

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

Tim Ditter, Kaia Haney, Tsun-Kai Tsai, and Carita Reid



Abstract

This report is part of a series that considers trends in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) activities across sectors in Africa in the context of global shocks. In this report, we examine the PRC's military and security involvement in Africa after the global shocks that have taken place since 2020. Rising instability in regions in Africa is affecting its security environment and drawing closer attention to the continent—including from the PRC. To protect its investments, interests, and citizens in Africa, the PRC is seeking to deepen its security ties and potentially grow the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) operational military presence on the continent. We found that the PRC is expanding the functions and capabilities of the PLA's Djibouti base, leading multilateral security forums, using military diplomacy efforts, and seeking to grow the PRC sphere of influence through PRC government mandates such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI) as a China-led security framework. The PRC's growing military and security role in Africa could negatively affect African nations' sovereignty by weakening areas of governance, human rights, and regional cooperation.

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Approved by: 

October 2024

Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Director
China Studies Program
CNA China & Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of a series that considers trends in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) activities across sectors in Africa in the context of global shocks. In this report, we examine the PRC's military and security involvement in Africa.

Africa is home to many firsts for the PRC: the first People's Liberation Army (PLA) overseas military base (in Djibouti), the first rotational deployment of PLA Navy (PLAN) anti-piracy ships, and one of Beijing's first multilateral forums established outside of China's periphery—the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). However, global events since 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the transition to green energy, and rising instability in regions in Africa—have affected the PRC's interests on the continent. These changes have had implications for the PRC's military and security presence in the region.

Key findings of this paper include the following:

- **Africa has been a testing ground for PRC military and security involvement outside China's borders.**
 - The PRC's military presence in Africa is significant. Africa is the location of the largest deployed PLA force operating outside of China's periphery, with PLA troops deployed to Djibouti, operating in United Nations Peacekeeping missions, and conducting counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.
 - Since first established in 2017, the PLA base in Djibouti has expanded from a "logistics facility" designed to service rotational deployments to a major logistics base with a dedicated naval pier capable of hosting

China's largest blue-water naval vessels and a deployed PLAN Marine Corps special operations force unit able to support combat missions.

- The PRC will likely pursue more military bases and infrastructure around the continent, including in the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa.
- **The PRC remains deeply involved across Africa's security domain, despite some setbacks.**
 - The PRC leads multilateral forums such as FOCAC and the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum.
 - The PRC is building influence with African military leaders through a long-established professional military education program.
 - The PRC is increasing its arms sales to African nations as Russian sales to the continent decline.

Implications for African nations of the PRC's involvement in Africa's security and military sectors include the following:

- Deepening PRC multilateral security engagements could negatively impinge upon individual African nation's sovereignty and governance across the continent.
- PRC military bases could be a political liability for African governments that host them.
- The PRC could use Africa as the testing ground for its aspirations of security assistance globally through implementation of GSI, potentially foreshadowing a future more globally active PLA military and security presence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Global Shocks to Africa’s Security	1
Part One: The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC’s Africa Presence	3
Instability threatens PRC interests in Africa	4
PRC aspirations to deepen military and security ties	5
The PLA’s military presence in Africa	6
The PRC’s military base in Djibouti	7
Selection factors for acquiring the PRC’s first overseas base	8
Changing nature of the PLA Djibouti base	8
The next naval base: PRC targeting the Gulf of Guinea	9
PRC overtures to Equatorial Guinea.....	10
Part Two: PRC Involvement in Africa’s Security	12
Professional military education	13
PRC-led security forums in Africa	14
The PRC’s Global Security Initiative	14
Foreign military sales.....	15
A potential rise in PRC private military contractors and security companies in Africa.....	18
Conclusion: Implications for African Nations of Deepening PRC Security Involvement	19
Abbreviations.....	21
Endnotes.....	22
References	30

INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL SHOCKS TO AFRICA'S SECURITY

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Africa is home to many firsts for the PRC: the first People's Liberation Army (PLA) overseas military base (in Djibouti), the first rotational deployment of PLA Navy (PLAN) anti-piracy ships, and one of Beijing's first multilateral forums established outside of China's periphery—the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). However, global events since 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the transition to green energy, and rising instability in regions in Africa—have affected the PRC's interests on the continent. These changes have had implications for the PRC's military and security presence in the region. For example:

- Disruptions in global supply chains and soaring inflation are intensifying food insecurity and regional instability following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹
- The "green revolution" is placing Africa at the center of the global supply chain for critical minerals.²
- Coups and terrorist attacks across mineral-rich Sahel nations are increasing instability.³

To protect its interests and grow influence across Africa, the PRC is using its role as a leader of multilateral forums, its professional military

education (PME) program, arms sales, and its Global Security Initiative (GSI) as vehicles for closer security ties. The PRC is also involved in security cooperation and military diplomacy and is expanding its role to conflict mediation, counterterrorism, policing, law enforcement cooperation, and military training across the continent.⁴

In addition, China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has an incipient operational presence across the continent. The PLA maintains a permanent deployed operational presence of roughly 4,100 servicemembers in Africa and its surrounding waters, including roughly 2,000 troops deployed to Djibouti, 1,400 troops participating in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs), and 700 PLAN sailors deployed in rotation around the Horn of Africa as part of ongoing counterpiracy operations.⁵

In this report, we refer to *security efforts* as collaboration between the PRC and African nations such as the following:

- Participation in multilateral forums such as FOCAC and the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum
- Capacity building
- Military diplomatic efforts

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

We refer to the PRC's *military operational presence* in Africa as the following:

- PLA troops deployed on the continent at the Djibouti base
- PLA troops participating in UNPKOs
- PLAN counterpiracy operations

This report examines the PRC's military and security presence in Africa in two parts. Part one explores the following:

- The current PLA operational presence on the African continent
- The evolving functions of the PLA's base in Djibouti
- The possibility for the PLA's operational presence to grow in the form of future bases and military infrastructure on the continent

Part two examines the PRC's growing influence in Africa's security landscape through the following:

- Activities in military diplomacy
- Educating and training African military leaders and officers in the PRC's PME program
- Leading multilateral security forums
- Promoting GSI
- Foreign military sales (FMS)
- Private security contractors

PART ONE: THE MILITARY AND SECURITY DIMENSIONS OF THE PRC'S AFRICA PRESENCE

"The world is going through profound change of a scale unseen in a century. In the face of new opportunities and challenges, China and Africa will further strengthen solidarity and cooperation."⁶

-PRC State Council Information Office,
China's National Defense in the New Era, 2019

Africa has played a prominent role in the PRC's concept of its foreign policy since 1949.⁷ According to former PRC Foreign Minister Qin Gang, "China-Africa relations are the bedrock of China's foreign policy."⁸

PRC economic interests on the African subcontinent are significant. Examples include the following:

- Despite a decline since the COVID-19 pandemic,⁹ it is estimated that between 2000 and 2022, PRC lenders supplied \$170.08 billion in loans to 49 African governments.¹⁰
- The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Gabon, Guinea, and Zambia are important to the PRC's supply of natural resources and critical minerals, with imports increasing year on year.¹¹

- In 2019, the PRC imported nearly \$10 billion worth of minerals from sub-Saharan Africa.¹²
- In 2020, this number increased to nearly \$16.5 billion worth of minerals.¹³
- In 2021, the PRC imported \$21 billion in minerals from sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴
- An estimated 700,000 to 1 million Chinese citizens are living on the African continent (the PRC does not report an official number).¹⁵

PRC official documents and statements suggest that Beijing perceives a growing need to protect its overseas investments and interests. The PRC's 2019 national defense white paper states that "China's overseas interests are endangered by immediate



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The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

threats such as international and regional turmoil, terrorism, and piracy” and that one of the missions of the PRC’s armed forces is to “safeguard China’s overseas interests.”¹⁶

As this PRC desire to protect overseas interests has intensified, the African continent has become a testing ground for PLA overseas missions—through the deployment of PLA servicemembers to the base in Djibouti, the deployment of PLAN sailors to the Horn of Africa for ongoing counterpiracy missions, participation in UNPKOs, and PLA training of African soldiers. The next section discusses some of the changes to Africa’s security that could affect PRC interests on the continent.

Instability threatens PRC interests in Africa

In August 2023, the PRC state-owned enterprise Chinese Gezhouba Group Company suspended its project to build the Kandadji hydroelectric dam in Niger because of the military takeover on July 26.¹⁷

The PRC’s massive investments across Africa could be held at risk because of rising instability in parts of the continent, particularly in areas of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where armed militias clash over natural resources and across Sahel nations where a string of coups d’état started in 2020.¹⁸ In PRC government documents and statements from leaders, Beijing has expressed its desire to increase its military and security capabilities to protect these overseas investments and its citizens abroad.¹⁹

Analysts have noted that much of the PRC’s infrastructure development under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is in politically unstable and conflict-prone areas of the continent. For example, in its 2020 assessment, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences noted that 84 percent of China’s BRI investments are in medium- to high-political-risk countries.²⁰ The military coups that have taken place since 2020 in Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Chad, and Mali—all of which the PRC has sizable investment or BRI infrastructure projects in—could have both current and future effects on PRC economic interests.

In addition, the presence of terrorist groups and armed rebel and bandit groups has intensified the risk of violence for those doing business in these regions. These threats include the following terrorist and rebel groups:

- JNIM (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, an affiliate of al-Qa’ida), based in West Africa
- ISIS-Sahel and ISIS-West Africa
- Al Shabab, based in East Africa
- Boko Haram, based in Nigeria²¹
- Armed rebel and militia groups in the Central African Republic²²

In the past decade, there have been more than 150 violent incidents involving Chinese citizens in sub-Saharan Africa.²³ In the aftermath of growing instability and coups in parts of Africa—particularly the Sahel—and even recent attacks on PRC citizens,²⁴ the PRC is deepening its security involvement across the continent and possibly looking to grow its military presence.

PRC aspirations to deepen military and security ties

Statements by PRC officials and in authoritative PRC media voice Beijing's resolve to increase its security and military involvement in Africa. For example, in 2022, PRC state-run media outlet Xinhua published a special report on the growing instability across Africa due to the COVID-19 pandemic and rising violence from terrorist and rebel groups across the continent. The report expresses that, in response to the growing instability, the PRC will further deepen its involvement in Africa's security affairs and will

assist Africa in implementing 10 peace and security projects, continue to implement military assistance to the African Union, support African countries in independently maintaining regional security and counter-terrorism efforts, and carry out joint training of Chinese and African peacekeeping forces, on-site training, and cooperation in the control of small arms and light weapons.²⁵

In July 2023, the PRC's defense advisor to the African Union, Senior Colonel Guo Baojian, reiterated that the PRC "vowed to strengthen...military cooperation" between the PRC and the African continent.²⁶ In February 2024, PRC Ministry of Defense (MOD) spokesperson Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang again stressed the need to strengthen and improve PRC-Africa military relations, stating, "In recent years, under the common concern of Chinese President Xi Jinping and leaders of African countries, China-Africa military relations have grown deeper." Zhang then emphasized that the PLA would "further enhance the quality and effectiveness of defense cooperation" between the militaries of Africa and the PRC.²⁷

The next section discusses the incipient PLA operational presence across the African continent and explores the changing functions of the PLA base in Djibouti.

The PLA's military presence in Africa

Other than Africa, the PLA deploys primarily to the PRC's military outposts in the South China Sea. It also has around 400 troops in Lebanon as part of a UNPKO and a small deployment of the People's Armed Police (the PRC's paramilitary organization primarily responsible for internal security) in Tajikistan for counterterrorism.²⁸

The PRC's military force in Africa is its largest persistently deployed presence outside of China and its periphery. The PRC maintains a permanent PLA presence in Africa of around 2,000 servicemembers deployed to its first and (as of early 2024) only overseas base. Combined with the approximately 1,400 PLA troops participating in UNPKOs in five nations on the continent²⁹ and around 700 PLAN sailors on ships around Africa's littoral, there are roughly 4,100 PLA servicemembers in and around Africa.³⁰

Although the PRC has fewer deployed servicemembers in Africa than France (approximately 5,500) or the US (approximately 5,000),³¹ Beijing's Africa deployments are very significant for the PLA.³² The PLAN's maritime missions off the Horn of Africa and the PLA Army's UNPKOs represent the most important opportunities for PLA "real-world" operations outside of Asia.

As of 2024, the PLA has the following deployments on and around the continent:

- Ongoing PLAN counterpiracy efforts, now on the 46th deployment since 2008. Each deployment has roughly 700 sailors, including a PLAN special operations unit.³³
- Around 1,400 PLA troops participating in UNPKOs.³⁴
- PLA troops embedded in military training centers in the DRC and a military training school in Tanzania.³⁵
- Roughly 2,000 servicemembers stationed at the PLA base in Djibouti, including a PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC) special operations force (SOF) unit.³⁶



The PRC's military base in Djibouti

The largest number of PLA servicemembers in Africa is deployed to the PRC's first overseas base in Djibouti. The PLA deployment to Djibouti in 2017 represented a significant turning point in PRC foreign policy and highlighted the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa in protecting the PRC's overseas investments.

For decades, the PRC criticized Western nations with overseas military bases as "expansionist military powers."³⁷ US overseas military bases were described in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) publications as a means for the United States to maintain US global hegemony.³⁸ In 2010, rumors of possible overseas PLAN bases began circulating in international media. The PRC MOD issued a refutation of the possibility, stating that the "idea that the Chinese navy would establish bases overseas was groundless."³⁹

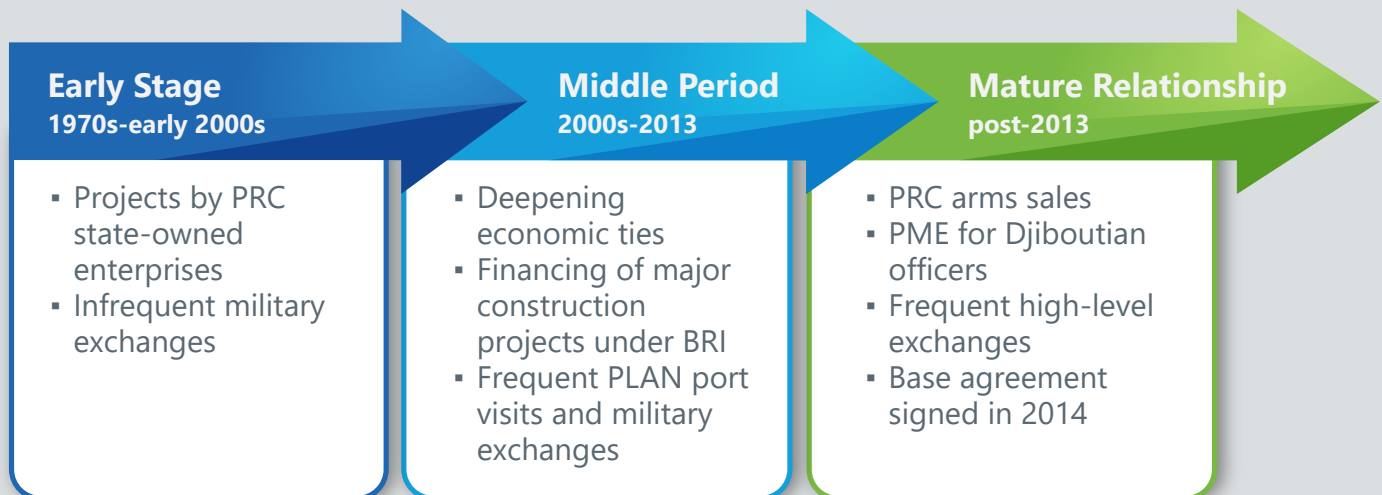
In 2016, during a press conference, then PRC Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi stated that as

China's overseas interests grow, including asset accumulations of "trillions of US dollars and 30,000 Chinese companies all over the world," the PRC should "build some necessary infrastructure and support capabilities in areas where China's interests are concentrated."⁴⁰

PRC leaders and military analysts then began to assert that ongoing PLAN counterpiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, protection of overseas interests, and PLAN "far-seas" missions require overseas military infrastructure.⁴¹

The PRC used a multifaceted approach to develop the relations necessary for the base agreement by appealing to Djibouti's economic ambitions as well as its security needs over a multiyear period. Figure 1 shows the deepening PRC-Djibouti ties over decades leading up to an eventual base agreement with Djibouti in 2014.

Figure 1. Process chart showing deepening PRC-Djibouti ties leading to base agreement



Source: CNA.

Selection factors for acquiring the PRC's first overseas base

The PRC likely considered these factors before targeting Djibouti for its first overseas military base:



Geography: Djibouti was well positioned to provide logistics support to the PLAN, protect sea lines of communication, and offer force projection capabilities.



Chinese-built and -operated infrastructure: PRC state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and banks financed and built, and manage and partially own, some of Djibouti's largest infrastructure projects.



Reliance on Chinese capital: Djibouti was heavily indebted to the PRC. The PRC may see such high levels of indebtedness as a source of leverage in negotiations and seek out other countries that are indebted to China when considering future locations.



Support for China's presence: The PRC maintained a consistent presence in Djibouti and had strong support from the country's political and economic elite. When considering future locations, the PRC may seek out other countries with similar strong political affiliations and support for the PRC.



Openness to foreign militaries: Djibouti's willingness to allow multiple foreign militaries to maintain a presence in the country may have contributed to the PRC's decision to build its first facility there. The PRC may seek to replicate this situation when searching for future locations.⁴²

Changing nature of the PLA Djibouti base

Since the opening of the PRC's first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017, the mission support functions of the base appear to have grown and its capabilities have been increased. Originally described by the PRC as a "support facility," the base is now a major logistics hub with a deployed PLANMC SOF unit able to support combat missions. Since 2017, the PLA has trained troops at the base in combat-type exercises, has built a dedicated naval pier at the base capable of supporting the PLAN's largest ships, and is likely adding a second dedicated naval pier.

FROM "SUPPORT FACILITY" TO "BASE"

Before the base's opening, PRC media reports were vague when discussing its function. For example, in 2015, PRC media outlet Xinhua addressed questions about the proposed base in Djibouti by labeling it as a "support facility" (保障设施) rather than a base.⁴³ Another 2015 article from Xinhua described the base's function as "solely logistical" in that it was intended to provide logistical support to PLAN vessels for the PRC's ongoing counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, UNPKOs, and humanitarian missions.⁴⁴ However, after the base officially opened in 2017, the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP, identified it as a "support base" (保障基地), dropping "facility" from the title.⁴⁵

FROM RESUPPLY BASE TO TRAINING FACILITY

The function and purpose of the base appear to have changed soon after its opening. The base began to be used not only to provide logistics resupply to PLAN vessels but also to train deployed troops in combat operations through live-fire exercises.

Articles published in China Military Online, the PLA's official media outlet, showed PLA troops deployed to

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

Djibouti conducting training and exercises more in line with combat missions than with force protection or logistics. Examples include the following:

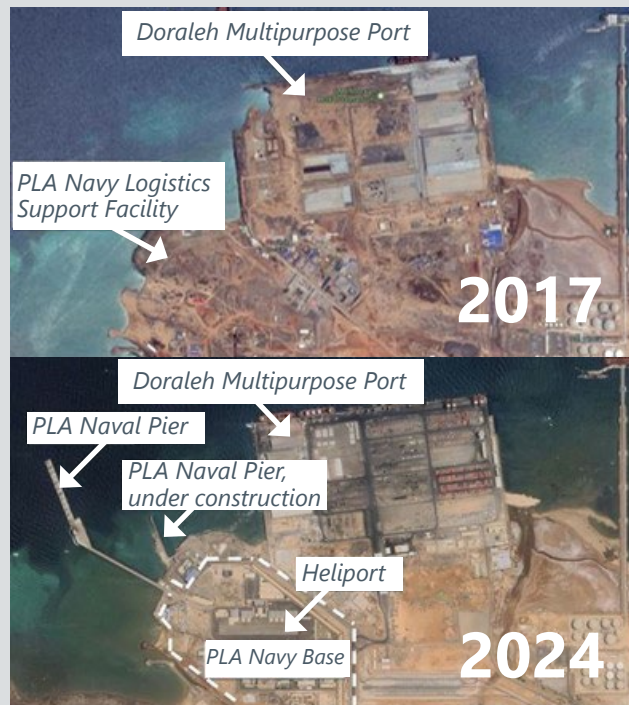
- In 2017, PLA troops conducted live-fire exercises.⁴⁶
- In 2018, PLA troops conducted live-fire exercises and full-gear field hikes.⁴⁷
- In 2020, PLA troops held contests showcasing fighting skills such as combat marksmanship, a full-gear 3-kilometer run, obstacle courses, and field first aid to help raise the PLA's "oversea mission capability."⁴⁸
- In 2020, the PRC announced that a PLANMC SOF unit had joined the previously assigned PLANMC unit in Djibouti, providing base protection as well as the ability to deal with contingencies affecting the PRC's interests and citizens in the region.⁴⁹

FROM RESUPPLY BASE TO MAJOR LOGISTICS BASE

In 2021, the PLA base in Djibouti underwent a significant upgrade in capabilities with the completion of a dedicated naval pier at the base.⁵⁰ According to satellite imagery, the pier is 340 meters long and capable of hosting the PLAN's largest blue-water ships, such as the new large-deck Type 075 amphibious warship and the domestically designed Type 002 aircraft carrier.⁵¹

The pier increases the base's capabilities to serve as a logistical resupply hub for the PLAN's counterpiracy mission and to service the PRC's carriers to project power beyond the Western Pacific, should it choose to deploy them. Satellite imagery also shows a helicopter pad and a new pier under construction. See Figure 2 for images showing the evolution of the base from 2017 (top image) to present (bottom image).

Figure 2. Changes to the PLA Djibouti base, 2017–2024



Source: Google Earth.

The next naval base: PRC targeting the Gulf of Guinea

The PRC may also seek a series of smaller footprint military installations rather than large Djibouti-style bases as a means of deflecting African and Western criticism and maintaining its narrative of a "peaceful rise" and anti-hegemonic power. As evidenced by the evolution of the Djibouti base's functions—from a "logistics facility" in 2017 to a major logistics hub with a deployed PLANMC SOF unit able to support combat missions—even small-footprint PLA facilities can evolve as the PRC gains a foothold. This section explores a potential second base location in Equatorial Guinea and expansion of PRC military infrastructure and logistics facilities in Africa.

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

There are indications that the PRC is seeking further military infrastructure and logistics globally to enable the PLA to project and sustain its military power.⁵² The African continent is a likely choice given the PRC's mandate to the PLA to protect overseas interests, investments, and citizens. Numerous reports have suggested that the Gulf of Guinea is one location that the PRC is targeting for expanded military infrastructure.⁵³ The following are three missions that the PRC could be seeking to fulfill by establishing a military base in the Gulf of Guinea:

1. **Supporting counterpiracy operations.** PLAN vessels frequently participate in counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Guinea,⁵⁴ and Beijing may assess a need for a base in the region for resupply as PLAN support increases. Although piracy has been in decline in the Gulf of Guinea since 2020, there was a surge in piracy in 2023, including attacks against Chinese oil tankers in April 2023.⁵⁵ Following the attacks, in June 2023, PLA Major General Qian Lihua stated that the PLA will "assist Western African countries in securing navigational safety in the Gulf of Guinea at a time when the region is facing an increasing threat from pirates."⁵⁶
2. **Protecting strategic maritime trade routes and overseas interest.** PRC SOEs are heavily involved in the local economy and export high volumes of products and raw materials from the Gulf of Guinea. A military base in the region would enhance the security of vital trade routes and protect PRC overseas interests.
3. **Supporting counterterrorism missions.** In the 2015 "Joint Statement of Comprehensive Partnership" between the PRC and Equatorial Guinea, the PRC declared that it will "increase cooperation on Counterterrorism operations with Equatorial Guinea." A PRC military base in the Gulf of Guinea could enhance security

cooperation and allow direct access to West Africa for counterterrorism support and missions.⁵⁷

PRC overtures to Equatorial Guinea

There are several factors that the PRC would likely use to evaluate basing options overseas. In a previous section, we examined several factors from the Djibouti base example that may have led to the signing of a base agreement. If the PRC used a similar list of selection factors to pick its next base, the following three factors could be considered when evaluating Equatorial Guinea as the location for a possible future base:

1. **Geography:** Equatorial Guinea possesses a strategic geographical position in the Gulf of Guinea, which is the location of 25 percent of African maritime traffic, 60 percent of Africa's oil production, and nearly 20 commercial seaports that attract PRC firms for business opportunities.⁵⁸
2. **Chinese-built and -operated infrastructure:** PRC SOEs and banks financed and built 19 critical infrastructure projects for Equatorial Guinea between 2000 and 2011, such as the New Port of Bata, the Bata-Niefang Road, and the Djibloho (Jibu Lao) hydropower station.⁵⁹
3. **Reliance on Chinese capital:** Equatorial Guinea is heavily indebted to the PRC, estimated at 49.7 percent of its gross domestic product in 2021, although no new data have been released by the Equatorial Guinean government in recent years.⁶⁰

Since 2021, there has been much speculation about whether the PRC is attempting to secure a base in Equatorial Guinea. For example, in 2021, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article stating that the PRC intends to establish its second military base in Africa along the Atlantic coast in Equatorial Guinea.⁶¹ The US Department of Defense echoed this assessment in its 2023 report on PRC military

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

and security capabilities. The report stated that the PRC has probably also considered several countries around the African continent for PLA military logistics facilities, “including Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, and Mozambique.”⁶²

Of note, Equatorial Guinea’s Vice President Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue subsequently denied allegations that the PRC was seeking its second base in his country via social media, stating, “I want to come forward to deny the reports from the American press Wall Street Journal about an alleged Chinese military base in Equatorial Guinea.”⁶³

In addition, the PRC and Equatorial Guinea have close economic ties going back to the early 2000s when the PRC increased its investment in Equatorial Guinea through its multilateral forum FOCAC.⁶⁴ Table 1 summarizes PRC and Equatorial Guinea relations across the diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) domain, all of which could help the PRC develop the necessary relations to sign a basing agreement or an agreement for military logistics access within the country.

Table 1. PRC–Equatorial Guinea ties across the DIME

Diplomatic	Information	Military	Economic
Multiple high-level visits by PRC top leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PRC SOE China Dalian International Economic and Technical Cooperation Group built Equatorial Guinea’s national television station in Malabo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-level exchanges between PLA and Equatorial Guinea military leaders In 2018, PRC minister of national defense met with the Equatorial Guinea defense minister 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China is Equatorial Guinea’s largest trade partner The PRC financed 19 development projects between 2000 and 2011

Sources: CNA and Simeón Oyono Esono Angue.

PART TWO: PRC INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICA'S SECURITY

In addition to the PLA's operational presence in Africa, the PRC also uses tools of military soft power and outreach to elevate its role in Africa's security affairs, increase influence, and protect PRC investments and citizens abroad. In this section, we focus on the

PRC's PME program, PRC-led multilateral security forums, the drive to implement GSI, and PRC FMS to African nations. Table 2 illustrates the PRC's military diplomatic activities in Africa, the goals of these activities, and areas to watch in the future.

Table 2. PRC military diplomacy efforts, their goals, and areas to watch in the future

PRC Military Diplomacy	Goal	Area to Watch
Professional military education	Deepen ties with current/future African military and political leaders Expand PRC brand of political influence	Increases in PME efforts could signal Beijing's intent to further entrench itself into Africa's military/security domain and increase its influence
PRC-led security forums	Exert influence on Africa's security apparatus Garner support for Beijing's political agenda Build international influence	Growing influence through PRC-led forums could pressure African nations to help the PRC reshape existing global institutions and norms, weakening sovereignty and harming human rights on the continent
Global Security Initiative	Exert influence on Africa's security apparatus Oppose Western involvement in Africa	The PRC could use GSI to pressure African nations to choose sides in great power competition; look for future GSI-specific forums held in Africa
Foreign military sales	Strengthen alliances and exert influence on recipient African nations Build new alliances and profit commercially	The PRC may increase its FMS in areas where Russian and French influence is in decline, especially West Africa

Source: CNA.

Professional military education

PME is one area that the PRC has historically used to build influence with current and future African military and political leaders. PLA PME programs train senior, mid-level, and junior military officers. In the PRC's military command institutions (e.g., the PLA National Defense University, the PRC MOD's Peacekeeping Training Center, the PLA Army Command College), students are educated on the PLA, its military system, and the PRC's governance model of politics, in addition to military theory and battlefield tactics, through classroom teaching and in-country visits to institutions.⁶⁵

PME institutions have been instrumental in PRC soft diplomatic efforts as well as the PLA's involvement in Africa. US academic David Shinn argues that "better trained...African military personnel who have exposure to China will also be more inclined to protect Chinese personnel and interests in Africa."⁶⁶ For example, a West African military officer who attended PRC PME training noted that political military programs are a part of a "larger political ecosystem in which military ties are built," further stating that the system is "very impactful on the impressions [formed] about China."⁶⁷

PRC PME programs and exchanges with the African continent have helped to strengthen mil-mil and government ties with both the highest levels of political leadership and senior- and junior-level officers that are projected to become only stronger. Several prominent African leaders and defense officials went through the PRC's PME system before the global shocks of recent years, including the following:

- Current president Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea
- Former president Laurent Kabila of the DRC
- Former president João Bernardo Vieira of Guinea-Bissau

- Former president Sam Nujoma of Namibia
- Former president Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe
- The Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO)
- Joint chief of staff of the Ugandan military General Fredrick Mugisha⁶⁸

More than 50 African countries have participated in PRC PME programs, with African officers making up about 60 percent of foreign officers admitted to top-level PRC military institutions.⁶⁹ According to Paul Nantulya, a researcher at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the PLA provided 6,000 PME scholarships to African military officers every three years through the PRC-led FOCAC.⁷⁰

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC had accepted thousands of African personnel through its PME programs. The number of PRC scholarships plummeted by 90 percent during the pandemic.⁷¹ At the 8th Ministerial Conference of FOCAC, held in 2021, the conference adopted the Dakar Action Plan (2022–2024), and the PRC emphasized the need to "actively conduct exchanges and cooperation in such fields as military education, military training, military medicine, logistics support, and maritime security, and hold exchanges and dialogues on military medicine."⁷²

Although statements do not hold the same weight as actions, comments made in January 2023 by former PRC Foreign Minister Qin Gang while visiting Ethiopia made it clear that Beijing prioritizes resuming, and even increasing, exchanges, as Qin emphasized "the need to speed up physical exchanges" and "upgrade" PRC-Africa cooperation.⁷³ The PRC is taking active measures to resume its PME program. For example, in July 2023, the PRC's MOD invited 100 military officers from more than 40 African nations to visit China. According to MOD spokesperson COL Tan Ke, the African officers were invited to "learn about China's national defense policy, military development, and

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

the global security initiative.”⁷⁴ The 9th Ministerial Conference of FOCAC, scheduled for 2024, will likely determine the number of PRC PME scholarships to be given in the coming year as a new action plan is set to be announced to replace the current Dakar Action Plan, which ends in 2024.

PRC-led security forums in Africa

The African continent has played a unique role for the PRC in its military and security involvement across the Global South, setting precedents for involvement elsewhere globally. For example, in 2000, the PRC established FOCAC, one of the earliest attempts by Beijing to establish a regional security forum in the Global South.⁷⁵ After establishing FOCAC, the PRC created other regional institutions largely mirroring the structure of FOCAC, such as the China Arab States Cooperation Forum, founded in 2004, and the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum, founded in 2014.⁷⁶

FOCAC was started as a multilateral coordination mechanism for PRC and African leaders to solidify trade and development ties but expanded to include a security cooperation component at the 5th Ministerial Conference in 2012.⁷⁷

The PRC uses its leadership of multilateral forums to grow its outreach and deepen its security cooperation and influence on the continent. The PRC leads two primary security forums in Africa—FOCAC and the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, started in 2018. Since 2000, the PRC has used FOCAC as a tool for outreach to African nations, gifting scholarships, fellowships, and grants that build influence across Africa and help the PRC achieve its political goals.⁷⁸ The PRC's participation in multilateral forums can

help build political alliances and support for the PRC in other global multilateral forums as well, such as the United Nations (UN). Africa holds the largest bloc in the UN General Assembly, with 28 percent of the votes compared to Asia's 27 percent, the Americas' 17 percent, and Western Europe's 15 percent.⁷⁹

The pandemic significantly affected the PRC's ability to invite participants and host large-scale multilateral forum events. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC offered about 100,000 invitations for academic, media, and local government trainings in both African nations and China. At the last meeting of FOCAC, hosted in 2021 (the first post-pandemic forum), approximately 10,000 invites were extended.⁸⁰

In August 2023, the PRC hosted the 3rd China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in Beijing.⁸¹ More than 100 delegates, representatives, and defense officials from 50 African countries attended the event. During the meeting, PLA General Li Shangfu, also Chinese state councilor and defense minister, highlighted the security challenges that are arising on the African continent, stating, “Traditional security issues such as military coups and civil war haven't been totally vanquished, while non-traditional ones like terrorism and illegal immigration are on the rise.”⁸² The PRC proposed its GSI as the vehicle for dealing with the rising instability across the continent. GSI is the PRC-led alternative to a Western security framework and is not tied to human rights concerns or political conditions of a nation.

The PRC's Global Security Initiative

Announced in April 2022, GSI is the PRC's first proposal for a PRC-led global security framework. As China continues to increase its international influence, GSI is a means for the PRC to offer its own

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

security architecture in the Global South as a counter to the current Western-led security apparatus. Although full details of what GSI will actually do have not yet been revealed, the PRC is heavily marketing its GSI across sub-Saharan Africa.

In February 2023, the PRC issued a concept paper elaborating on implementation of GSI, specifically mentioning the rising security challenges in Africa.⁸³ The PRC paper identified that the “world is changing in unprecedented ways” and that the global shocks of crises, regional and global hotspots, and the COVID-19 pandemic have presented significant challenges. The PRC proposed that GSI be adopted to address these global security challenges and specifically Africa’s hotspot areas, such as “the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and the Great Lakes region.”⁸⁴

Although the concept paper states that GSI “seeks concrete actions and tangible results,” it does not articulate a framework, mechanisms, list of “signatories,” or other specifics about what GSI would do and how.⁸⁵

The PRC appears to be using the broad language of GSI to leverage existing economic ties with African nations and grow its influence in the security cooperation domain. For example, the theme of the August 2023 3rd China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in Beijing was “Implementing the Global Security Initiative and Strengthening China-Africa Solidarity and Cooperation.”⁸⁶ The PRC used the forum as a platform to broadcast the message of GSI, with PRC State Councilor and Minister of National Defense General Li Shangfu stating that through GSI, “China will enhance military cooperation with Africa in various fields including joint exercises, peacekeeping and escorting, military education as well as professional training.”⁸⁷

Whereas Western states emphasize the importance of democracy, good governance, and human rights when forming security partnerships with African countries, GSI has no such conditions and relies on the PRC’s declared “non-interference” policy.⁸⁸ Critics of GSI state that signing on to the initiative could harm human rights in Africa and give authoritarian regimes further leverage to operate with impunity because the PRC does not prioritize human rights or democracy.⁸⁹ In addition, the PRC’s emphasis through GSI on a multilateral approach to solving security issues on the continent could potentially give the PRC, as the organizer, disproportionate influence and reduce the sovereignty of African participant nations.

Foreign military sales

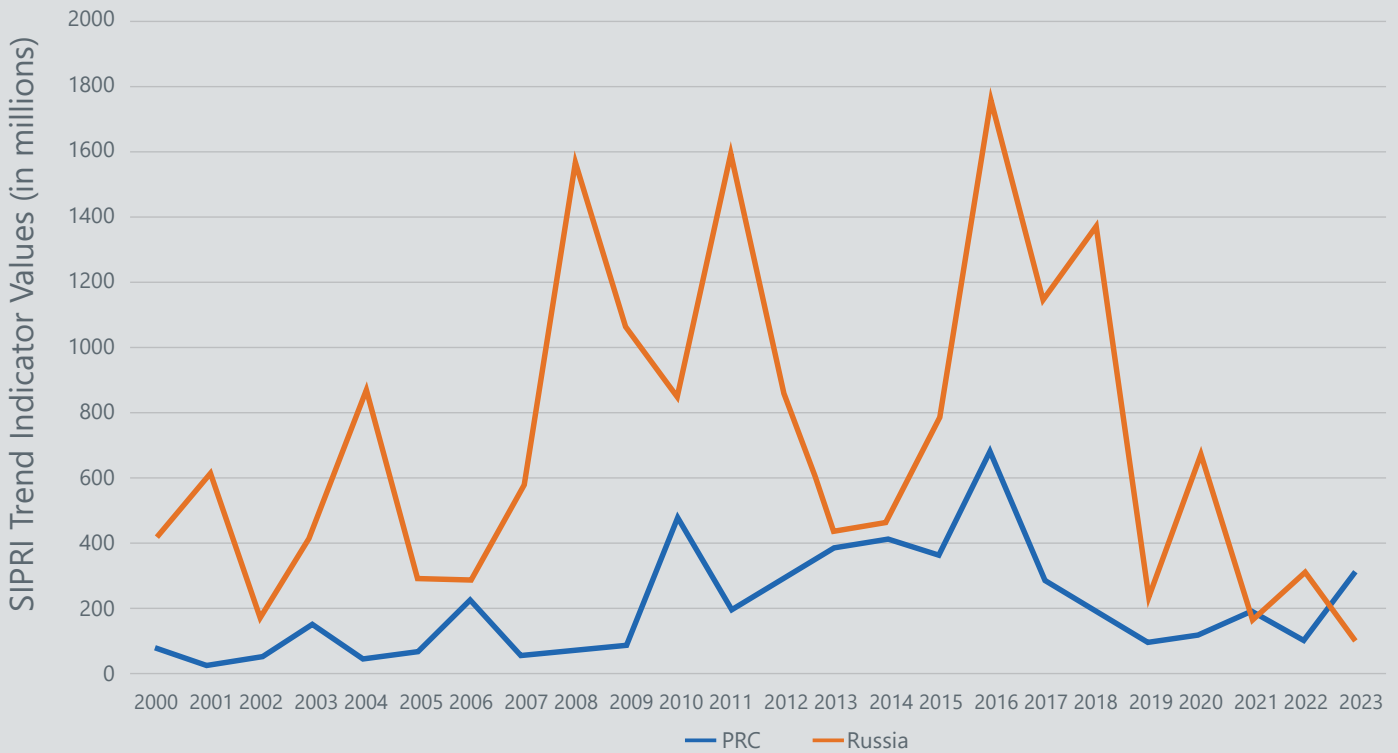
The PRC uses FMS in conjunction with other types of military aid and assistance to complement its foreign policy initiatives, gain a profit from sales from its SOE arms manufacturers, and build influence in Africa. The PRC’s arms sales globally have risen steadily over the last few decades, making the PRC and Russia the world’s fourth and third top exporters of arms, respectively.⁹⁰ With the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions draining Russia’s resources, an opportunity may be arising for the PRC to increase its arms sales to African nations.

In 2022, Russia provided roughly 44 percent of Africa’s weapons, and the PRC provided around 18 percent. However, Russia’s overall total arms sales to the continent have been in decline since 2018.⁹¹ In 2021, PRC arms sales exceeded Russian arms sales for the first time since 2013 before declining again in 2022, largely because of global supply chain issues, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

Figure 3. PRC vs. Russia arms exports to Africa, 2000–2023



Source: CNA, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database.

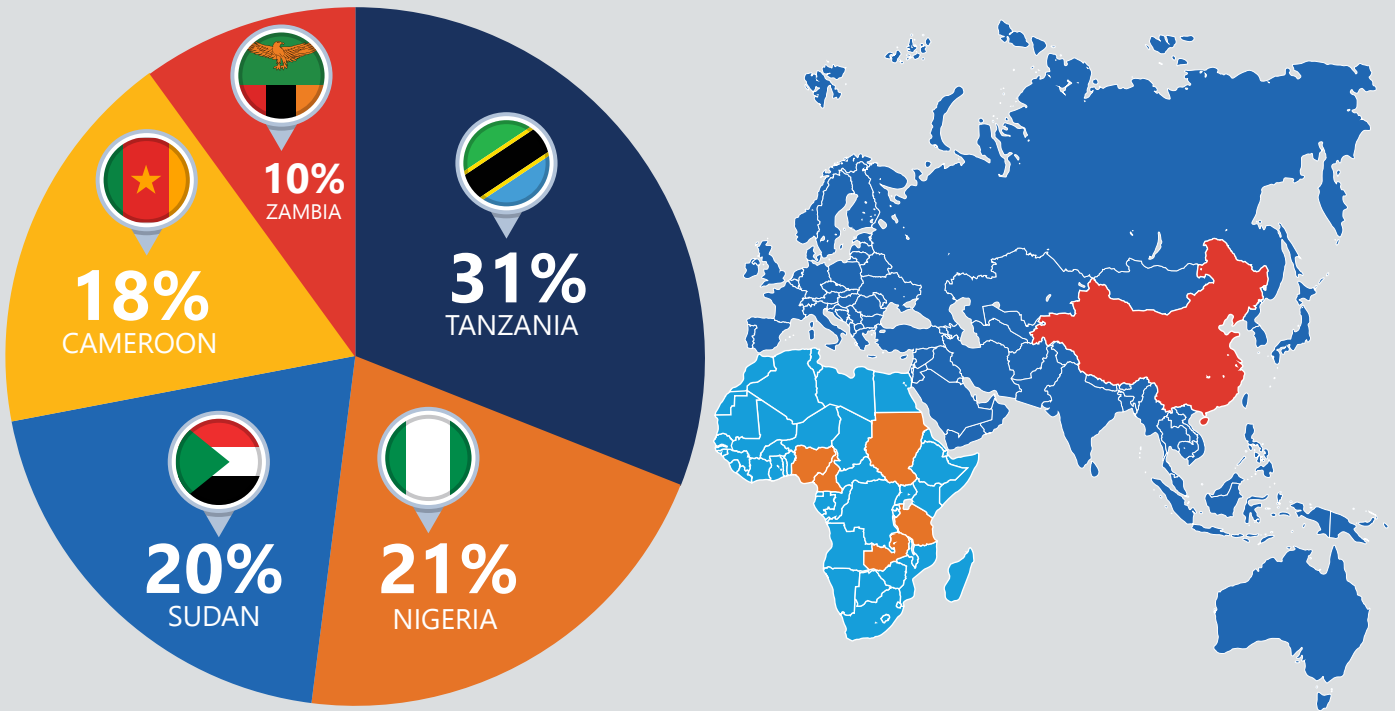
The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the PRC's and Russia's ability to produce and distribute arms to Africa, which was then further affected by global disruptions to military industrial production. Despite this setback, the PRC still supplied arms to five primary recipient sub-Saharan African nations (as seen in Figure 4), which made up more than 60

percent of PRC arms exports to the sub-Saharan African region in 2022.⁹² These five nations also are recipients of the PRC's largest investment and construction projects in sub-Saharan African, indicating a growing connection between Beijing's economic interests and increasing security concerns in the region.⁹³

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

Figure 4. Percentage of total PRC arms exports to sub-Saharan Africa, 2022



Source: CNA, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database.

One area for continued monitoring is the potential effect of the war in Ukraine in Africa. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine could affect its arms sales to Africa in 2024 and beyond, potentially giving the PRC opportunities to expand its arms sales. Russia's ability to access new technologies and supply chains has been disrupted by its war, and in 2022, the Russian arms industry was struggling to meet even domestic requirements.⁹⁴ According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2023, the volume of Russia's arms sales was 52 percent lower than in 2022.⁹⁵ Russian arms

sales to Africa fell from \$315 million in 2022 to \$102 million in 2023. Meanwhile, the PRC's arms sales to the African continent rose from \$103 million in 2022 to \$306 million in 2023.⁹⁶ In addition, the sanctions and financial restrictions that the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Canada have placed on Russia are designed to "have a deep and long-lasting effect on the Russian defense sector" and could further affect Russia's ability to maintain FMS.⁹⁷

A potential rise in PRC private military contractors and security companies in Africa

In the future, the PRC may seek a layered approach to deepening its ties and influence in Africa's peace and security. For example, the PRC will likely continue providing leadership and soft power influence in Africa's security domain while adding incremental military power elements—possibly increasing the role of private military contractors (PMCs) and security firms, whose role offers a degree of plausible deniability. A possible rise in the PRC's use of PMCs and security companies in Africa may be driven by the need to secure PRC infrastructure development projects, investments, citizens, and embassies as incidents of attack against Chinese citizens have increased in recent years.¹⁰⁰

The PRC and Russia both use PMCs and private security companies (PSCs) on the African continent with different goals and different results. In this section, we refer to PMCs as privately owned, independent groups hiring mercenaries and offering services such as advice and training to local forces, intelligence gathering, rescue, and, on occasion (and most notably with Russia's Wagner Group), engaging

in combat missions and fighting wars on behalf of governments. We refer to PSCs as privately owned entities providing passive security services, such as access control, protection against theft and violence, and physical security to individuals or groups.

Although the PRC government does not release an exact number of PSC personnel on the continent, a report from Africa-based military analysts estimates that PRC security companies currently operate in 14 African countries.¹⁰¹ One Beijing-based security firm, DeWe Security Service, has around 2,000 contractors protecting the \$4 billion Kenya railway.¹⁰²

Experts believe that the use and deployment of contractors across the continent is likely to grow because many high-value projects are located in insecure regions and the PRC is not confident that its security needs can be met by African forces.¹⁰³ For example, PRC writings acknowledge that "terrorism has increased in multiple regions, with Africa becoming the most serious region for global terrorist activities."¹⁰⁴ In addition, in March 2023, nine Chinese gold mine workers were killed in the Central African Republic, prompting a response from the PRC's Foreign Ministry warning of "high security risks" for Chinese citizens in some African nations.¹⁰⁵

A key difference between PRC security companies and other nations' PMCs is that the PRC's contractors are not technically private because they must by law be "either wholly owned or majority-owned state proprietorships, or at least 51 percent of their registered capital must be government-owned."⁹⁸ PRC security companies are mostly composed of former soldiers from the PLA, ex-special forces members, and other former military members. The PRC's security contractors are forbidden from carrying arms and typically work with and through local forces or provide training to armed African forces.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN NATIONS OF DEEPENING PRC SECURITY INVOLVEMENT

The global disruptions that have affected the African continent have also affected the PRC's military and security involvement in Africa. Some of these disruptions have had a negative effect, such as slowing down the PRC's PME program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other global disruptions may

provide opportunities for the PRC to develop deeper ties, such as increasing its arms sales to the continent. Table 3 summarizes some examples of changes to the PRC's military and security involvement in Africa from global shocks.

Table 3. Changes to the PRC's military and security involvement in Africa after 2020

Up to 2020	After 2020	Opportunity
PRC arms sales to Africa were rising in 2019	PRC arms sales to Africa declined in 2021 during COVID-19 because of manufacturing and supply chain issues	The PRC could increase arms sales to Africa in 2024 and beyond by replacing or supplementing declining Russian arms sales due to the war in Ukraine
Before COVID-19, the PRC gave out nearly 6,000 PME scholarships every three years to African military officers	COVID-19 reduced the number of PRC PME scholarships by 90 percent ¹⁰⁶	PRC officials have stated a desire to return to, if not increase, previous PME numbers
Before COVID-19, the PRC offered about 100,000 invitations for academic, media, and local government trainings at its multilateral forum events in both Africa and China	After COVID-19, numbers of PRC invitations to Africans for PRC-led multilateral forum events fell to 10,000	The next iteration of FOCAC, to be held in Beijing in 2024, could help the PRC resume or increase its previous level of invitations to and participation of African leaders

Source: CNA.

The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence

CHANGES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL SHOCKS

The PRC is seeking a greater role in Africa's security apparatus through military diplomatic efforts, leading multilateral institutions such as FOCAC and the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, and GSI. The PRC may be seeking additional base locations as well to increase its ability to project PLA presence globally and protect PRC interests across the African continent. If the PRC does pursue future military basing in Africa, it would need to leverage all its instruments across the DIME, including its deepened influence in Africa's security domain. Implications for African nations of the PRC's involvement in Africa's security and military sectors include the following:

- **Deepening PRC multilateral security engagements could negatively affect sovereignty.** The PRC's policy of "non-interference" could give authoritarian regimes more room to operate with greater impunity, weakening areas of governance, human rights, and regional cooperation.
- **PRC military bases could be a political liability for African governments that host them.** African populations, political leaders, and institutions are often wary of foreign bases for several reasons, including the perception that the foreign military may undermine the host government's domestic agenda or sovereignty.
- **The PRC could use Africa as the testing ground for its aspirations of security assistance globally through implementation of GSI.** If GSI is instituted, the PRC could potentially use it to leverage greater influence with participant African nations to "choose China" over other nations in decision-making, especially in an era of increased great power competition on the continent. In addition, GSI's multilateral approach to security issues could potentially give the PRC a disproportionate role in decision-making in security issues, leading to a loss of sovereignty for African nations.

ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DIME	diplomatic, information, military, and economic
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FMS	foreign military sales
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
GSI	Global Security Initiative
MOD	Ministry of Defense
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	PLA Navy
PLANMC	PLA Navy Marine Corps
PMC	private military contractor
PME	professional military education
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSC	private security company
SOE	state-owned enterprise
SOF	special operations force
UN	United Nations
UNPKO	United Nations Peacekeeping Operation

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