

# Understanding China's New Counterterrorism Ambitions in Africa

By Jason Warner

China has recently been pursuing a much more aggressive stance in African security affairs, including playing a more engaged role in counterterrorism (CT). Where is China engaged in CT in Africa, and by what means? What challenges would China face in engaging more robustly in African CT? Most importantly, why is China newly expressing interest in engaging in the African CT landscape at this particular moment? In the main, this piece argues that despite ostensible rationales related to self-defense of economic interests and solidarity with African states, at its core, Beijing's primary motivations for entering the African CT space are to diversify its means of influence in Africa beyond its historical "economics-first" approach. Recognizing that engaging in African CT is a high-risk but potentially high-reward activity (which other global powers have recently engaged in with mixed results), Beijing likely believes it has a new genre of CT assistance—less kinetic, more economic, and rooted in equitable partnerships—that represents a fundamentally new and productive means of gaining influence in Africa. Yet, China faces challenges in its African CT pursuits, including reconciling whether its cautious ethos can stomach the turbulent landscape of African terrorism; how to deal with a saturated African CT space; and how not to fall victim to the same pitfalls as other global powers that have recently engaged in African CT. Nevertheless, if China can prove that its cautious non-military-first approach is fundamentally different from existing CT value propositions from external states, Beijing could deeply rival, and potentially replace, Washington as the partner of choice for security cooperation in Africa.

Over the past 20 years, external states have sought to gain influence in Africa by assisting African countries in fighting terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the United States' entrance into the Sahara and Sahel in the years after 9/11 to stem the tide of al-Qa`ida's presence there, Washington would soon also become involved in trying to tamp down al-Shabaab's presence in Somalia.<sup>2</sup> By 2011, France had begun to intervene seriously in African counterterrorism (CT) in Mali with its Operation Serval mission in the country against a combination of al-Qa`ida affiliates and separatists,<sup>3</sup> a mission that would expand to see it creating an ill-fated pan-Sahelian counterterrorism organization, the G-5 Sahel,<sup>4</sup> all while its own Operation Barkhane tried and failed to stem the exponentially rising tide of terrorism in Mali, Burkina Faso, and

Niger.<sup>5</sup> By 2019, Russia too had entered the African CT space in a bid to gain influence on the continent, deploying elements of its state-run Wagner Group to address terrorist threats affiliated with al-Qa`ida or Islamic State groups in Mozambique, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, all with highly variable results.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, fast forward to the present day, and each of these states has been met with a general lack of success<sup>7</sup> in African CT, with reputations being tarnished, not burnished, as a result. Most notably, after more than a decade of serious engagement, in the 2020s, France began having its counterterrorism forces ridiculed and accused of supporting terrorist elements in the countries they were present in—notably Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—by both host governments<sup>8</sup> and civil society<sup>9</sup> alike. Due to a combination of the perceived failures of its CT efforts as well as its treatment of local partners, France has of late ignominiously had its security cooperation agreements annulled by state after African state (including Mali,<sup>10</sup> Niger,<sup>11</sup> Burkina Faso,<sup>12</sup> Senegal,<sup>13</sup> Côte d'Ivoire,<sup>14</sup> Chad,<sup>15</sup> and others), resulting in its lowest degree of influence in Africa in half a century.

For its part, the United States, while not faring as poorly as France and still generally the partner of choice for African militaries, notably saw its primary counterterrorism bases—Bases 201 and 202, on which it had spent hundreds of millions of dollars over a decade—revoked by the Nigerien government in 2024.<sup>16</sup> Even Russia, which has, for the past several years, been the CT partner of choice for many of the most terrorism-beset African regimes, saw its own stock plummet recently: Beyond the constant reports of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Wagner Group/Africa Corps,<sup>17</sup> the Wagner Group recently announced it was leaving Mali after apocryphally claiming a "completed mission."<sup>18</sup> In the midst of this scramble by current, former, or aspiring great powers for influence via CT in Africa, one global heavyweight has historically been notably quiet: China.

But 2024 marked a turning point. In that year, more than any other before, China shed the illusion that it sought to remain a primarily economic partner for African states and made clear that it was instead ready to jump more ardently into the security realm in Africa. The most telling example of this was the fact that at the September 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

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Summit, China was unabashed about its desire to become a major security actor on the African continent, giving what some called “unprecedented Chinese emphasis on its role in security on the continent.”<sup>19</sup> In the opening speech of the summit,<sup>20</sup> “Chinese President Xi Jinping promised to provide Africa with approximately \$140 million in grants for military assistance; training for 6,000 military personnel and 1,000 police and law enforcement officers; participation in joint military exercises, training, and patrols; and invitations for 500 young African military officers to visit China.”<sup>21</sup>

More broadly, since 2024, observers have recognized and underscored China’s growing military role in Africa. To that end, they have focused on the growing militarization of China’s Africa policy,<sup>22</sup> the growing role of private Chinese security firms in Africa,<sup>23</sup> and China’s increased use of military diplomacy<sup>24</sup> and arms sales in Africa,<sup>25</sup> with one analyst underscoring that “Africa now represents the PRC’s largest persistent military deployment outside of its periphery.”<sup>26</sup> And yet, one specific dimension of China’s broader push has, to date, received relatively little attention: counterterrorism.<sup>27</sup>

To that end, this article asks: Where is China engaged in CT in Africa, and by what means? What challenges would China face in engaging more robustly in African CT? Most importantly, why is China newly expressing interest in engaging in the African CT landscape at this particular moment? In the main, this piece argues that despite ostensible rationales related to self-defense of economic interests and solidarity with African states, at its core, Beijing’s primary motivations for entering the African CT space are to diversify its means of influence in Africa beyond its historical “economics-first” approach. Recognizing that engaging in African CT is a high-risk but potentially high-reward activity (which other global powers have recently engaged in with mixed results), Beijing likely believes it has a new genre of CT assistance—less kinetic, more economic, and rooted in equitable partnerships—that represents a fundamentally new and attractive means of gaining influence in Africa. Yet, China faces challenges in its African CT pursuits, including reconciling whether its cautious ethos can stomach the turbulent landscape of African terrorism; how to deal with a saturated African CT space; and how not to fall victim to the same pitfalls as other global powers that have engaged in African CT. Nevertheless, if China can prove that its cautious non-military-first approach is fundamentally different from existing CT value propositions from external states, Beijing could deeply rival, and potentially replace, Washington as the partner of choice for security cooperation in Africa.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it lays out the evolution of Chinese understandings of “terrorism” and “counterterrorism” in both domestic and international spheres. Next, it describes the specific genres of activities that China is currently engaged in within the African CT space. In the third section, it articulates the rationales as to why China has chosen the current moment to pursue this new interest in African CT. In the fourth, it lays out some of the challenges that China will grapple with if it does elect to become a more forceful player in African CT. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the above discussions, drawing out the implications for Africa, the United States, and the world if China succeeds in becoming the new major CT provider in Africa.

## Part I: Evolution of the Chinese Conceptualization of CT

The notion of ‘terrorism’ in China is a relatively new phenomenon,

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which primarily has roots in China’s domestic politics but has, over time, evolved to become a concern and an area of policy engagement for China internationally. In Imperial China, the notion of ‘terrorism’ did not exist; political violence was instead conceived of as actions threatening to the emperor and leading to “chaos.”<sup>28</sup> However, as China began to liberalize in the 1980s, dissident groups in the country became more vocal, and China saw a rise in separatist and religiously fervent groups. Most specifically, this pseudo-opening and liberalization led to the rise of increased threats posed to national unity by its Uyghur Muslim minority in the western Xinjiang province, and its militant arm, the Uyghur East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Arising in the 1990s, ETIM sought a separate “East Turkistan” state. ETIM has undertaken attacks on police,<sup>29</sup> bombed a train station,<sup>30</sup> assassinated local officials,<sup>31</sup> undertaken a widescale knife stabbing attack in Kunming in 2014,<sup>32</sup> and plotted to attack the U.S. embassy.<sup>33</sup> Germanely, ETIM has also been shown to have links to al-Qa`ida, the Taliban, and their allies, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.<sup>34</sup>

In light of its experience with ETIM, China would eventually come to conceive of terrorism in the context of combating the “three evils”—ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism.<sup>35</sup> Importantly, China’s view of terrorism is rooted in its domestic experience, in which Islamist terrorists not only threatened disruptive violence but more fundamentally endangered the very territorial integrity of the Chinese state.

The year 2001 also served as a fundamental turning point in China’s understanding of threats of transnational terrorism. Though China never served as a steadfast or particularly important partner in the United States’ Global War on Terror,<sup>36</sup> given its experience with al-Qa`ida-linked ETIM, the 9/11 attacks did, nevertheless, lead China to take such threats from al-Qa`ida much more seriously.





*Supporters of Niger's National Council of Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) wave the Chinese flag and a flag bearing a logo of private military company Wagner in Niamey on September 16, 2023. (Democracy News Alliance/news aktuell via AP Images)*

Domestically, China increased its use of language about terrorism in national documentation and, throughout the early 2000s and 2010s, consistently grew its own counterterrorism legislative agenda,<sup>37</sup> including passing its wide-ranging Counterterrorism Law in 2015. Among other provisions, the law laid out definitions of “terrorism” (which have been critiqued as broad and vague); expanded state authority to prevent terrorism (including granting wide-ranging powers for intelligence gathering, surveillance, detention, and the use of armed forces); put new demands on companies and individuals to assist the government in counterterror efforts (including rendering communications records and demanding citizen assistance); and defined the root causes of terrorism (which include a lack of economic development and a desire for social justice).<sup>38</sup> Germanely, the law also outlined the international dimensions of China’s counterterrorism outlook. These included stipulations that China would seek to develop CT cooperation with other states and organizations (Article 68); would undertake exchanges of intelligence, cooperative enforcement, and financial monitoring (Article 69); and could assign members of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and police forces to leave the country on CT missions (Article 71).<sup>39</sup> While the 2015 Counterterrorism Law would come to serve as the bedrock for China’s domestic and international counterterrorism outlook, it received wide-ranging criticism for the exceptional powers it granted to the state, and the potential abuses such powers could engender.

Perhaps the wide-ranging powers of the Counterterrorism Law were no more evident than concerning China’s Uyghur communities. China’s enduring concerns about its Uyghur minority led it to undertake “preventive counterterrorism” strategies, which included extreme surveillance measures, widespread arrests, and the placement of these members in so-called “re-education camps,” all of which have been widely critiqued by human rights groups.<sup>40</sup> In response, with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, Chinese Uyghurs came to serve as a non-negligible presence of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.<sup>41</sup> The Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, singled China out in April 2014 as a state that repressed Muslims.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, China’s treatment of its Uyghur minority has come to serve as a troubling shibboleth of its approach to CT. As of 2020, reporting suggested that some one to three million people—including Uyghurs, but also Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs—had been detained in an array of some 1,200 “re-education” camps in China, while members of the Uyghur diaspora had been put under intense surveillance.<sup>43</sup>

Outside of its domestic sphere, also beginning in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, China began engaging in counterterrorism assistance with nearby countries to safeguard its own borders. Working primarily under the auspices of the Chinese-established Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China began extensive bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism cooperation with countries in its near-abroad, including Russia and especially

in the ‘-stans’: Pakistan,<sup>44</sup> Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This cooperation normally focused on joint exercises and intelligence-sharing. For instance, in 2021, in the face of the resurgence of the Taliban and worries about the impact on its economic projects, China signed a deal to finance a counterterrorism military base in Tajikistan,<sup>45</sup> with which it conducted counterterrorism drills in 2019,<sup>46</sup> 2021, and 2023, and with which it has agreed to host joint counterterrorism exercises every two years.<sup>47</sup>

When it comes to Africa more acutely, China’s concerns about the effects of terrorism on its economic interests coincided with the 2013 launch of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the need to protect its overseas economic investments. While Chinese “private” security companies (though with state funding and attached to international state enterprises) were some of the first deployments that intended to safeguard Beijing’s investments, these were generally perceived to be far more anodyne than traditional PMCs. For instance, by law, Chinese nationals cannot carry weapons abroad,<sup>48</sup> and the Chinese government only grants a limited number of companies the authority to serve in such security roles.<sup>49</sup>

As BRI projects expanded on the African continent, particularly in terrorism-afflicted states—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad—or simply unstable states—Sudan, Guinea, Gabon<sup>50</sup>—so too did China’s concern about the economic impacts of terrorism. By 2014, Chinese analysts began referring to “an arc of instability caused by terrorism” in Africa that included Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Somalia,<sup>51</sup> while simultaneously, Chinese workers on the continent began facing violence from non-state armed actors. Anecdotally, nine Chinese goldmine workers were killed in the Central African Republic in 2023 by rebels, just days after another three Chinese workers were kidnapped in another part of the country.<sup>52</sup> In both the DRC and Nigeria, Chinese nationals have been kidnapped by members of violent extremist organizations; in the latter, Chinese workers are referred to as “sweet pastries” due the substantial ransom payments they could expect to generate.<sup>53</sup> Thus, China’s early engagement in defensive African anti-terrorism efforts—to be distinguished from offensive counterterrorism efforts—began with an economic impetus, and for good reason: One think-tank shows that from 2014–2024, Chinese citizens were subject to some 150 violent incidents in sub-Saharan Africa, though numbers on terrorism-specific incidents are not known.<sup>54</sup> And indeed, this is logical, as many of Beijing’s economic investments occur precisely in conflict-prone spaces. For instance, in its 2019 defense white paper, China noted that “China’s overseas interests are endangered by immediate 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.”<sup>55</sup>

However, China’s clearest definition of its current understanding of terrorism and counterterrorism has been incrementally articulated via its Global Security Initiative (GSI) framework, intended to serve as an alternative international security effort to that of the Western and NATO-led world order. While its initial unveiling in 2022 addressed terrorism in the context of China’s near-abroad regions of Southeast and Central Asia,<sup>56</sup> it said little about the GSI’s view of terrorism in other world regions, including Africa.<sup>57</sup> However, in February 2023, China released “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” which elucidated global and regional priorities of the GSI, giving stark evidence of its prioritization of CT in Africa. To that end, the report was

notable in two regards. First, while it made broad references to global terrorism, the only *region* in which terrorism was mentioned explicitly was Africa. Second, and perhaps more tellingly, China’s commitment to assisting in counterterrorism efforts in Africa was arguably the *primary lens* through which China articulated its value proposition to the continent. The full text of the Africa section of the GSI Concept Paper (below) underscores this centrality of its role in African security generally, and counterterrorism specifically, both in explicit mentions of CT as well as allusions to the most volatile terrorism-afflicted regions of the continent. In it, China pledges to:

*Support the efforts of African countries, the AU and sub-regional organizations to resolve regional conflicts, fight terrorism and safeguard maritime security, call on the international community to provide financial and technical support to Africa-led counter-terrorism operations, and support African countries in strengthening their ability to safeguard peace independently. Support addressing African problems in the African way, and promote peaceful settlement of hotspots in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Great Lakes region and other areas. Actively implement the Outlook on Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa, promote the institutionalization of the China-Horn of Africa Peace, Governance and Development Conference, and work actively to launch pilot projects of cooperation.*<sup>58</sup>

The GSI Concept Paper’s focus on “Africa-led counterterrorism” via a variety of instruments—conflict resolution, conferences, security-focused pilot projects, and global cooperation—speaks to the breadth of approaches in its toolkit. This Chinese focus on African counterterrorism was followed by a March 2023 U.N. speech by Liu Yuxi, special representative of the Chinese government on African affairs at the United Nations, whose statements focused exclusively on the need for more global action to combat terrorism in Africa.<sup>59</sup> Collectively, these actions set the stage for the recent Chinese CT push that has been evident for at least the past several years.

## Part II: Means of Chinese Engagement in African CT

Having laid out how China thinks about terrorism and counterterrorism domestically, internationally, and increasingly, in Africa, just how is China engaging in counterterrorism-related activities in Africa?

### *A Deferential, Cautious Approach*

At the broadest level, and beyond any individual means of engagement, the hallmark of China’s engagement in military and security cooperation—and, *inter alia*, counterterrorism cooperation—in Africa is one of caution, amity, respect, non-interference, and deference to African partners. As this author has suggested elsewhere, China’s military ambitions in Africa have tremendous potential to upend the status quo precisely because they appear to be non-threatening. In opposition to others, China’s military engagement in Africa has been marked by being “quiet, nonviolent, boringly technical, and profoundly, delicately measured,” focusing on “technical—not combat—training; police—not military—training; and more broadly on economic—and not security—phenomena.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, as an organizing principle, *how* China frames its CT, not merely *what* it does, is one of the most important dimensions of its engagement.



### ***Bilateral and Multilateral Terrorism-Related Diplomacy, Outreach, and Agreement Making***

Across the continent, China's recent push for counterterrorism-related influence has been evident. Stories have emerged of counterterrorism-focused discussions between senior Chinese and African officials in Algeria (February 2025<sup>61</sup>), Benin (September 2023<sup>62</sup>), Burkina Faso (June 2021,<sup>63</sup> December 2023<sup>64</sup>), Cameroon (September 2024<sup>65</sup>), Djibouti (September 2024<sup>66</sup>), Egypt (January 2023,<sup>67</sup> June 2024,<sup>68</sup> October 2024,<sup>69</sup> April 2025<sup>70</sup>), Gambia (February 2024<sup>71</sup>), Mali (June 2025<sup>72</sup>), Niger (March 2025<sup>73</sup>), Tunisia (May 2024<sup>74</sup>), and Togo (September 2024<sup>75</sup>). China has also signed formal counterterrorism-related agreements with various African countries, including Nigeria (December 2020,<sup>76</sup> February 2025<sup>77</sup>), and, arguably, depending on interpretations,<sup>a</sup> Egypt (November 2024<sup>78</sup>). It has donated material to African states to combat terrorism in Benin (March 2023 and August 2024<sup>79</sup>), engaged in counterterrorism intelligence-sharing in Egypt,<sup>80</sup> and conducted joint counterterrorism drills with Tanzania and Mozambique in July and August 2024.

Outside of these bilateral counterterrorism agreements, China has also sought to inform the contours of the United Nations' means of addressing terrorism through its funding of U.N. counterterror mechanisms. China frequently espouses the need for greater counterterrorism cooperation for Africa within the United Nations<sup>81</sup> and led the creation of the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund,<sup>82</sup> which funds counterterrorism efforts and argues for more resourcing and empowerment of African international organizations, including the African Union, and regional economic communities, including the Economic Community of West African States.<sup>83</sup>

Elsewhere, China has sought multilateral CT influence in organizations including the BRICS, FOCAC, and China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (SASCF),<sup>84</sup> but especially in the context of the Chinese-led SCO, which has, at its core, a focus on regional counterterrorism cooperation. It has also offered its rhetorical support for African-led counterterrorism research and capacity-building through continued assistance to the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), based in Algiers.<sup>85</sup> Beyond the discussions that happen in and on the sidelines of these multilateral events, an imperative feature of its engagement in multilateral fora is China's infusion of its *modus operandi* of CT into global normative counterterrorism culture.

### ***Engagement in U.N. PKOs***

As a major player in funding and participation in U.N. peacekeeping missions, the majority of which are in Africa and involve some dimension of terrorism presence, China has quietly gained experience via U.N. peacekeeping operations (PKOs) while also burnishing its image as a responsible and altruistic rising 'great power.' Indeed, some analysts have described its peacekeeping efforts as "the most significant platform of Chinese security engagement in Africa."<sup>86</sup> Since 1990, China has deployed over 30,000 peacekeepers to Africa-based missions, equaling approximately 80 percent of its total global peacekeeping deployments.<sup>87</sup> Most notably, China once had a somewhat significant presence in the terrorism-centric

U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali (MINUSMA),<sup>88</sup> which had been interpreted by some observers as demonstrating "China's willingness to further engage in [counterterrorism] operations."<sup>89</sup> Indeed, underscoring the continued trope of Africa as a proving ground for China, one PLA officer described Africa as a "test lab" for China, where it can "get military experience without giving up on its non-interference principle,"<sup>90</sup> with all military activities occurring under the far more innocuous U.N. banner.<sup>91</sup> As some analysts have noted of China's one-time approach in Mali, "rather than [Beijing] contributing to a comprehensive CT strategy in Mali, participants found that 'keeping a low profile' has thus far been crucial in China's CT efforts."<sup>92</sup>

However, it is worth noting that while many observers view China's role in U.N. PKOs as helping bolster its overall security profile on the continent, as has been the case with other international actors in U.N. PKOs, China has also been barred from counterterrorism hotspots in Africa, especially Mali, thus limiting its influence via counterterrorism cooperation generally. For instance, according to the latest available numbers (as of May 31, 2025), of the 1,776 U.N. PKO troops China had deployed, the vast majority were part of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) (1,031 troops), Lebanon (UNIFIL) (475), and the disputed Abyei region between Sudan and South Sudan (UNISFA) (270), none of which features terrorism as a primary source of conflict. Instead, it has only 18 personnel—a combination of experts, police, and staff officers—in the two terrorism-centric African PKOs in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the DRC (MONUSCO).<sup>93</sup> Put otherwise, while China uses PKOs to learn about the African security environment, it is limited in how much these can be used to get an up-close look at the dynamics of terrorism, given the exodus of foreign actors from such missions today.

### ***Basing***

While China's military base in Djibouti is rarely considered for its potential counterterrorism-related role, it should not be overlooked. China opened its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017, promising that it was intended solely for economic purposes to support its growing international investment portfolio, asserting in 2010 that "the idea that the Chinese would establish overseas bases was groundless"<sup>94</sup> and the location in Djibouti was a "support facility intended to help logistics resupply for Chinese PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels."<sup>95</sup> Yet after opening, the rationale shifted to include roles in counterpiracy missions, assisting the PLA in its role in African PKOs, and humanitarian missions. It would soon also go from being referred to as a "support facility" to a "support base."<sup>96</sup> Between 2017 and 2020, the PLA was then shown to be conducting numerous live-fire exercises in Djibouti, and by 2020, the PRC announced that the PLANMC (People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps) had deployed a special operations force (SOF) unit to Djibouti.<sup>97</sup> Intuitively, a SOF presence was a logical next step for counterterrorism operations. Indeed, as recently as April 2025, Djibouti and China conducted joint counterterrorism exercises.<sup>98</sup>

Outside of Djibouti, China is looking to establish another military base, likely with a smaller footprint, likely in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>99</sup> Reports have emerged of its talks with Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.<sup>100</sup> While neither of those states faces counterterrorism crises, their authoritarian governance structures combined with their proximity to the terrorism-beset Sahel would lead Beijing to have an ideal launching pad for CT operations if it so chose. Moreover, in the Sahel, China has been shown to have some degree of

a In this instance, Egypt and China signed a security cooperation protocol, focusing on regional security and "crimes in all their forms," which include mutual security concerns that generally involve terrorism.

interest in the lesser-considered coastal West African states of Benin and Togo, which are currently battling to stem the tide of al-Qa`ida (JNIM)-related threats from entering their northern borders. In addition to documented discussions on counterterrorism in both countries,<sup>101</sup> China has been shown to have donated four Norinco PMR-50 reconnaissance drones to Benin (March 2023) to monitor terrorist groups' movements and four howitzers (August 2024) to help bolster the country's defenses against the groups.<sup>102</sup>

As concerns the search for new bases in proximity to the Sahel, some analysts have surmised that the PRC may actively look for African partners that allow multiple foreign partners to base there,<sup>103</sup> suggesting either that it seeks to partner with other international powers, or, conversely, that it seeks proximity to other international military presence to gather additional intelligence, which the FBI has emphasized is a concern.<sup>104</sup>

### ***Bilateral and Multilateral Training Drills***

Perhaps the most visible moves that China has taken to bolster its CT credentials in Africa as of late have been its leading of bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism drills between African countries, akin to what it has been doing in Central Asia for years. The banner events in this regard were the trilateral Peace-Unity Drills between China, Tanzania, and Mozambique. Running in July and August 2024 in Tanzania, the Peace-Unity Drills of 2024 were focused on joint counterterrorism military operations and enhancing participating countries' ability to conduct counterterrorism operations. The 2024 drills were the fourth iteration of China's Peace-Unity Drills with Tanzania, with previous iterations having been held in 2014, 2019/2020, and 2023.<sup>105</sup> Of note, the 2014<sup>106</sup> and 2023<sup>107</sup> iterations stated a focus on counterterrorism.<sup>b</sup>

The 2024 exercises were comprised of two phases of training. The first was the sea phase, which consisted of nine operations, including port joint defense; counterterrorism tactics; visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations; anti-terrorism and anti-piracy; and joint maritime patrols. Aside from the military operations, the PLA held open vessel days for the public in Tanzania to come aboard the ships, intending to promote its cultural diplomacy efforts and demonstrate its "blended approach" to military diplomacy.<sup>108</sup> The second, land phase, focused on counterterrorism. As one analyst describes:

*The land phase took place at the PRC-built combined training center in Mapinga, Tanzania. It centered on counterterrorism operations and was divided into four stages: joint specialty training ..., combined command, tactical training, and live-fire drills. During the joint specialty training component, units from the TPDF and the PLA 82<sup>nd</sup> Group Army participated in an equipment-instruction module. PLAA soldiers displayed and provided instruction on more than 23 different types of weapons and equipment, including small arms, micro unmanned aerial vehicles, and various engineering, reconnaissance, communication, and infantry vehicles. As part of this event, both sides trained together on counterterrorism concepts and modern battlefield tactics,*

*techniques, and procedures.*<sup>109</sup>

This phase consisted of exercises such as joint combat planning, infiltration and reconnaissance, stealth assault and rescue, and decapitation and arrest.<sup>110</sup> It also showcased a variety of light arms, many different infantry fighting vehicles, assault vehicles, command vehicles, communications vehicles, explosive ordnance disposal vehicles, and drones.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, the drills, which were hailed as representing a "significant increase in scope and scale" of Chinese engagement,<sup>112</sup> are perhaps the clearest signal yet of China's bid to establish itself as a CT player in Africa.

Finally, it is worth stating that the two partner countries of choice—Tanzania and Mozambique—were reasonable ones. With shared socialist and communist affinities, Tanzania has been one of China's most important African military allies, having been a training partner with China in three other iterations of the drills, as described above. In an upcoming study from the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office, China receives a relatively rare "high" degree of military influence in Tanzania.<sup>113</sup> For its part, Mozambique, Tanzania's resource-rich but terrorism-troubled southern neighbor, is an intuitive collaborator. With an enduring but contained threat of terrorism in Mozambique from the Islamic State-affiliated Al-Sunnah (also known as Islamic State-Central African Province - Mozambique, or ISCAP-M), Mozambique could be an ideal laboratory for China to test out counterterrorism tactics in a generally under-considered theater.

### ***Police Training***

Another primary means by which China is inserting itself into the African CT space is via police training, which Beijing uses as yet another means to avoid being seen as overly aggressive instead of more traditional military training. As Paul Nantulya has described, China has taken a wide-ranging interest in training African police. Informed by China's understanding of the nature of terrorism and the aforementioned "Three Evils," China's police training in African states is similarly based on these ideals: curbing "terrorism," separatism, and religious extremism.<sup>114</sup> But indeed, more than merely aligning on understandings of the *nature of terrorism*, China's inroads in African CT are abetted by the similar *structures* that mark the role of police in fighting counterterrorism. As Nantulya describes:

*African police entities are centralized under the executive and overseen by an interior, police, or public security minister like in China. Most African police are also part of the national security architecture and tend to be highly militarized in their basic organization, ranking system, and work methods. Many African police jurisdictions, furthermore, are organized into "commands," and it is common for police to deploy into the military and vice versa.*<sup>115</sup>

Indeed, between 2018 and 2021, some 2,000 African police received Chinese training from across 21 police academies associated with China's Ministry of Public Security.<sup>116</sup>

### ***Intelligence and Surveillance***

One of the hallmarks of China's domestic counterterrorism strategies in Xianjing has been its focus on surveillance and monitoring of Uyghur and other populations. Another understudied phenomenon of China's engagement in African CT relates to its provision of similar surveillance techniques to African states. Most notably, China's eagerness to provide "Smart City" technology to African states<sup>117</sup>—which improves urban security

<sup>b</sup> Open-source research did not reveal a CT focus for the 2019/2020 "Sincere Partners" exercise. Instead, it is referred to as an event to upgrade military capabilities and build on China and Tanzania's partnership. See Chen Lufan, "China, Tanzania conclude 'Sincere Partners 2019' joint military training," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, January 21, 2020.

## **“A primary boon for China in African CT is that it does not have the same burden of history as other actors: It has only a minimal reputation as a security actor on the continent, and most of that reputation is generally positive and uncontroversial.”**

and efficiency, but which can also be used to closely track citizen movement—speaks to its future CT ethos. For instance, reports have emerged of African governments using Chinese technologies specifically to surveil dissenters,<sup>118</sup> track political opponents, and suppress protests, particularly in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zambia.<sup>119</sup> China has elsewhere been shown to have controversially engaged in intelligence-sharing with Egypt, including Chinese intelligence officers collaborating with the Egyptian state to interrogate Chinese students at an Egyptian prison in 2022.<sup>120</sup> More broadly, China’s outsized role in African information and communications technology (ICT) namely through its state-owned Huawei telecommunications company, is consistently one of the primary instruments that this author and colleagues have found that China uses to exert military influence in Africa.<sup>121</sup> On the use of smart technologies for CT purposes explicitly, in July 2021, China’s EXIM bank launched the \$94 million “Smart Burkina Faso” project (in conjunction with Huawei Technologies and China Communications Construction Group Co. Ltd.,) to install a 650km fiber optic network and 150km metro access network in the country,<sup>122</sup> which also included the installation of around 900 surveillance cameras to curb urban crime and, importantly, improve counterterrorism efforts.<sup>123</sup>

### ***Economic Development***

Finally, while not traditionally conceived of as a counterterrorism measure, for Beijing, its broader ethos of prioritizing economic development is part and parcel of a bid to reduce terrorist threats. Conceptually, China’s view of terrorism is that it is undergirded by poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>124</sup> As a result, one of Beijing’s underlying approaches to counter radicalization and deradicalization<sup>125</sup> is economic development.<sup>126</sup> Remarks in November 2022 from China’s Ambassador, Xhang Jun, at a U.N. Security Council High-Level meeting on counterterrorism in Africa underscore this vision:

*We should address both the symptoms and the root causes of terrorism. Military and security means alone cannot fully and completely eliminate the threats of terrorism. We must focus on the reality on the ground in Africa, with a view [to] adopting a systematic governance approach to implement integrated measures. The Sahel and the Lake Chad region are highly representative. The local economies [are] comparatively underdeveloped, and the people there have difficulties in making [a] living. So terrorist forces take advantage of the situation, and target unemployed poor youth from underprivileged background[s] for recruitment. The international community should take measures to support Africa’s development with a greater*

*sense of urgency. The UN should listen to Africa and give more prominence to the importance of the development agenda, and raise favorable environment to enable Africa’s development.*<sup>127</sup>

Notably, in the speech above, Ambassador Jun made clear that China views the antidote to the rise of African terrorism as economic development, which China can provide via the BRI.<sup>128</sup> In practice, China has claimed that it would not levy tariffs on most incoming goods from the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), like Burkina Faso, linking the tariff reduction to combating terrorism.<sup>129</sup> China would make similar linkages in a March 2023 speech at the United Nations.<sup>130</sup>

### **Part III: Examining Rationales for Chinese Interest in African CT**

Having understood the evolution of how China thinks about CT and the real-world instances of how it is increasingly engaging in African CT, the question bears asking: What rationales undergird China’s newfound interest in African counterterrorism efforts?

At its core—and despite varying other proffered rationales such as protection of investments and citizens on the continent<sup>c</sup>—China’s burgeoning new engagement in African CT is primarily about diversifying pathways to influence in Africa. To date, China’s means to gain influence in Africa have been heavily economically focused. Indeed, even among the tools that it could use to gain *military* influence, data from the M-DIME Research Project, which this author co-leads, underscores China’s lopsided emphasis on using economic (“E”) tools in attempts to gain military influence in third-party states (through investment in strategic minerals and materials, strategic infrastructure development, and foreign military sales). In contrast, by far, this research shows that China’s least-used tools of military influence are the most typically military (“M”) tools, (such as formal defense treaties and joint bilateral and multilateral training exercises.) Having broadly cornered the market on external economic influence, Beijing is now seeking new pathways to cement its presence via more traditional, though tempered, military means.

However, beyond the need to diversify its means of influence in Africa, other rationales are likely at play. First, and related to the above, one can understand China’s push for CT influence through the lens of its geopolitical rise and its desire to see itself serve as an alternative pole of power in the international security sphere. As articulated in the GSI, China is explicitly trying to carve out a leadership role for itself in the realm of international security. To that end, it could well be the case that, as an aspiring global power, it views itself as being unable to continue to effectively sit on the sidelines on one of the thorniest international security issues—African terrorism—if it truly wants to assert itself as a global security leader. In other words, while its demure approach to engagement in lower-level African security has worked to this point, Beijing may now view it as necessary to take bolder action than it has to date in order to show that it is truly listening to African concerns and working in earnest to address them. Simultaneously, a primary boon for China in African CT is that it does not have the same burden of history as other actors: It has only a minimal

c Yet, it should not be overlooked that China does have real economic concerns: Its workers and projects are genuinely vulnerable to certain violent African non-state actors, though in no place is the threat so significant that national-level counterterrorism engagement would be imperative.



reputation as a security actor on the continent, and most of that reputation is generally positive and uncontroversial.

Second, one might understand China's desire for African CT engagement through a military planning lens. China, considering an invasion of Taiwan, needs quick, on-the-ground combat experience, and Africa's conflict-prone pockets offer relatively low-stakes training grounds. Indeed, as China has set its sights on a potential invasion of Taiwan by 2027 or 2030,<sup>131</sup> it has notably little real-world combat experience outside of the Indo-Pacific. As Beijing considers its capacity to operate kinetically in the future, having experience is important. As noted earlier, observers have already pointed to the fact that Africa has long served as a sort of Chinese military laboratory,<sup>132</sup> with some suggesting that China's deployments in U.N. peacekeeping missions as well as its increased air drills with Egypt<sup>133</sup> serve as pathways for it to gain experience in new theaters.

Third, China might also be compelled to enter the African CT fight as a matter of opportunistic timing. A confluence of geopolitical realities may be signaling to Beijing that the time is ripe for new action. As terrorism rises to unprecedented levels in the Sahel and continues strong elsewhere,<sup>134</sup> it is also the case that the stalwart external actors assisting African countries in their counterterrorism efforts—the United Nations, France, the United States, and, newly, even Russia—are now being ousted. While the challenges of African counterterrorism lamentably grow by the day, especially related to the increased movement of actors associated with JNIM into coastal and western West Africa, any continuity of external actor involvement to help aid in CT efforts is in chaos. Therefore, China may have strategic calculations related to timing. Indeed, as AFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley said in May 2025 of China's military presence in Africa in response to the current moment of U.S. retrenchment: "They're stepping it up and trying to replicate every type of thing, whether it be advise-and-assist type of training and specialized military domains, or putting on exercises like they did in the fall."<sup>135</sup> Simultaneously, Langley has also implored allied partner nations to help fill in the gaps the United States has left.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, as this author has argued elsewhere, China, not Russia, is the next greatest military partner likely to threaten U.S. presence in Africa.<sup>137</sup>

#### Part IV: Challenges for Chinese Engagement in African CT

Despite some of the reasons presented above that indicate the rationality of a more forceful Chinese entrance into African CT, many challenges remain. First, and most broadly, is the question of just how deeply China seeks to wade into the fraught waters of African counterterrorism in the pursuit of an alternate, non-economic avenue of influence. With truly deep engagement, at some point China will be forced to reconcile its cautious approach with the brutal realities and difficult decisions incumbent in the African terrorism space. Indeed, China has historically shown clear reluctance for deep kinetic CT engagement in other partner nations, even when its interests are directly affected. For instance, in Pakistan, where Chinese nationals working as part of China's BRI have been attacked and killed in sundry instances, China has shown an unwillingness for a direct kinetic response, akin to its ethos in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>138</sup> Instead, Beijing has responded by paying ransoms to violent non-state actors; pressuring leaders to provide better security; and offering surveillance technology.<sup>139</sup> It thus remains a question as to how it would prove itself a forceful, prevalent player while also remaining cautious and non-

**"It thus remains a question as to how [China] would prove itself a forceful, prevalent player while also remaining cautious and non-controversial: Its risk-averse, economic-first approach to CT may well prove to be too meager—all carrot and no stick—to deal with the brutality of the current African terrorism scene. At a certain point, China will likely have to cross a perilous bridge: take bolder, riskier, and more muscular and militarized approaches to CT, or stay the course, be perceived as weak, and ultimately, likely be ineffective."**

controversial: Its risk-averse, economic-first approach to CT may well prove to be too meager—all carrot and no stick—to deal with the brutality of the current African terrorism scene. At a certain point, China will likely have to cross a perilous bridge: take bolder, riskier, and more muscular and militarized approaches to CT, or stay the course, be perceived as weak, and ultimately, likely be ineffective.

Beyond the *depth* of engagement, there is also the question of the *breadth* of engagement: Would China be willing to take on a major degree of responsibility for a given operational environment—akin to the United States in Somalia or France in the Sahel—or would it seek to be a more present partner among many different theaters? To date, it has shown little deep commitment to any particular African country or theater beset by terrorism.

Second, even if China does decide that it seeks much deeper and broader engagement in Africa, does China have a model of CT that could actually be effective, and what exactly would be its novel value proposition for African states? To be clear, despite its engagement in training, in reality, China has limited experience in CT outside its borders. To the extent that China has any real background in CT, it is in dealing with the Uyghur minority, both within its own borders and in neighboring states. It has a smattering of engagement in the proximity of terrorism in U.N. peacekeeping missions in Mali, for instance. Apart from that, it has scarce real-world CT experience akin to that of the United States, France, or Russia. That said, what seems to be the most likely case scenario is that if China does become involved in African CT, there will somehow be an "economics-first" approach, akin to what it has done elsewhere in its engagement in African security.

Third, if China does become involved in African CT, will there be a China-Russia clash in terms of CT? An emerging organizing principle of the analysis of contemporary geopolitics focuses on the analytical unit of the so-called CRINK alliance, between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. At its core, this nominal alliance is worrisome precisely because it puts the four major U.S. state adversaries in a cooperative relationship with one another. While



some commentators have referred to the CRINK Alliance as a new “axis of disorder,” “Axis of Evil 2.0,” “axis of autocracy,” “unholy alliance,” or even “Legion of Doom,”<sup>140</sup> others have emphasized the tenuousness of the alliance,<sup>141</sup> underscoring that, depending on the issue area, cooperation between the countries constitutes a convenience of interests rather than abiding alignment of priorities.<sup>142</sup> Thus, in African CT, where Russia has become the influencer *du jour* in places such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, its agenda could theoretically come into conflict with that of China. However, despite that potential scenario, in the work that this author and colleagues have undertaken investigating Chinese and Russian military influence globally via the M-DIME Research Project, there is no clear evidence of any real discord or competition between China and Russia in the military or counterterrorism space. This may be a non-issue.

Fourth, will China engage with pariah countries on CT? One of the most vexing counterterrorism issues in Africa at the moment is the fact that the most terrorism-afflicted countries, in the Sahel, are also run by a consortium of antagonistic military juntas. These juntas, operating under the aegis of the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES), have ousted the United Nations, France, and the United States, and broadly welcomed in Russia and the Wagner Group/Africa Corps as replacements, to poor results for civilians and overall security. One challenge that China would face if it were to become more deeply involved in African CT would be just how far, if at all, it would engage with these pariah regimes. China has thus far played a cautious, even-handed, non-controversial security role on the continent. If it were to engage in CT, at least in a serious way, it would have to make a hard choice: Engage with these pariah regimes and go after terrorism in a serious way, or skirt collaboration and thus operate on the margins of the continent's real security problems. If history is any guide, this might not be as fraught a prospect as it might seem. Historically, China has proven to be agnostic to state regime; intuitively, it has little desire or space to critique autocrats. Indeed, in the aftermath of Western withdrawals of Sahelian states of late, China has been quick to step in, appointing its first defense attaché to Niger in February 2025.<sup>143</sup>

## Conclusion and Implications

This article has shown that despite its historically overwhelming focus on economic influence, China is quietly and increasingly pursuing a role as the primary external security actor in Africa, including in the often-fraught space of counterterrorism assistance. But what are the potential impacts of this push for actors outside China?

For African citizens and states, the impact of China's CT push remains unclear. Certain observers have suggested that the PRC's expanding military presence in Africa more generally risks “negatively affecting African nations' sovereignty by weakening areas of governance, human rights, and regional cooperation.”<sup>144</sup> However, China's CT approach has thus far exhibited none of the more worrisome dimensions of Russia's approach and could indeed accrue benefits for African citizens at risk of violence. A more responsible, less-militarized Chinese presence may well serve to offer increased protection to African citizens.

Globally, perhaps one of the greatest impacts of China's push to

become a major CT player in Africa is that Beijing will increasingly dictate how the world conceptualizes the appropriateness of various CT paradigms and actions. In line with the broader ethos of the GSI, China is solidifying an alternative paradigm for 21st-century global security relations to replace the ever-sclerotic post-WWII order once led by the United States and NATO allies. Though its engagements in African CT are but a microcosm of this push, China's desire for an all-encompassing approach to the use of whole-of-state tools to shape the civilian environment for China's overall national interests is what Paul Nantulya describes as “military political work” (*jundui zhengzhi gongzuo*).<sup>145</sup> While he investigates this phenomenon through China's provision of professional military education, it is clear enough that this strategy pervades every Chinese interaction, including in international fora.

For the United States, China's rise as an aspiring counterterrorism force in Africa should cause concern.<sup>146</sup> China is the primary U.S. military pacing threat,<sup>147</sup> largest economic global competitor, and the state most likely to unseat the United States from its role as the global leader. China's rise in African CT could allow it to replace the United States as a preferred security partner; to minimize U.S. access to markets; and more broadly chip away at the global security posture and normative agenda of the United States.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, an increased Chinese presence in African CT has the potential to serve as a logical inroads for China to expand the activities at its current base in Djibouti; to make the case further for the base it is ostensibly pursuing in Equatorial Guinea or Gabon; or to compel terrorism-afflicted states, especially in the Sahel, that they should allow Beijing to open a base there. More generally, for better or worse,<sup>149</sup> one of the primary ways that the United States has retained some degree of military influence in Africa over the past two decades has been via counterterrorism assistance. A deeper Chinese CT presence in Africa could fundamentally undermine U.S. security relationships on the continent.

While it is clearly the case that the United States should be concerned since this Chinese push is indicative of its pursuit of global ambitions,<sup>150</sup> Washington's own self-retrenchment from international affairs, especially in Africa, is serving to facilitate Beijing's ambitions of influence. Washington cannot have it both ways. It cannot both seek to retrench from Africa militarily and diplomatically but also openly fret about losing influence to China globally. Either the United States needs to commit to a serious and sustained military and counterterrorism assistance presence or make peace with the fact that it is ceding counterterrorism influence to China in Africa, and pursue other means of African alliance building. The latter may not be a bad option.

To conclude, what is perhaps the most interesting phenomenon to observe at the current moment is the flip-flopping of the historical approaches to African counterterrorism: China, historically the economic juggernaut, is now trying to get into CT, while the United States, historically the CT-first external power, is now taking an economics-first approach. Meanwhile, Russia, which had been the CT player *du jour*, is now on the outs, as is France, all while Turkey surges in its own efforts. Whether China will succeed—whatever ‘success’ looks like—in establishing itself in African counterterrorism, a historical folly for external powers, remains to be seen. **CTC**

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