Intelligence Report

November 2026





CASR CGSP 中南项目 Intelligence

Mapping China's Growing Security Footprint in Africa

Authors
Lungani Hlongwa & **Paul Nantulya**

Table of Contents

Executive Summary — 3

Introduction — 4

Understanding the big picture of the China-Africa security relationship requires breaking it down to different layers of engagement.

Dimension 1: What signals vision and diplomatic positioning? — 7

Engagement with Africa supports China's broader goals of building its global security image.

Dimension 2: How is China building institutional ties? — 11

Diplomatic engagements, military exercises, and peacekeeping operations build the foundations of security relationships.

Dimension 3: What is China providing materially? — 17

Chinese companies are selling arms, partnering for local production, and providing technology for surveillance and space capabilities.

Dimension 4: Where is China's on-the-ground presence and infrastructure materializing? — 26

Examining port relationships and private security company activities reveals where Chinese actors have the greatest access in Africa.

Dimension 5: The tensions and vulnerabilities that come with China's growing investments in Africa — 31

China's footprint in Africa comes with its own risks and risk management systems.

Conclusion — 33

The nexus of different areas of engagement offers clues to the future of China-Africa security engagement.

References — 36

Cover photo caption:
Peacekeeper troops from China deployed by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), patrol on foot outside the premises of the UN Protection of Civilians (PoC) site in Juba, South Sudan, on October 4, 2016. Photo by ALBERT GONZALEZ FARRAN / AFP

Executive Summary

China has gradually expanded its military and security cooperation with African countries, especially since the establishment of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Beyond traditional areas of engagement like peacekeeping and naval escorts, security cooperation now encompasses digital and public security, overseas interests, and infrastructure protection, as well as security governance under the Global Security Initiative (GSI).

As these activities have diversified across countries, sectors, and institutions, academic and policy interest has grown significantly. Yet, evidence of these types of engagements remains dispersed across academic and case studies, official announcements, and sector-specific reporting, making it difficult to see broad continental trends and changes over time.

To address this gap, the China-Global South Project (CGSP), in collaboration with the China Africa Security Radar (CASR) Substack, has created the China-Africa Security Atlas to present a fuller picture of this evolving relationship. Drawing on more than 700 open-source materials, the Atlas organizes and presents approximately 500 publicly documented engagements across 12 categories covering the period from 2000 to early 2026.

Key Findings:

- **Military and police diplomacy form the connective tissue and institutional infrastructure for building deeper security cooperation**. It is the largest category of engagement.
- **Arms sales are the second-largest category of engagement**. China is increasingly positioning itself to meet African demand for advanced weapons systems and has become an important supplier for entities facing Western sanctions.
- **Defense-industry development is a new and growing area in China-Africa military and security cooperation**. Partnerships for local arms production and joint defense ventures position Chinese defense firms to play a crucial role in partner countries' defense industrialization and modernization.
- **Port access across African coastlines is supporting China's growing blue-water naval ambition and counter-piracy operations**, beyond the PLA's naval base in Djibouti.
- **Provision of Chinese dual-use technologies is growing rapidly in Africa**, particularly in the form of surveillance technologies and space infrastructure.

The findings reveal a broad and multilayered relationship where diplomacy, arms transfer, technology, infrastructure, and risk management increasingly reinforce one another. The implications of this deepening relationship will depend not only on China's ambitions but also on how African states use these partnerships to strengthen local capacity while preserving strategic autonomy.

Introduction

In the past two decades, security has become a key pillar of China-Africa relations, captured in approximately 500 datapoints on the China-Africa Security Atlas. To understand the complexity of this relationship, this report breaks down the data through an analytical framework of five dimensions of engagement.

China's relationship with Africa has evolved over the last two decades from one focused mainly on trade, investment, and resource access to one with security as a key pillar. This growing focus on security has been driven by the need to protect China-constructed infrastructure and Chinese citizens in Africa while seeking to strengthen ties with African security actors and institutions.

The 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit in Beijing, widely labeled the "security FOCAC," clearly illustrates prioritization of security in China-Africa relations. Unlike prior summits' vague language on security, FOCAC 2024 attached hard numbers to security cooperation: RMB 1 billion (about $140 million) in free military grants to African countries; training for 6,000 military personnel and 1,000 police/law-enforcement officers; and inviting 500 young African officers to China.

Historically, much of this engagement occurred in plain sight but was analytically fragmented. China-Africa security engagement has been scattered across country case studies, arms sales databases, and episodic media coverage. This fragmentation created distorted lenses for analyzing the true scale, coherence, and motivations of Beijing's growing security footprint on the continent. It is within this context that the China-Africa Security Atlas finds its relevance.

At its launch in 2026, the China-Africa Security Atlas (the Atlas) consolidates more than 700 open-source materials into approximately 500 documented engagements across 12 categories. As shown in Table 1, these categories are organized into five analytically distinct but overlapping dimensions that form a coherent framework for understanding the data and China's multilayered security engagement in Africa.

Table 1: The 12 areas of China–Africa security engagement covered in the Atlas.

	Entries	Category / Definition
Dimension 1	9	**GSI Endorsement** — Formal African state endorsements of China's Global Security Initiative, typically through bilateral joint statements during state visits.
	19	**Peace & Mediation** — Chinese diplomatic engagement in African conflict resolution, including special envoys, mediation efforts, and peace process support.
Dimension 2	167	**Military & Police Diplomacy** — High-level military and law enforcement exchanges, training programs, official visits, and institutional relationship-building.
	23	**Military Exercises** — Joint military training exercises between PLA forces and African armed forces, including naval, ground, and counter-terrorism drills.
	13	**Peacekeeping Operations** — Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, including troops, police, engineers, and medical personnel.
Dimension 3	114	**Arms Sales** — Direct transfers of military hardware from Chinese suppliers to African states, including weapons systems, vehicles, and equipment.
	19	**Local Arms Production** — Chinese support for defense-industrial capacity in Africa, including local manufacturing, assembly facilities, and technology transfer.
	25	**Space & Satellite Cooperation** — Satellite projects, ground stations, and space technology partnerships with dual-use civil and security applications.
	27	**Safe Cities & Surveillance** — Chinese-supplied urban surveillance infrastructure, including CCTV networks, facial recognition, and command centers.
Dimension 4	27	**Port Access** — PLA Navy port calls, logistics arrangements, and maritime presence infrastructure across African coastal states.
	28	**Private Security Companies** — Chinese private security firms operating in Africa to protect Chinese personnel, assets, and projects.
Dim. 5	29	**Security Warnings** — Chinese consular security advisories for African countries, revealing risk perceptions and citizen protection posture.

Dimension 1 consists of African countries that have endorsed the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the bilateral level and China's peace and mediation engagement. This dimension shows how Beijing is positioning itself diplomatically, politically, and ideologically in Africa's security landscape.

Dimension 2 consists of military and police diplomacy, military exercises, and peacekeeping operations. This dimension shows how Beijing is building and strengthening institutional and personnel ties with various African security institutions and actors.

Dimension 3 consists of arms sales, local arms production, space and satellite cooperation, and urban surveillance systems. This dimension focuses on what China provides materially in its military and security relationship with African countries.

Dimension 4 consists of port access and Chinese security firms. This dimension reflects engagements that help China expand its physical footprint and project power in Africa.

Dimension 5 consists of security warnings by Chinese consular services in Africa. Entries in this dimension reflect strategies employed by Beijing to manage risks faced by Chinese enterprises and citizens in volatile African regions.

This five-dimension framework is not meant to suggest one linear trajectory of China-Africa security engagement, nor does it claim to capture every aspect of this relationship. However, the Atlas offers two key original contributions. First, to our knowledge, it is the first attempt to consolidate publicly available evidence of China-Africa security engagements into a single reference tool that considers diplomatic positioning, institutional cooperation, material provision, physical presence, and risk governance. Second, the framework for the Atlas was built inductively, emerging from patterns in the data rather than being externally imposed as a theoretical model. This provides a ground-up view of a relationship long dominated by macro-level and state-centric perspectives.

Of course, relying on open-source information has limitations that should be acknowledged from the outset. The Atlas captures only what is publicly documented, searchable, and verifiable, therefore reflecting the visible margin of China–Africa security relations rather than the full universe of activity. As such, it should be read as a living evidentiary record that helps document engagements and track changes over time, and not as a complete inventory of every security interaction.

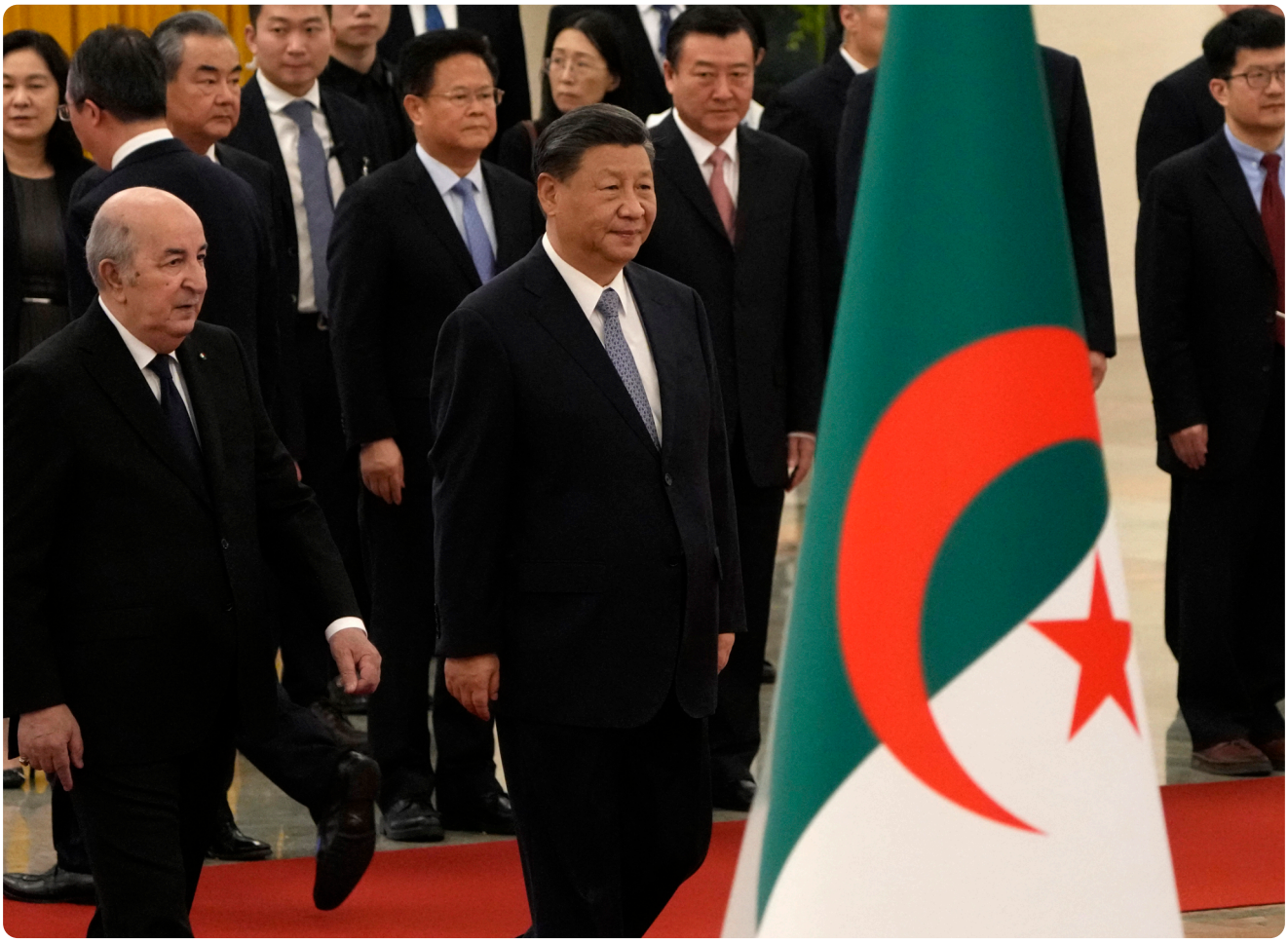
These dimensions offer five lenses through which to understand the bigger picture:

- GSI endorsement and mediation show why China engages Africa (its vision and diplomatic positioning).
- Military diplomacy, exercises, and peacekeeping show how China builds institutional ties.
- Arms sales, local production, satellites, and surveillance show what China provides.
- Port access and Chinese security firms show where China's on-the-ground infrastructure and physical presence materialize.
- Security warnings reveal the tensions and vulnerabilities that come with China's growing investments in Africa.

Dimension 1: What signals vision and diplomatic positioning?

China-Africa security engagement is connected to how China portrays itself as a leader on global security issues. On a macro level, this is most evident in African endorsements for the GSI and China's involvement in diplomatic conflict mediation.

What motivates China to engage African nations on security issues? One lens through which to understand this is how Africa fits into China's broader strategic vision for its place in global governance and the image China hopes to project on the world stage. Two types of engagements tracked by the Atlas offer insight: GSI endorsements and peace and mediation efforts. Robust bilateral support for the GSI is an important outcome for China's efforts to build its profile as a world leader and norm-setter on security. China's involvement in conflict mediation also offers a high-level view of what drives China to engage with major conflicts.



Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune (L) endorsed the GSI during a state visit to China in July 2023—the earliest bilateral endorsement included in the Atlas. (Photo by Ng Han Guan / POOL / AFP)

Global Security Initiative (GSI) Endorsements

The GSI is best understood as one of Beijing's frameworks for reshaping global security norms and governance.[1] According to the GSI concept paper,[2] the present Western-led security order is failing due to "deficits in peace" fueled by hegemonism and a "Cold War mentality." In Africa, Beijing frames the GSI as complementary to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), extending engagement from infrastructure and development into the security domain.

Nine African nations have offered bilateral GSI endorsements since its launch in 2023, indicating stronger commitments than en masse endorsements in multilateral forums. Unsurprisingly, most recorded endorsements occurred during high-profile African state visits to Beijing. In this sense, the GSI plays a crucial diplomatic signaling role.

Significance

On the surface, the GSI's significance appears to be more a mechanism to signal continued support for China than one of operational use. This view may be partially true to the extent that the GSI is currently in the testing phase, primarily gauging buy-in across the Global South. Beijing is, however, moving quickly to demonstrate what actual GSI implementation can look like, going as far as folding pre-existing engagements under the framework.

> *The GSI will likely evolve the same way as the BRI—from formless expansion to managed flexibility.*

For African states, the calculus is mostly transactional. GSI endorsements do not cost much and can help unlock access to Beijing's bureaucracy, which could provide much-needed economic and security assistance and loan finance. In the coming years, more China–Africa security cooperation is likely to be folded under the GSI umbrella, in much the same way that the BRI became the broader framework for China–Africa economic and infrastructural engagement. In that sense, the GSI will likely evolve the same way as the BRI—from formless expansion to managed flexibility. At the same time, Beijing will likely continue promoting its other initiatives in Africa, namely the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), which collectively promote the idea of a "community with a shared future."

Peace & Mediation Engagements

Beijing engages with armed conflicts and interstate disputes through envoys and participation in UN and AU peace processes. This area is where the paradoxes of Beijing's formal language of "non-interference" are most visible.

The Atlas records 19 peace and mediation engagements in 19 countries and conflict dyads, with records spanning from 2000 to the present day. Of the 19 engagements, 15 are captured as active as of the time of reporting.

The three phases of China's mediation footprint

Data indicate that China's mediation footprint in Africa developed in three phases, each shaped by growing volatility in conflict-affected regions.

Mid-2000s — 2013

***The first phase, starting in the mid-2000s**, was mostly reactive. China's engagement in the Darfur crisis was particularly instructive. Beijing initially defended Sudan, but pressure from Western governments and human rights organizations mounted over its perceived indifference, with some calling for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. China eventually pressured Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir to accept the deployment of UN peacekeepers, voting alongside other UN Security Council members to set its terms[3]. This was the first time Chinese diplomacy focused on conflict management in Africa, with Chinese envoys cooperating with international partners, including, notably, the United States.*

2013 — 2020

***The second phase (2013–2020)** was mostly driven by investment risk, clearly exemplified in South Sudan. As Chinese oil infrastructure faced risks from anti-government rebels, Beijing increased its support for mediation under the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), including providing technical and financial support to the mediation effort and organizing discreet talks between the protagonists. South Sudan became, as some analysts put it, a testing ground for a more operational diplomatic posture.[4]*

~2022 —

***The third phase, beginning around 2022**, is exemplified by the creation of the Outlook on Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa initiative. This phase represents a shift in China's peace and mediation efforts in Africa from episodic, conflict-specific engagement to a more institutionalized regional security posture.[5] The stated objective of this initiative, which has held three regional peace conferences (2022, 2023, and 2025), is to broker peace through mediation and support African-led peace processes.*

Other factors have drawn China into conflict management in Darfur and South Sudan and continue to shape engagement. In 2024–2025, the Chinese government and Chinese firms operating the 1,200-mile Niger–Benin oil pipeline mediated a dispute between Niger's ruling junta and the Benin government over border closures and restrictions on Nigerien oil exports through the port of Cotonou.[6] The dispute became significant enough for Xi Jinping to meet both leaders personally during the 9th FOCAC Summit in Beijing. At the same time, China faced rebel attacks on the pipeline as well as tensions with Niger's junta, which at one point expelled Chinese oil executives while demanding contract renegotiations.

Patterns in mediation

Throughout these phases, two patterns can be observed. First, with the possible exception of Sudan and South Sudan, China has stopped short of direct mediation, preferring to work through existing African or UN-led mechanisms and aligning with local frameworks such as IGAD, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), or the African Union (AU). Beijing says this approach promotes "African solutions to African problems."

A second clear pattern is that China's decisions to engage correlate closely with its economic exposure. Indeed, China's high-intensity mediations have been concentrated in South Sudan, Sudan, the DRC, and Libya, where Chinese investments in oil, critical minerals, and strategic infrastructure are sizeable. By contrast, Western Sahara and other countries have received little operational Chinese engagement beyond political symbolism and alignment with AU positions.

Significance

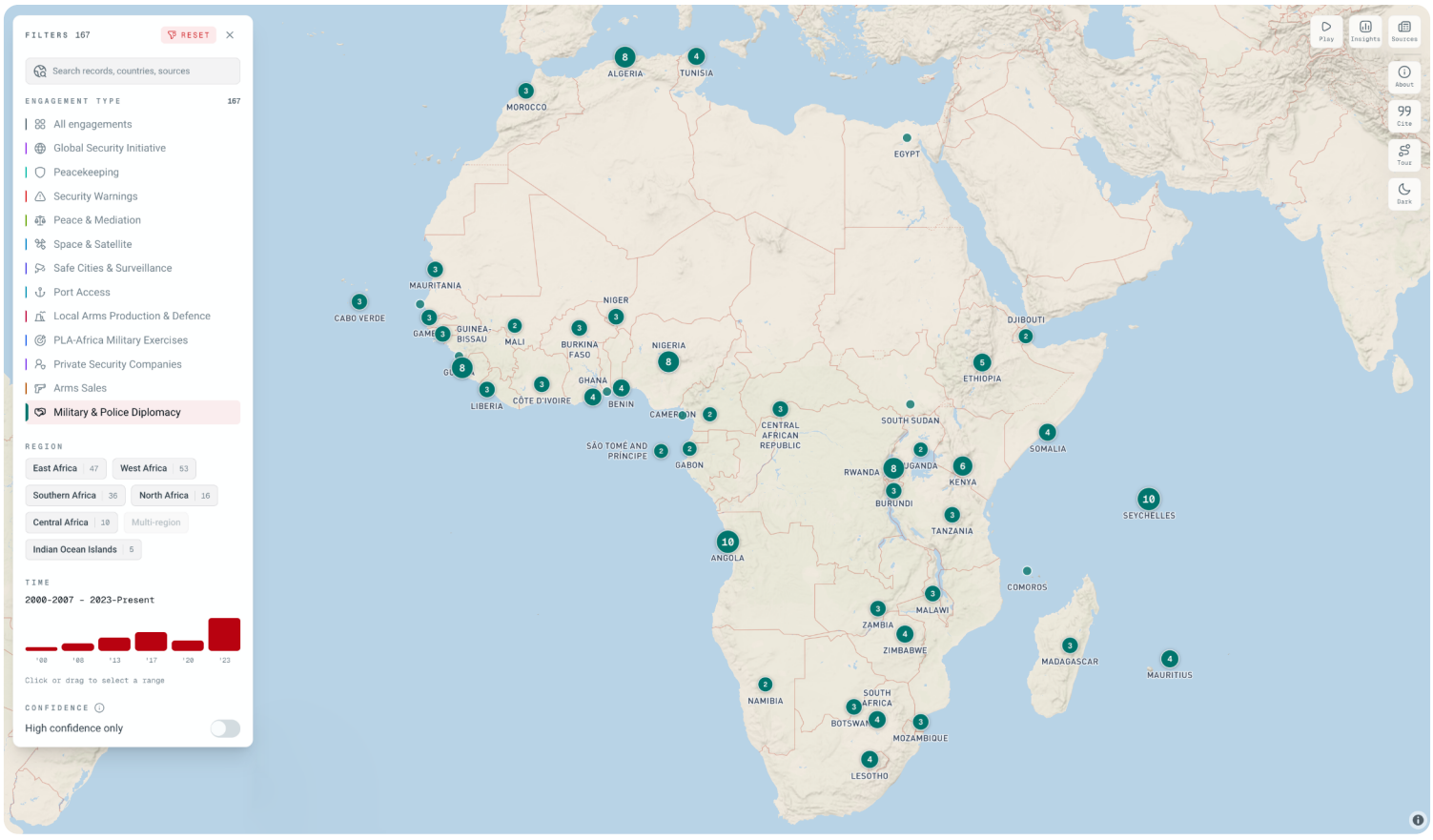
China's mediation-related engagement in Africa has generally focused on mitigating diplomatic, economic, and security risks rather than following a coherent strategy or traditional mediation practices. Beijing's messaging about GSI in the context of its Horn of Africa initiative appears to be aimed, in part, at bringing greater coherence to the GSI's otherwise reactive, case-by-case approach to crisis. In the long run, however, the GSI's ability to develop into a meaningful conflict mediation framework will be determined by how well it aligns with, and empowers, African principles and methods of mediation rather than simply extending China's own sovereignty-centered approach to regional peace and security.

Dimension 2: How is China building institutional ties?

Frequent diplomatic and military engagements form the foundation of China's security relationships in Africa. From PLA naval hospital ships to Chinese peacekeepers, these interactions build familiarity and lay the groundwork for deeper partnerships and access.

If dimension one shows how China positions itself in Africa, this dimension shows how that positioning builds relationships with African security actors. Dimension two reflects how China leverages institutional ties and personnel networks to build familiarity, trust, and influence in Africa's security institutions. This is captured in the Atlas through three types of engagements: military and police diplomacy, military exercises, and peacekeeping operations. The China-Africa security relationship is sustained not only through high-level summits and agreements but also through ongoing trainings, visits, donations, and professional exchanges that gradually normalize China's role as a security partner.

Military & Police Diplomacy



A snapshot of the Military and Police Diplomacy category in the China-Africa Security Atlas.

Military and police diplomacy functions as the connective tissue of China–Africa security cooperation. We define this type of diplomacy as structured interactions between China-Africa military and security personnel to forge political and ideological affinities and develop expertise. These interactions are also intended to cultivate an image of China as a capable, loyal, trustworthy, and powerful security partner. This category captures the routinized, regular, and often overlooked work of relationship building that quietly underpins all China–Africa security engagements.

> *Military and police diplomacy functions as the connective tissue of China–Africa security cooperation.*

The Atlas captures 167 military and police diplomatic engagements spanning 47 countries between 2002 and 2026. These account for 33 percent of the total datapoints recorded in the Atlas, with the vast majority of the entries grouped as building institutional ties. This finding corroborates broader literature that finds Beijing has emphasized military, security, and political exchanges over other forms of defense and security engagement, except in the areas of weapons transfers and military assistance.[7]

Focus on GSI and diplomatic attention

Two structural patterns can be seen in the data. First, an acceleration in diplomacy engagements after 2022 shows deliberate intensification of military and police diplomacy accompanying operationalization of the GSI. Second, defense diplomacy engagements reflect a specific strategy. Official visits and donations dominate because they are low-cost and highly visible. This diplomacy receives public and media attention without requiring substantive commitments. Yet they often precede other forms of engagement, such as arms sales, defense-industrial cooperation, and Professional Military Education (PME).

Donations also serve to demonstrate China's reliability as a security partner and lay the groundwork for future sales. Notably, police cooperation is the fastest-growing frontier, with donations of motorcycles, surveillance equipment, police armored vehicles, riot control equipment, and digital forensics laboratories. These engagements, projects, and investments, often justified by Chinese state-affiliated commentators as necessary for the protection of Chinese citizens, point to the GSI's growing focus on internal political stability and public order.

Significance

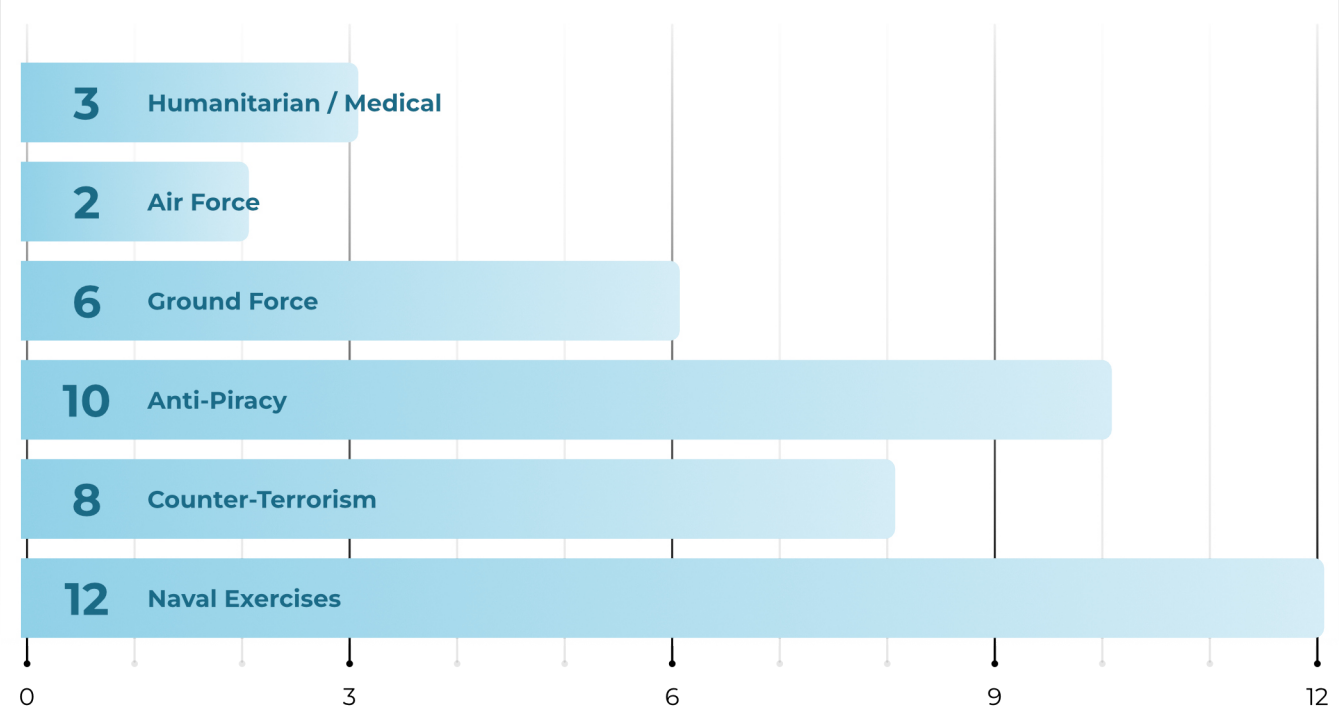
Military and police diplomacy is one of the most active channels of China's security engagement. However, African states continue to hedge against Chinese security influence by cooperating with one another and diversifying partnerships (including with the United States, Russia, and some European and Middle Eastern countries). This should be understood as foundation-building—but not an effort that requires difficult choices between different partners or weapons systems.

Police cooperation is particularly important, as it relates to a broader narrative about China's internal security proficiency. China frequently criticizes public safety issues in Western countries, contrasting its own success in maintaining a low crime rate as a national strength. Cooperation on police issues strengthens this image and promotes Chinese policing expertise. Policing engagement further offers synergies with Safe City and surveillance technology sold, discussed in the next dimension. Atlas data demonstrates a strong correlation between the locations of police cooperation and sales of Safe City and surveillance equipment.

Military Exercises

Military exercises operationalize China–Africa security engagements. Practical cooperation builds a deeper understanding of the other's systems while equipping both countries' troops with combat practice. This includes short exercises in communications and vessel boarding and search, as well as longer-duration exercises on amphibious landings, airlift operations, and combined-arms live-fire scenarios. The Atlas captures records of 23 military exercises dating back to 2009.

Figure 1: PLA-Africa military exercises by type.



Note: Figure 1 shows the distribution of these 23 exercises across six overlapping categories.

Four phases of military exercises

China's military exercises in Africa expanded in four interconnected phases.

2009 – 2013

Phase one (2009–2013) *represents the early experimental stage, in particular Peace Angel 2009 in Gabon, which is the PLA's first recorded exercise on African soil. This exercise was deliberately small and focused on medical training, with little to no political messaging.*

2014 — 2018

Phase two (2014–2018) *is characterized by escort task force visits to African ports. These were typically stopover drills with coastal states including Nigeria, Cameroon, Namibia, Ghana, and Gabon, conducted by the PLA Navy anti-piracy deployments through the Gulf of Aden. These typically short, modular exercises focused on transit logic rather than longer operational planning.*

2019 — 2023

Phase three (2019–2023) *saw a new logic emerge—that of diversification and strategic signaling. Notably, the Mosi trilateral exercises involving Russia and South Africa (2019, 2023) introduced a shift towards geopolitical maritime coordination outside of a West-centric framework. Sincere Partners (2019) in Tanzania paved the way for a ground-force track, while Cooperation-series drills in Djibouti (2024 onward) set in motion joint training within a permanent overseas PLA infrastructure.*

2024 — 2026

Phase four (2024–2026) *was a qualitative transformation with large multidomain exercises. Three exercises signal this shift. Peace Unity 2024 (Tanzania–Mozambique–China) introduced large exercises involving land, sea, and air forces deployed in Africa for the first time. Eagles of Civilization 2025 demonstrated expansion of the PLA Air Force's operational reach well beyond China's immediate territory. Will for Peace 2026 (South Africa) expanded the Mosi format into a new BRICS-plus naval platform by involving new members.*

Significance

For African militaries, exercising with the PLA offers several benefits, including gaining operational capacity relevant to local security needs. Joint exercises also allow African forces to diversify their security partnerships beyond traditional Western partners. For some states, exercising with the PLA comes with trade-offs. The exercise with South Africa during Will for Peace-2026, for example, generated considerable attention and criticism from the West, particularly the United States, which perceived it as Pretoria's growing alignment with anti-Western states.



Chinese Peacekeepers return home from South Sudan in 2019. (Photo by Stringer / Imaginechina / Imaginechina via AFP)

For the PLA, Africa provides a relatively smooth environment for expeditionary learning, where long-range deployment of air and sea assets and multi-service interoperability can be rehearsed without the potential political complications that would emerge in other theaters. Beyond these tactical gains, such exercises normalize the PLA's global presence and introduce Chinese military technology and platforms to potential buyers[8]. PLA-Africa military exercises can be expected to become more routinized and expand beyond the traditional land and sea domains.

Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping operations constitute one of the most visible arenas in which Beijing seeks to project itself as a responsible major power (负责任大国 fuzeren daguo), reinforcing a narrative of China as a leading contributor to international peace and stability. China now contributes more peacekeepers than any other permanent member of the UN Security Council and is the second-largest financial contributor to both the UN peacekeeping and UN regular budgets. As of March 2026, China had 1,659 uniformed personnel deployed in various UN missions, making it the eighth-largest contributor of troops overall.[9]

The Atlas documents Chinese participation in 13 UN or hybrid AU-UN peacekeeping missions across Africa. Engineering and medical units dominate (6 missions each), followed by logistics and transport roles. Only three missions (UNMIL, UNMISS, and MINUSMA) include force protection or infantry deployments. Of those, only UNMISS includes a combat-capable infantry battalion (from 2015 onward). Helicopter units appear in two missions, formed police units in three, and five missions are observer-only.

China also provides training to African troops earmarked for peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations at its training center in Huairou and finances training initiatives through the UN Peace and Development Fund.

Four phases of China's peacekeeping

China's peacekeeping trajectory in Africa unfolded in four phases.

1991 - 2002

Phase one (1991–2002) *is the observer stage. Early contributions were not operational commitments, functioning mostly as controlled entries into the UN security system.*

2003 — 2010

Phase two (2003–2010) *is defined by an expansion into formed units. UNMIL in Liberia is the turning point at which a 600-strong Chinese contribution included engineering, medical, logistics, and police units. MONUC/MONUSCO, UNMIS, and UNAMID extended this model in Central and East Africa. Significantly, China's deployment patterns loosely correlated with areas of economic or strategic interest, such as resource corridors in the DRC, and engagements linked with oil in Sudan.*

2011 — 2015

Phase three (2011–2015) *introduced limited combat exposure. UNMISS, UNISFA, MINUSMA, and MINUSCA marked a qualitative shift, particularly with the 2015 deployment of a Chinese infantry battalion to South Sudan. This was the first time PLA troops operated under a UN mandate with explicit rules of engagement for civilian protection.*

2016 —

Phase four (2016–present) *plateaued. No new major African UN peacekeeping mission has emerged since MINUSCA in 2014, and several older missions have closed or begun drawdown (UNMIL, UNOCI, UNAMID, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO). China's peacekeeping presence now mostly operates within legacy structures rather than expanding into new theaters.*

Significance

Peacekeeping is the earliest and most embedded form of China's security presence in Africa. In African host states, Chinese peacekeeping has focused on stabilization, with engineering units, medical teams, and logistics support filling capability gaps in missions lacking necessary resources.

China's benefits are multidimensional. Peacekeeping has equipped cohorts of PLA personnel with much-needed operational experience in African environments while strengthening institutional ties with African militaries. It is unclear how China will adapt its peacekeeping approach in Africa as the viability of large multidimensional UN missions is in doubt.

Dimension 3: What is China providing materially?

Some of China's most consequential security influence in Africa is taking shape through Chinese companies supplying arms and technologies crucial to African security ecosystems.

Beyond state diplomacy, China's private sector is providing materials that shape security capabilities on the continent. The Atlas tracks this through arms sales, localization of production, space and satellite cooperation, and Safe City, or urban surveillance infrastructure. Some Chinese companies, both private and state-owned, are building technological systems, supporting industrial capacity, and embedding themselves—along with Chinese technology standards—into African security ecosystems. This makes the material provision dimension central to understanding how China's influence extends to both Africa's traditional defense sectors and its nontraditional, dual-use security domains.

Arms Sales

Arms sales include the transfer of Chinese arms, weapons systems, platforms, and technologies to African countries, making it arguably the most material and consequential layer of China–Africa military relations. Not only do arms transfers visibly change African force structures, but they also shape conflict dynamics—sometimes providing a lifeline to regimes under pressure and, at other times, playing a factor in escalating existing conflicts. Weapons transfers also generate political and diplomatic influence for Beijing, enabling China to position itself as a trusted security partner in Africa. The Atlas records 114 arms transfers in 31 African countries from 2000 to 2025.

Three phases of arms sales

Three phases broadly characterize China's arms sales trajectory in Africa.

2000 - 2012

The first phase (early 2000s–2012) *is defined by high-volume sales of legacy platforms such as the Type 59 main battle tank, mostly concentrated in states politically aligned with Beijing based on historical ties dating back to the wars of independence and in states facing Western sanctions.*[1]

[1] The early 2000s start date reflects the mapping periodization, as Chinese legacy system transfers began much earlier.

2013 — 2017

The second phase (2013–2017) *broadly aligns with the early BRI period and represents expansion beyond historical partners. During this period, China's arms sales saw significant geographic expansion and diversification beyond battle tanks. Algeria's early imports of C28A corvettes, Tanzania's amphibious armor acquisitions, and Nigeria's early UAV imports are examples of this shift.*

2018 —

The third phase (2018–present) *is primarily defined by systems diversification, mostly by accelerating UAV exports. Armed drones supplied by China gained prominence around this period, with exports growing rapidly after 2021. Today, Africa has become a growing market for Chinese military drones, which are shaping conflict landscapes in parts of the continent.*

Significance

China is increasingly positioning itself to meet African demand for more advanced weapons systems, particularly as access to Russian military equipment has been restricted following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

For many African states, Chinese systems are often the pragmatic choice, striking a balance between cost and performance while lacking the political conditionality that often comes with buying Western systems. For entities facing Western sanctions, they are the only available option to procure military equipment needed to combat security threats or keep themselves in office.

For China, arms exports to Africa not only provide economic and security benefits. They are almost always bundled with security cooperation like PME, joint exercises, and technical transfer, allowing Chinese actors to embed their influence beyond arms transfer. China also gains political and diplomatic influence, establishes supply chains, and benefits from dependence on its military transfers, especially in cases where it is considered a partner of last resort.

China's arms sales to Africa face several challenges, some of which are not unique to China as a supplier. First, there are claims that China uses African venues for systematic weapons testing,[10] however publicly available evidence is limited. Reports of field testing, however, routinely appear in the Chinese and African media. What is more likely is that Chinese arms manufacturers are learning indirectly through user feedback and maintenance.

> *China is increasingly positioning itself to meet African demand for more advanced weapons systems, particularly as access to Russian military equipment is limited by international sanctions following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.*

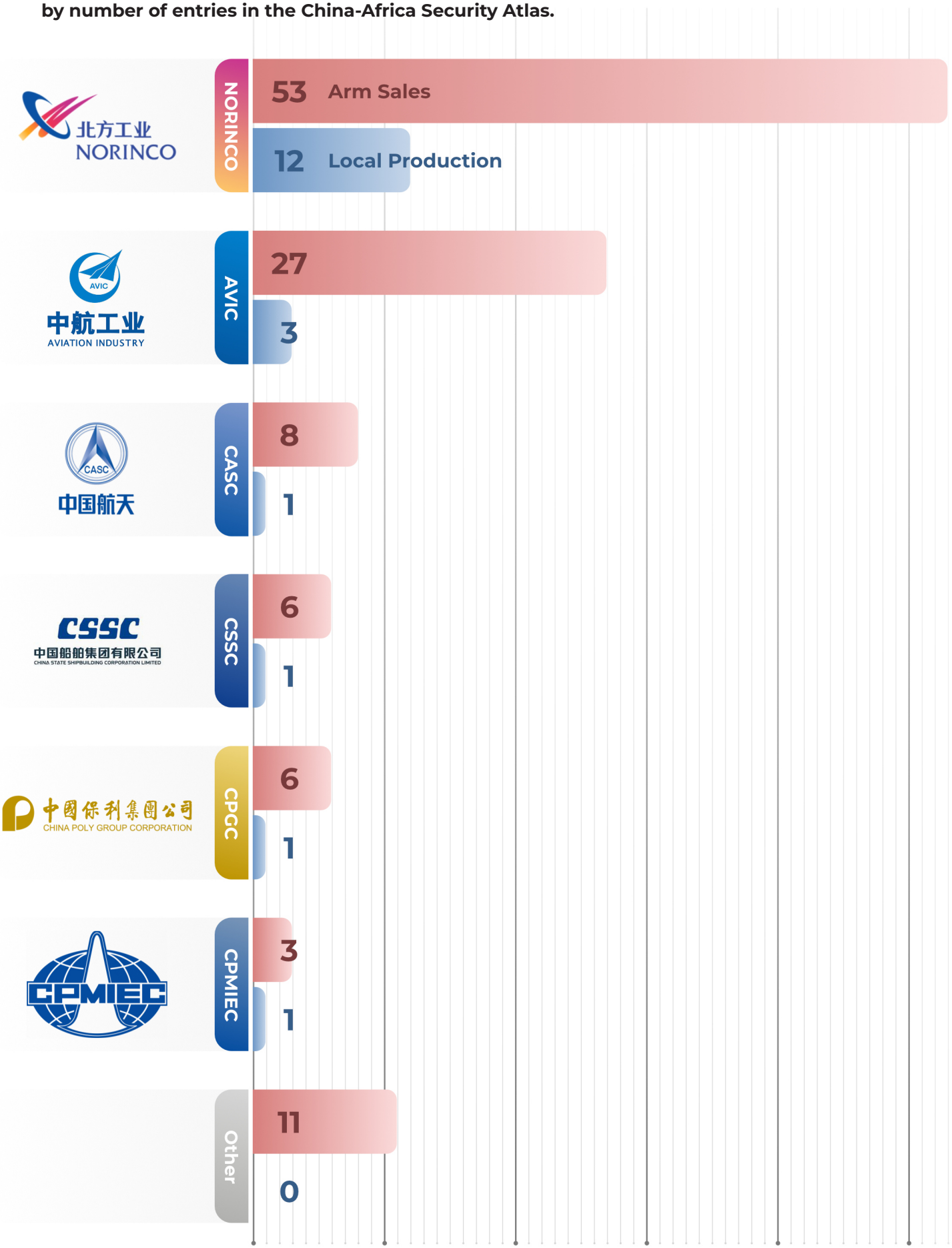
Second, weapons diversion and leakage, where arms sold to state entities end up in the hands of non-state actors, have been major issues. Weapons supplied by China, Serbia, Türkiye, and other suppliers have reportedly fueled conflicts in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes region.[11] Beijing has sought to mitigate these risks through measures like the 2020 Export Control Law and participation in multilateral small-arms control frameworks. Enforcement challenges persist, and the diversion of weapons remains a concern. This highlights a broader structural tension in China's Africa policy: some of Beijing's exports are simultaneously contributing to both security and insecurity.



Chengdu J-10 Vigorous Dragon fighter aircraft of China's Ba Yi Aerobatics Team release smoke while performing maneuvers during the first Egypt International Airshow on September 4, 2024. (Photo by Khaled DESOUKI / AFP)

Third, concerns over the reliability of Chinese weapons systems have also been raised. These appear to be system-specific, with uneven concerns about reliability, maintenance, availability of spare parts, and after-sales support[12] rather than universally poor manufacturing quality. China's increasing arms sales and recent diversification towards technologically more sophisticated systems in Africa—including armed UAVs, air-defense platforms, and naval equipment—suggest that African buyers consider Chinese suppliers capable of meeting their specific operational needs. In Africa, the issue seems less about whether Chinese weapons are intrinsically unreliable and more about whether suppliers can keep those systems operating in peak condition throughout their entire operational life cycle.

Figure 2: Top six Chinese actors involved in arms sales and local arms production, as measured by number of entries in the China-Africa Security Atlas.



Local Arms Production and Defense Industrialization

Local arms production covers the defense-industrial side of China–Africa security and military relationship. These arrangements enable African states to move from importing Chinese weapons toward producing, assembling, and sustaining them domestically, usually under license. This category focuses on the transfer of production capacity itself, including the embedding of Chinese defense conglomerates within African industrial landscapes. The Atlas documents 19 local arms production entries in 10 African countries over the period of coverage.

Notably, China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) dominates in this category. The state-owned defense conglomerate appears in 12 of 19 projects (63 percent), clearly reflecting its position as not just an exporter but as the central architect of China's African defense-industrial footprint.

Structural dynamics of local arms production

Two dynamics in this category are worth highlighting. First, the geography is uneven but intentional. Egypt has advanced industrial capabilities and the ability to adopt licensed production at scale. Algeria can be seen as a transition economy moving from procurement to production. Uganda appears to be a concentrated experimental cluster focused on UAV and dual-use technologies. Nigeria is rising as a potential West African ammunition hub. Sudan represents the continuation of legacy systems rather than new expansion. The absence of Central Africa is notable and most likely reflects the limits of industrial absorption capacity rather than political alignment.

Second, NORINCO's dominance points to a centralized model of defense-industrial expansion. The company is not only exporting systems but also building a layered engagement that includes sales offices, licensing agreements, production transfers, and MRO (maintenance, repair, and overhaul) networks. Together, these engagements are meant to turn buyers into long-term industrial partners.

Significance

For African states, the appeal of developing defense capabilities with Chinese assistance is both material and political. Industrial localization is often framed in terms of sovereignty, technological self-reliance, and defense indigenization. Proponents argue that such engagements will create employment, enable technical skill transfer, and in some cases enhance dual-use industrial capacity.

The flip side of this engagement is the potential structural lock-in effect. For instance, production systems tied to Chinese components, software, and supply chains may be difficult to replace once established. This trades autonomy in production for dependency in industrial architecture.

For China, there are major potential benefits to helping Africa localize its defense industrialization. The continent is showing signs of a likelihood that arms customers become industrial partners, and industrial partners become long-term demand nodes. This architecture reduces logistical difficulties by externalizing parts of the maintenance and production ecosystem while at the same time embedding Chinese standards into African defense industries.

The trajectory is already clear. China no longer only exports weapons to Africa. It also, in selected cases, exports the capacity to reproduce them. It remains to be seen whether this approach consolidates into well-functioning production ecosystems or remains a patchwork of uneven implementation.

Space and Satellite Cooperation

Space and satellite cooperation covers the orbital and ground-based dimension of China–Africa security engagement. Chinese aerospace enterprises provide space infrastructure, training, and technical support while helping manage African space assets.[13] Cooperation in this area shapes how African states see, communicate, and navigate, and gradually, how they manage security-related information across land, sea, and space. It is important to note that the boundary between civilian and security use is structurally blurred under this category. In practice, it is often not meaningful to separate them given the dual-use nature of observation, navigation, and communications systems.

The Atlas records 25 entries in the reporting period, covering nine African states and seven multilateral frameworks with continental reach. The time span is the longest in the dataset after peacekeeping, reflecting the early integration of African territory into Chinese space infrastructure.

From satellite delivery to national space ecosystems

China's space engagement in Africa has evolved from delivering high-profile satellite projects to building broader national space ecosystems. Early cooperation focused on turnkey delivery of satellites, exemplified by Nigeria's NigComSat program, followed by communications and earth-observation satellites for Algeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. The capabilities that these projects offered to African governments include telecommunications, broadcasting, environmental monitoring, and national planning. Ground stations play an important role within this ecosystem. Nigeria's Lugbe station, Ethiopia's Entoto station, and Namibia's Windhoek station allows satellite data to be received, processed, and distributed locally.

But it is recent engagement that truly stands out. Focus has increasingly shifted toward localization and strengthening

Figure 3: Satellite ground station locations



multilateral cooperation.[14] Movement beyond satellite acquisition includes Egypt's satellite assembly, integration, and testing center; Algeria's agreements on low-orbit satellite manufacturing; BeiDou cooperation; remote-sensing training; and African participation in the International Lunar Research Station. China is becoming deeply embedded in Africa's emerging space sector while providing African states capabilities that would otherwise be too expensive or technologically out of reach.

The multiplicity of actors on the Chinese side is functional rather than accidental. Institutions such as the China Academy of Space Technology (CAST), China National Space Administration (CNSA), China Great Wall Industry Corporation (CGWIC), and Land Satellite Remote Sensing Application Center (LASAC), along with emerging commercial ones like Geespace, have each positioned themselves in distinct segments of a vertically integrated ecosystem. As with arms sales, training functions as an important element of influence building, with cohorts of African engineers trained in Chinese systems, data architectures, and operational protocols, creating pathways for long-term dependency far beyond hardware lifecycles.

Significance

For African states, engaging with China in the space sector has major benefits. China offers relatively low-cost entry into advanced space capability, often bundled with technology transfers, with an absence of political conditionality. These engagements equip African states with functions in surveillance, communications, disaster response, and resource monitoring that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

The trade-off for African states is long-term architectural dependence on Chinese standards, platforms, and upgrade cycles. There is also a risk of militarization, as exemplified by Namibia's Swakopmund Ground Satellite Tracking Station.

For China, there are major strategic payoffs. These include data access and the consolidation of commercial leadership in emerging space markets, allowing China to shape the informational environment in which African states operate.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of China-Africa space engagement will be shaped by the choices of both sides. African states that invest in indigenous technical capacity, negotiate data sovereignty clauses, and diversify partnerships, including with emerging space powers like India, the UAE, and the European Space Agency, will be better positioned to extract real benefits without giving up informational control and policy autonomy.



Low-orbit internet satellites are launched into orbit from China. (Photo by stringer / cnsphoto / Imaginechina via AFP)

Safe Cities and Surveillance Infrastructure

The safe cities and surveillance dataset captures the use of urban security systems mostly financed and supplied by Chinese entities across Africa. Chinese technology firms like Huawei, ZTE, and Hikvision have worked with African governments, and sometimes local security companies, to install AI-enabled surveillance systems[15] and command centers, ostensibly to improve public safety. These systems usually combine dense CCTV networks, integrated command-and-control centers, and sometimes AI-driven analytics such as facial recognition, license plate recognition, and behavioral pattern detection. In many cases, these systems are embedded within broader smart city or digital governance packages that include fiber-optic backbones, telecommunications networks, and national data infrastructure.

The Atlas maps 27 entries of Safe City and urban surveillance infrastructure. Of these, 24 systems are captured as operational, two are planned, and one is stalled or non-operational.[2] The overall pattern shows a gradual shift from city-level deployments toward integrated surveillance architectures deployed at the national level.

Table 2: Top Safe City projects by investment.

Country	*Project name*	*Est. Investment (USD)*
Nigeria	National Public Security Communications System	$460 million
Ghana	ALPHA Project (Phases 1-2)	$375 million
Cameroon	Intelligent City Project	$270 million
Botswana	Safe City Project	$230 million
Zambia	Safe City / National Command Centre	$210 million
Kenya	Public Safety Communication & Surveillance	$172.5 million
Mozambique	Safe City Project	$140 million
Uganda	Safe City Project	$126 million
Mali	Mali Numérique	$117.3 million
Zimbabwe	Smart Sustainable Cities	$100 million
Burkina Faso	SMART Burkina	$94 million
Mauritius	Safe City Project	$73.7 million
Côte d'Ivoire	Abidjan Safe City Project	$57.1 million
Guinea	Safe City Program	$56 million
Madagascar	Smart City	$50 million
South Africa	Johannesburg CCTV (Vumacam)	$27 million
Djibouti	Urban Security Monitoring System	$20 million
Cabo Verde	Cidade Segura	$20 million
Total	**18 projects**	**$2.6 billion**

Note: Botswana's $230 million amount is an average estimate from a $220-$240 million estimated range. $2.6 billion is slightly rounded up from $2.598 billion.

[2] Every effort was made to capture the current status of Safe City projects using the latest available reporting. This was challenging as public information is often fragmented, outdated or contradictory. Status classifications are therefore best understood as estimates unless confidence score is high.

A handful of vendors dominate this category, with Huawei appearing in 19 of 27 entries. ZTE appears in four entries and is often associated with earlier or grant-linked deployments. Hikvision appears in a smaller number of cases, mostly as a component supplier within layered surveillance systems.

From CCTV to system integration in four phases

The evolution of Safe City systems in Africa follows a slow and uneven transition from relatively small and standalone surveillance projects to more integrated governance infrastructures, though not all countries follow this path.

2007 - 2014

During the first phase (2007–2014), *deployments were relatively narrow in scope and focused mostly on CCTV installations framed around crime prevention and urban management.*

2014 — 2018

The second phase (2014–2018) *is characterized by platform consolidation through which surveillance systems begin to integrate across agencies and functions. For instance, there is increased adoption of command-and-control centers that unify police, traffic management, and emergency response systems. Fiber networks and secure communications infrastructure also began enabling real-time data exchange, shifting surveillance from passive recording to active coordination.*

2018 – 2022

The third phase (2018–2022) *is AI-enabled expansion, including facial recognition, behavioral analytics, and automated identification systems embedded within surveillance networks. This technology changed surveillance from observation to classification and prediction. Unsurprisingly, this period is marked by considerable political sensitivities around Chinese urban surveillance systems in Africa.*

2022 —

The fourth phase (2022–present) *can be broadly understood as system-level integration exemplified by surveillance projects in Zambia and Mali. Surveillance infrastructure is no longer seen as a standalone security tool but is slowly becoming part of a broader digital governance infrastructure. National data centers, smart city frameworks, and secure communications systems are gradually merging into a single architecture of state visibility and control.*

Significance

For African governments, the appeal of Chinese surveillance providers lies mostly in availability, financial feasibility, and scalability.[16] These systems offer rapid upgrades to policing capacity on flexible financing terms, even under fiscal constraints, allowing local security forces to gain greater situational awareness of crime and insecurity in urban environments. The trade-off is long-term structural dependence on external vendors for maintenance, upgrades, and software access as well as unresolved questions around data ownership, legal oversight, and institutional accountability.[17]

For China, these systems extend influence through infrastructure rather than presence. They create technological ecosystems in which Chinese standards, software, and hardware are embedded in important state functions, positioning Chinese entities to shape Africa's urban governance. Patents filed by Chinese technology companies in Africa illustrate how this influence can take shape, although they do not provide actual evidence of deployment.[18] Chinese surveillance companies are selling not just technology but a governance model premised on the idea that greater visibility and predictability lead to improved urban governance, even if this model has not been thoroughly tested in the African context.

Dimension 4: Where is China's on-the-ground presence and infrastructure materializing?

An examination of China's naval port access in Africa and the presence of its private security companies highlights areas where Chinese security actors have the deepest access and how they developed it.

Where does China's security presence in Africa become physically visible? This dimension focuses on the sites and mechanisms that Chinese actors use to gain access, maintain presence, and protect interests on the ground and at sea. The Atlas captures this through port access and private security companies (PSCs). Port access enables China to project naval power, most notably through its Djibouti base, and to engage in naval diplomacy, often through port calls. The deployment of PSCs, however, reflects the limits of China's military power projection abroad, as such projection is constrained by the official state policy of non-interference. Significantly, this dimension captures where China's security presence becomes spatially anchored in African spaces, both on land and at sea.

⚓ Port Access

The port access dataset captures documented cases of PLA Navy presence in African maritime zones through port calls, exercises, humanitarian deployments, and permanent basing. The dataset focuses on how access to African ports has evolved from sporadic engagements during the 1990s to a well-structured naval capability spanning the continent after China deployed its first naval flotilla in the Gulf of Aden in 2008.

This category's dataset overlaps with those from military diplomacy and military exercises but is maintained as a distinct layer due to the growing strategic importance of Africa's maritime domain

in China's economic and security strategy. Port access, moreover, is a dimension of China-Africa security cooperation rife with speculation, thus calling for a deliberate, evidence-first approach that records what is publicly confirmed rather than what is often inferred.

The PLA Navy's sporadic visits to Africa in the 1990s have grown into a sustained regional presence, underpinned by Gulf of Aden escort missions since 2008 and, subsequently, a permanent logistics base in Djibouti.

These engagements have expanded China's access to ports across Africa, with ties ranging from initial humanitarian visits by the Peace Ark hospital ship to recurring port calls, joint exercises, and established naval partnerships.

Figure 4: China's naval port access in Africa.

CORE: RECURRENT ACCESS:

Dar es Salaam, Simon's Town, and Alexandria function as hubs for high-frequency engagements by combining routine port calls, exercises, and institutionalized naval relationships. Broadly speaking, these are ports where China-Africa naval cooperation has been normalized.

ESTABLISHED: SIGNIFICANT ACCESS

These ports serve as recurring waypoints within broader deployment cycles. These ports are visited periodically but without the sustained institutional depth seen in core ports.

OCCASIONAL: PERIPHERAL ACCESS

These represent single or initial engagements, often via Peace Ark or first-time PLA Navy escort task force visits. They include Nouakchott, Cotonou, and Port Sudan. These may evolve into higher-tier ports over time.



Escort task force rotations and the Peace Ark hospital ship are central

At least two operational principles underpin China's port access strategy in Africa. First, escort taskforce rotations are the backbone of a sustained naval presence. Since 2008, escort task forces have operated in the Gulf of Aden, with Djibouti serving as the permanent logistical base. Beyond anti-piracy duties, these rotations function as structured port calls and joint drills.

Second, the Peace Ark hospital ship blurs the boundary between strategic access and humanitarian aid. With 16 appearances across the dataset, it is the most frequently deployed PLA Navy asset in Africa. Its medical missions, most notably 2024's Mission Harmony, which treated more than 80,000 patients, enable operational access to ports that might otherwise remain closed or sensitive to military vessels.

In several cases, first-time PLA Navy access to a port was achieved through Peace Ark deployments rather than a warship, establishing a lower friction entry point for future naval engagement. This approach is not universal, as some warship deployments precede those of Peace Ark.



The Chinese hospital ship Peace Ark docked in the Cape Town harbor on August 26, 2024. (Photo by RODGER BOSCH / AFP)

Significance

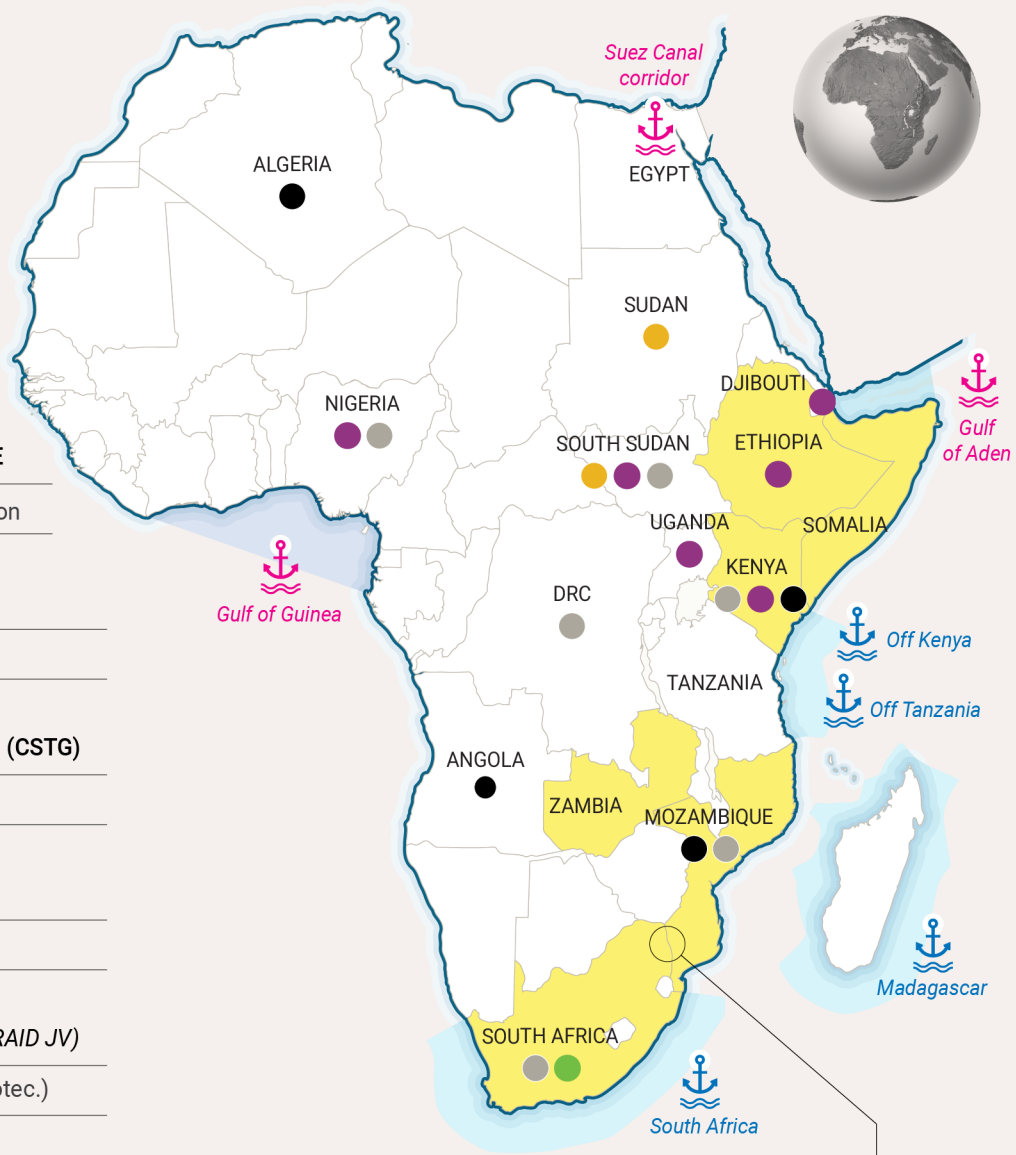
For African states, granting the PLA Navy port access represents a strategic calculation beyond naval diplomacy. The dataset reveals how port access enables African navies to develop operational relationships with a rising maritime power. Tanzania's Dar es Salaam and South Africa's Simon's Town, for example, have evolved from occasional port calls into platforms for staging joint exercises and regular naval cooperation. Questions remain for some ports about how access intersects with sovereignty and longer-term structuring of African maritime space, especially in cases where Chinese port investments and PLA Navy presence overlap.[19]

For China, port access across the African littoral supports its blue-water ambitions and evolving role as a security actor on the continent. The dataset demonstrates how the escort taskforce system depends on a network of resupply ports stretching from Alexandria to Durban that are necessary for counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. It remains speculation whether China will seek to establish a second naval base in Africa, though port access would certainly facilitate expansion.

Private Security Companies (PSCs)

PSCs represent an emerging layer of China–Africa engagement. This network of Chinese private security companies provides protection services, risk management, armed maritime escort, and logistics security for Chinese capital, personnel, and infrastructure in Africa. Unlike state-to-state security cooperation, this category operates through quasi-commercial entities that still function within an ecosystem tightly controlled by the Chinese government.

Figure 5: Operational areas of Chinese private security companies in Africa.



COMPANY KEY

BEIJING DEWE SECURITY SERVICE
Oil sector security . BRI project protection

FRONTIER SERVICES GROUP
Security . Logistics

CHINA SECURITY TECHNOLOGY GR. (CSTG)
BRI project security . Surveillance tech

VSS SECURITY GROUP
Oil sector security . BRI project security

SHANDONG HUAWEI SEC. GR. *(HW RAID JV)*
Personnel sec. (Chinese community protec.)

MARITIME OPERATIONS

OVERSEAS SEC. GUARDIANS *(Zhongjun Junhong)*
- Off Kenya, Tanzania
- South Africa
- Madagascar

HUA XIN ZHONG AN *(HXZA)*
- Suez Canal corridor
- Gulf of Aden
- Gulf of Guinea

COSG: A MULTI-COUNTRY NETWORK

CHINA OVERSEAS SECURITY GROUP (COSG)
Operates subsidiaries in:
- Somalia
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Mozambique
- Zambia
- South Africa

Limits and Dependencies of Chinese PSCs

Some Chinese security firms have shown an ability to operate at scale and protect assets of high value in very difficult environments. The 2016 Juba crisis in South Sudan provides a good example. DeWe successfully organized the evacuation of 330 China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) workers during active combat, demonstrating that Chinese contractors can mobilize quickly in crises.[20]

However, this evacuation also exposed structural limitations and core dependencies. Since DeWe's personnel were unarmed, they instructed the stranded nationals in 10 different locations to hunker down and enlisted armed South Sudanese personnel as backup. The evacuation proceeded only after Ugandan forces secured the airport.

Similar patterns occur across the dataset, revealing the limits of China's predominantly unarmed approach to private security in Africa. When situations escalate beyond routine protection (civil conflict, kidnappings, major unrest, etc.), Chinese security firms rely on forces from host countries or direct diplomatic intervention from Beijing. In this regard, PSCs do not function as autonomous security providers in the way Western Private Military Companies (PMCs) or Russian mercenary models do, but rather as one layer in a broader state-backed system. However, not all Chinese PSCs are unarmed. Hua Xin Zhong An (HXZA), for example, has provided armed maritime escort and anti-piracy services for commercial shipping in the Gulf of Aden, showing that a small number of Chinese PSCs can deploy armed personnel in tightly regulated maritime settings.

Significance

For China, the rise of PSCs in Africa marks a shift in how Beijing manages the protection of its overseas footprint. Firms such as Beijing DeWe, Frontier Services Group, and China Security Technology Group provide a layer of security that the PLA cannot openly deliver without raising sovereignty sensitivities. Chinese PSCs often train, supervise, and coordinate local forces while remaining closely tied to the state through personnel networks, ownership structures, and regulatory authorization. This allows China to project security presence without overt militarization and to deliver outcomes in environments where local security forces are limited or absent.

For African states, the picture is more complex. Chinese PSCs provide real and tangible benefits, such as employment for local security personnel, diffusion of professional practices, and protection of infrastructure projects that are the bedrock of economic activity. In cases where the host state's capacity is limited, Chinese PSCs fill gaps that governments cannot easily address on their own. Yet their expansion raises structural questions about security governance and external influence. The integration of firms linked to Chinese state structures into domestic security environments blurs the line between providing commercial service and maintaining strategic presence.[21] This is particularly evident where physical security is combined with surveillance technologies and where PSCs operate in politically and economically sensitive sectors such as mining and energy.

The result is a trade-off: African governments gain access to capable and scalable security provision tied to investment flows at the cost of embedding external actors aligned with a major power in their security architectures.

Dimension 5: The tensions and vulnerabilities that come with China's growing investments in Africa

Security risks also impact Chinese actors based in Africa. Chinese warning systems offer key insights into how risk assessments follow Chinese capital.

What risks arise from China's growing footprint in Africa, and how does Beijing manage them? This dimension looks at the vulnerabilities that Chinese citizens, companies, infrastructure, and investments face when exposed to conflict, crime, political instability, and local grievances. The Atlas captures security warnings and consular alerts, which have evolved into regulatory tools to influence overseas behavior. This dimension is significant not only because it shows how Beijing manages risks but also because it reveals how risk governance is a mechanism for disciplining Chinese actors abroad and aligning their conduct with state priorities.

⚠ Security Warnings and Consular Alerts

The Security Warnings dataset captures formal risk communications issued by Chinese state institutions, primarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and overseas embassies, concerning security conditions that affect Chinese citizens, firms, and assets across Africa. These include travel advisories, evacuation instructions, safety alerts, and operational guidance in response to armed conflict, insurgency, terrorism, kidnapping, piracy, electoral violence, and severe governance breakdowns.

The dataset is more than a collection of alerts, revealing an evolving system of overseas risk governance. The dataset shows Beijing's translation of fragmented security environments in Africa into structured behavioral guidance for its nationals and enterprises. These warnings are gradually shaping where Chinese firms operate, how they deploy personnel, and under what conditions they suspend or continue activities. They are significant to the broader parameters of China-Africa security relations, helping calibrate China's expanding overseas presence to the unstable security environments Chinese nationals and enterprises operate in.

From reactive warnings to regulatory tools

The trajectory of China's security warnings in Africa shifted from occasional responses to crises to continuous risk governance. Early warnings were reactive to shocks such as Libya (2011), where a large evacuation campaign exposed the limits of China's overseas capacity to protect citizens.[22] Libya marked a turning point as mass evacuation became a protocol for future crises. Over time, however, the logic changed. Warnings moved beyond emergency response to become part of routine overseas operations. This notable shift can be seen in how Chinese embassies moved from ad hoc crisis actors to standing regulators of risk by issuing continuity guidance across different environments, be it the mining sector or daily life.

Security warnings have also evolved into tools for governing behavior. They no longer just describe risk but increasingly shape how Chinese actors operate abroad. Advisories now tend to direct firms and individuals to suspend activities, restrict movement, strengthen security arrangements, and avoid zones considered high-risk. They also standardize practices to minimize risks in various sectors.

> *Security warnings have also evolved into tools for governing behavior.*

In this sense, consular warnings function as regulatory tools by structuring overseas behavior. This approach is reinforced by broadening what is typically considered "security." Earlier warnings focused on war, insurgency, and evacuation scenarios. More recent warnings incorporate fraud, labor disputes, regulatory violations, and community tensions linked to Chinese business practices.

Security, in other words, is no longer just about exposure to external threats but also considers that the conduct of Chinese actors themselves could become a source of vulnerability within complex local environments.

Significance

For China, what began with responses to crises like Libya (2011) has grown into an established system used by embassies and ministries to manage risks, shape corporate behavior, and, when necessary, force withdrawal. These notices are not peripheral but rather function as tools for reducing exposure and prioritizing the safety of Chinese citizens and companies operating in environments affected by conflict.

For African states, the warning system overlaps clearly with zones of weak governance, conflict, and extractive activity. A pattern emerges: where Chinese capital goes, risk assessments follow, and those assessments can be understood as judgment of local security capacity. At the same time, the warnings highlight a shared vulnerability. Violence targeting Chinese projects often also affects local workers, communities, and security forces. This reality underscores the urgency for both China and Africa to find sustainable solutions that address vulnerabilities for all while preserving local laws and regulations to manage security threats.

Conclusion

> Understanding China-Africa security relations requires a multifaceted lens that recognizes distinct forms of engagement and how they interact with and reinforce one another.

This paper's most critical takeaway is that China-Africa security relations are broader and more layered than any single category of engagement suggests. What the Atlas shows is not simply what makes the headlines: China selling weapons, installing urban surveillance infrastructure, or seeking port access. Rather, what emerges is a relationship built through multiple forms of engagement that operate at different levels simultaneously: diplomatic signaling, institutional relationship-building, material provision, physical presence, and risk management.

The 12 security categories described in this report are neither neatly parallel nor independent. Some reinforce one another in ways that may not be immediately visible, and Table 3 presents several of these relationships alongside their relative strength. The analysis is based on patterns visible in the dataset and existing scholarship rather than on fixed causal claims. Single arrows (→) show the likely direction of influence, and double arrows (↔) show links that plausibly run both ways or whose direction remains unresolved. It is important to bear in mind that observations may not apply to all countries over the period analyzed. Some of these relationships (such as that between military exercises and arms sales) are better understood as future developmental directions than as established relationships. The Atlas, therefore, is best understood as an ecosystem where some distinct layers interact in significant ways.

Table 3: Cross-category relations

Relationship	*Direction*	*Evidence strength*	*Empirical example*
Arms Sales → Local Arms production	Enabling	**Strong**	**Egypt:** The 1999 K-8E procurement contract included aircraft parts and a production line. AOI began assembly in 2000, gained production certification in 2005, and delivered the program's 120th and final aircraft in May 2010.
Port access → Military exercises	Logistical enabler	**Strong**	**South Africa:** The 42nd Chinese naval escort fleet docked at Richards Bay for MOSI II in February 2023. The exercise included port-based consultations followed by a sea phase.
Safe Cities & Surveillance ↔ Military & Police Diplomacy	Complementary	**Strong**	**Kenya:** Huawei–Safaricom's police surveillance system included operator training; Huawei reports 10,000 people trained. China also trained Kenya's railway police.
GSI Endorsement → Military & Police Diplomacy	Normative framework	**Moderate**	**Zimbabwe:** Paragraph 11 of the September 2024 joint statement pairs explicit GSI support with agreement to sign a police-cooperation MoU and a criminal mutual-legal-assistance treaty.

Relationship	Direction	Evidence strength	Empirical example
Private Security Companies ⇄ Port Access	Layered local nexus	Strong locally	**Djibouti / Gulf of Aden:** The PLA support base at Doraleh supports naval operations in the same maritime corridor where HXZA provides armed guards aboard commercial vessels.
Military & Police Diplomacy → Arms Sales	Procurement channel	Strong	**Nigeria:** The F-7 procurement covered 12 fighters and three trainers. Nigerian pilots began training on the aircraft in China in 2008, before deliveries in 2009–2010.
Security Warnings ⇄ Private Security Companies	Shared risk exposure	Moderate	**South Africa:** HW Raid was established in Johannesburg in 2014 to protect Chinese businesses and nationals from violent crime. A 2020 consular kidnapping alert urged Chinese shopowners and residents to strengthen workplace and home security.
Military Exercises ⇄ Arms Sales	Temporal association	Weak	**Tanzania:** Beyond 2014 naval/marine training took place in October–November 2014. Two Chinese-supplied patrol ships, TNS Mwitongo and TNS Msoga, were commissioned in April 2015.

The five-dimension framework presented in this framing paper provides a way to see China-Africa security relations as an evolving system rather than a set of unconnected activities. Its value lies in showing how different engagements tie together: diplomatic signaling sometimes creates political space for security cooperation; institutional ties can support later training or exercises; material provision can extend into technology systems and local production; port access and PSCs make China's presence more physically visible; and security warnings reveal the risks produced by that expanding footprint.

Looking ahead, China–Africa security relations are likely to expand, even as African governments continue to diversify their partnerships. As these ties develop, the relationships presented in Table 3 offer clues about what to look for. Key areas to observe include the nexus between arms sales and local production and between the GSI and wider security cooperation. These areas speak more directly to African agency in a rapidly changing global order. How they evolve will indicate whether African states can translate deeper engagement with China into greater strategic autonomy and locally rooted security capacity.

The China–Africa Security Atlas aims to track this relationship from the ground up. It is not intended to be a static record. The actors, activities, and forms of cooperation it captures will change as China's security engagement across Africa expands and evolves. The Atlas will be continuously updated and grow alongside the relationship it seeks to document.

Authors

Lungani Hlongwa

Lungani Hlongwa is the editor of the China-Africa Security Radar (CASR) Substack. He is also a postdoctoral research fellow at the International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS) at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University (NYCU) in Taiwan and a research fellow at the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA) at Stellenbosch University's Faculty of Military Science.

Paul Nantulya

Paul Nantulya is a Research Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, where he prepares analyses on African security issues. He is also a China scholar, specializing in Chinese foreign policy, the People's Liberation Army, and other Chinese security forces in Africa, as well as African relations with China and other Asian powers.

Cite this Report

Hlongwa, Lungani, and Paul Nantulya. Mapping China's Growing Security Footprint in Africa. CGSP Intelligence, October 2026. doi:10.5281/zenodo.23129173

References

[1] Jash, A. (2025). “Africa Pivots to China’s Global Security Initiative.” ***ORF Issue Brief No. 784***.

[2] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ***Global Security Initiative Concept Paper***.

[3] Nantulya, P. (2026). ***The Misalignment Between Chinese and African Peacemaking: The Case of Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis. Stimson Center***. https://www.stimson.org/2026/the-misalignment-between-chinese-and-african-peacemaking-the-case-of-ethiopias-tigray-crisis

[4] International Crisis Group. (2017). ***China’s foreign policy experiment in South Sudan***. https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/africa/south-sudan/288-chinas-foreign-policy-experiment-south-sudan

[5] Ma, X. (2022). ***New Blueprint for Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa on Brown Land***. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China / FOCAC. https://web.archive.org/web/20220424121428/http://www.focac.org/eng/zfzs_1/202204/t20220411_10666501.htm

[6] Nantulya, P. (2025). ***The Limits to China’s Transactional Diplomacy in Africa***. Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

[7] Nantulya, P., Béraud-Sudreau, L., Brewster, D., Cairns, C., Ellis, R. E., Herlevi, A., Lee, R., Nouwens, M., Pincus, R., & Wuthnow, J. (2022). “Only with Deep Roots Can a Tree Yield Rich Fruit: The People’s Liberation Army in Africa.” In R. Cliff & R. D. Kamphausen (Eds.), ***Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA — 2020 PLA Conference Papers*** (pp. 25–50). Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42811.7

[8] China-Africa Security Radar. (2026). Eagles of Civilization-2026: Beyond the J-16 vs Rafale Dogfight. Substack. https://cafradar.substack.com/p/eagles-of-civilization-2026-beyond

[9] United Nations Peacekeeping. (2026). ***Troop and police contributors***. United Nations. https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors

[10] Kim, G.-S. (2026). ***China overtakes France as top arms supplier to West Africa***. Seoul Economic Daily. https://en.sedaily.com/finance/2026/01/08/china-overtakes-france-as-top-arms-supplier-to-west-africa

[11] Bromley, M., Duchâtel, M., & Holtom, P. (2013). ***China’s exports of small arms and light weapons*** (SIPRI Policy Paper No. 38). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). https://www.sipri.org/publications/2013/sipri-policy-papers/chinas-exports-small-arms-and-light-weapons

[12] Zheng, C. (2023, June 8). ***Countries buy defective Chinese military equipment. Why?*** RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/06/countries-buy-defective-chinese-military-equipment.html

[13] Danesi, M. (2026). ***China’s Space Presence in the African Continent***. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI). https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-space-presence-in-the-african-continent-224942

[14] Danesi, M. (2026). ***China’s Space Presence in the African Continent***. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI).

[15] Wakabi, W., & Roberts, T. (Eds.). (2026). Smart City Surveillance in Africa: Mapping Chinese AI Surveillance Across 11 countries. Institute of Development Studies (IDS). https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2025.068

[16] Jili, B. (2020). ***The Spread of Surveillance Technology in Africa Stirs Security Concerns***. Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS).

[17] China-Africa Security Radar. (2025). ***Cameroon Goes All in on Chinese Safe Cities, but at What Cost?*** Substack. https://cafradar.substack.com/p/cameroon-goes-all-in-on-chinese-safe

[18] China-Africa Security Radar. (2026). ***Why This Chinese Surveillance Patent Matters for Africa’s Future Policing Models***. Substack. https://cafradar.substack.com/p/why-this-chinese-surveillance-patent

[19] Nantulya, P. (2025). Mapping China’s strategic port development in Africa. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 10.

[20] Legarda, H., & Nouwens, M. (2018). Guardians of the Belt and Road: The internationalization of China’s private security companies. ***Mercator Institute for China Studies, 16***.

[21] Arduino, A. (2020). ***The Footprint of Chinese Private Security Companies in Africa*** (No. 2020/35). Working Paper.

[22] Zerba, S. H. (2014). “China's Libya Evacuation Operation: a new diplomatic imperative—overseas citizen protection.” ***Journal of Contemporary China***, 23(90), 1093-1112.

CGSP 中南项目
Intelligence

cgspintelligence.com