and Britain, launching an international effort to secure their release.

EPIDEMICS: THE CASE OF EBOLA

An unanticipated security threat arose with the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which the UN Security Council (UNSC) declared a 'threat to international peace and security'.[1] Many countries were under pressure to offer assistance to affected areas while securing the wellbeing of their own citizens, both in the afflicted areas and in their own territories. Thus, the pandemic posed a risk not only at the level of individual health but also in terms of political reputation. As an avowed 'all-weather friend', crises of this nature have obliged China to show significant levels of commitment.

As part of China's response to the Ebola outbreak, it sent over $140 million worth of aid,[2] primarily to the three most affected countries, namely Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Its response focused on four aspects: providing aid (ambulances, incinerators, food, protective equipment, funds, etc.); sending medical and support staff (the current target is 1 000 individuals); constructing the necessary infrastructure (medical training, treatment and testing facilities); and preventing the outbreak from spreading (eg, by contributing to Nigeria's disease prevention fund).

China did not close its borders to foreign nationals, although it was criticised for the way in which it dealt with Africans within its borders. Some countries such as Australia and South Africa placed a ban on travel from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, while providing humanitarian aid. Others such as the US took the middle ground by implementing stricter visa requirements but not going as far as issuing travel bans. Officially, China's response did not include visa restrictions for citizens from the affected countries, and travel 'restrictions' were limited to voluntary check-ups at the airport. There were, however, reports that Africans landing at Guangzhou from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia and the DRC were placed in quarantine for 21 days.

The media has scrutinised China's response to the Ebola outbreak and compared it with that of other countries, insofar as the crisis tested major international donors' commitment to Africa. Africa's largest partners – the US, EU and China – all sent both humanitarian aid and medical personnel (demonstrating compassion through direct human contact). Critics argued that the World Health Organization (WHO) had been slow in responding effectively to the crisis, meaning that states and organisations were obliged to play the leading role. This saw, to a certain degree, soft power capital generated by those who stepped in most effectively, with many articles in the media analysing (and

criticising) China's role. Financially China contributed less than the US, but its extensive support portrayed it as a 'hands-on' partner to Africa.

Ebola caught many countries off guard, demanding a greater degree of preparedness for future outbreaks. China played an important role in combating Ebola and will likely continue to do so. This will require increased co-ordination among states, with the WHO taking a strong leadership role. The US, EU and China should co-ordinate their responses to international medical emergencies, possibly from their positions in the UNSC. The greater international response to Ebola was assigned to the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response. The AU also set up its own strategic task force (the AU Support to Ebola Outbreak in West Africa) with representatives from other AU departments, the UN and partners such as the EU and US.

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Another growing security concern is the loss of biodiversity occurring at an alarming rate globally. In Africa and China – regions with some of the greatest biodiversity in the world – this concern is ever increasing. Africa has seen an increase in illegal wildlife trade and logging, which are major worries to both conservationists and governments. China plays a dual role, with a growing level of commitment towards tackling environmental issues on the part of the government contrasted with the continued involvement of Chinese citizens in these crimes.

Chinese syndicates are involved, for instance, in the illegal trade in abalone, an endangered species that is often harvested illegally in South Africa. The demand for this delicacy in especially China and Hong Kong has created a connection between South African gangs and Chinese organised crime syndicates operating on a transnational level, with local gangs in Western Cape villages poaching the abalone for the Chinese syndicates.

In Southern, Eastern and Central Africa there has also been an increase in rhino and elephant poaching for the lucrative Asian markets in rhino horn and ivory. South Africa, home to some 80% of the world's rhino population, lost approximately 1 015 rhinos to poaching in 2014. TRAFFIC, an international wildlife trade-monitoring network, reported that at least 20 000 African elephants were killed in 2013.[3] The illegal ivory trade is having a devastating impact particularly in Central Africa, where many elephant populations are facing local extinction.

The Chinese government has signalled its commitment to work with African governments at a bilateral level, signing Memorandums of Understanding with countries such as South Africa and Kenya on conservation and wildlife trade. In 2014 a suspected ivory smuggler from China was arrested in Kenya and extradited – the first time that China helped arrest a wildlife crime suspect overseas. Since 2011 Chinese authorities have been involved in a number of

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operations with international organisations and other countries to combat smuggling and illegal wildlife trade in China. In 2014 tonnes of illegal wildlife products were confiscated and more than 400 suspects arrested.[4] The operation was co-organised by, among others, China, the US, South Africa, the Lusaka Agreement Task Force and regional (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) networks, supported by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and Interpol.

In the timber sector, Chinese companies continue to place pressure on Africa's environmental resources. Gabon, Cameroon and Mozambique have become major exporters of timber products to China. Since 2007 there have been numerous reports (involving Chinese companies in Africa) of illegal timber being seized. In 2014 Kenyan authorities seized shipping containers destined for China with hundreds of tonnes of illegally logged rosewood from Madagascar, the largest bust of its kind and worth $13 million.[5] Given the importance of forests, most African countries have environmental and economic forestry regulations in place, but implementation is weak. Over the last few years the Chinese government has made significant changes to its environmental legislation, including introducing a comprehensive legal framework for the forestry industry, protecting China's own forests and setting out guidelines for Chinese companies on investment in and the sustainable utilisation of forests abroad.

There are major imbalances, however, between China and African countries in the timber trade. Africa's trade with China is almost exclusively in logs. In 2010, the government of Gabon banned unprocessed timber exports to encourage local value-add. But inconsistencies between legislation and customary practices have hampered implementation. The Chinese government's policy of not taxing imported logs promotes the import of raw materials rather than finished timber products. This secures China's logging industry, but diminishes Africa's potential for value-added exports. Other implementation challenges for the timber regime mainly stem from corruption and weak governance in African states, ie, a lack of capacity to enforce legislation. Closer co-operation should be sought with customs officials to ensure existing regulations are enforced, timber exports to China are legal and timber is harvested sustainably. Both Chinese and African authorities need to observe and understand China's timber import regulations.

Africa's rich biodiversity plays a number of critical roles. Wildlife serves not only vital ecological purposes but is also important for tourism. Many African states rely on eco-tourism to help grow their economies. Forests also have a wide range of economic, social and environmental benefits. In Gabon, for example, the timber industry is the second-largest source of export earnings after petroleum. Thus it is crucial that China continues to work with African states and international organisations in fighting environmental destruction, while devoting greater resources to tackling the problem domestically.

CONCLUSION

The concerns discussed here highlight some of the evolving security challenges that the Chinese government and its citizens face on the African continent. The various adaptive actions taken by the Chinese government illustrate the deepening of the China–Africa relationship as Beijing attunes itself to the diverse and shifting African security terrain. Across the different fields discussed, we see China acknowledging the global nature of these issues through increasing participation in multilateral initiatives. In the cases of terrorism, Ebola and ecological destruction, problems are complex and widespread. While China has been criticised for its reluctance to engage in issues of global and regional security, the problems will increasingly oblige China to work within these platforms – a consequence of its 'going-out' strategy and engagement with world markets. The 2015 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Action Plan should pay greater attention to these concerns and the strategies to address them.

Various steps can be taken to address the security challenges facing China in Africa.

• Chinese embassies should maintain regular contact with their citizens and institute mechanisms to deal with crime within communities. Co-operation between Chinese communities and local police should be encouraged. The Chinese government will most likely continue to engage with Europe and the US on issues of terrorism.
• Improving law enforcement and cross-border co-operation in the illegal wildlife trade and logging can be undertaken through FOCAC, where policy dialogue and exchanges can be strengthened between African governments and China.
• The importance of wildlife for tourism and African economies should be addressed in FOCAC discussions and strategies.
• China should continue to engage in international medical emergencies, preferably through international organisations such as the UN and WHO, to increase its expertise on international health emergencies. All of these organisations should either include input from the AU or support the measures undertaken by the AU.
• The Chinese government should draft a clear policy on domestic visa restrictions regarding health emergencies. This could counter health risks and prevent diplomatic tensions over unofficial visa restrictions.
• The US, EU and China should try to co-ordinate their responses to international medical emergencies, possibly from their positions in the UNSC and with the inclusion of the AU. Ebola showed that taking action appropriate to the threat is more important than the size of the financial contribution.

ENDNOTES

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