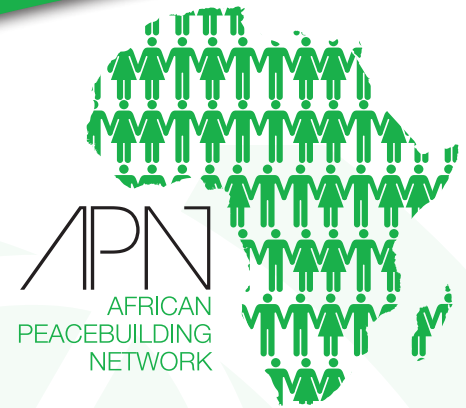




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The African Union's Peace and Security Partnership with China

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The AU and China should strengthen** their partnership in areas of soft skills.
- **The AU should consolidate** its comparative advantage in human and natural resources and strategic influence.
- **African governments should actively promote** the study of Chinese history, politics, economics, and international relations.
- **African governments, RECs, and the AU should harmonize** their strategies of engagement with and policies towards China.

The China-African Union (AU) peace and security partnership can be positively harnessed in support of peacebuilding processes on the continent. This policy brief urges African policymakers to look beyond the familiar narratives of Sino-African relations as “resource diplomacy.” It notes some of the challenges facing China’s engagement with peace and security issues in Africa, and considers several options for addressing them. The brief also offers recommendations to the AU and African sub-regional organizations on how to optimize the opportunities presented by China’s engagement with Africa to consolidate sustainable peace on the continent.

CHINA: FROM NON-INTERVENTION TO ENGAGEMENT

China has recently become Africa’s leading partner in the areas of trade, investment, and development.¹ Apart from bilateral relations with African states, China partners with regional and sub-regional organizations on a growing number of issues. Of note in this burgeoning relationship is the partnership between China and the AU in the areas of peace and security.² China’s involvement in peace and security initiatives on the continent marks a departure from the country’s non-interventionist foreign policy towards more active engagement.

To better grasp the policy change, it is useful to situate Beijing’s contemporary engagement in Africa in historical perspective. Over the past fifty years, the Sino-African partnership has passed through different phases of ideological, diplomatic, and economic relations. According to an AU official, China was one of Africa’s allies during the era of liberation movements and decolonization, and the current partnership can be seen as a continuation of the past. “The partnership is reciprocal,” asserted the official, reiterating the role some African countries played in lobbying for the People’s Republic of China to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

¹ Agnes Ngoma Leslie, “China-Africa Relations: Political and Economic Engagement and Media Strategies,” *African Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 3-4 (2016): 1–6.

² “AU, China Vow to Take Bilateral Ties to New Height,” *Xinhua*, May 4, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/04/c_135332004.htm.

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Additionally, this seems to have leveraged China to represent itself as a true partner of the continent (without the baggage of a colonial legacy in Africa). With China emerging as a global economic power and a major actor on the world stage, Africa has become a “new frontier” for Beijing to exercise soft, hard, and “smart” power. According to some commentators, China has exercised soft power (the practice of convincing other actors to follow its footsteps in their economic policies, trade relations, investments, etc.) as a strategy to counter American/Western hegemony and to extend its “Beijing model” of development.³

Nevertheless, China has recently expanded its engagement in Africa to include support for peacekeeping operations, which has marked a radical policy shift whereby Beijing is exercising a form of hard power (the practice of using military and/or economic incentives and strength to influence other actors). The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 set the stage for consolidating China’s influence in Africa. In 2006, China identified four major areas of engagement in China-Africa peace and security cooperation: military cooperation, conflict settlement and peacekeeping operations, judicial and police cooperation, and non-traditional security cooperation.⁴ In terms of financial support, President Xi announced in 2015 that China would provide USD 100 million to the AU to support the building and operation of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC).⁵

Apart from direct financial assistance, China also provides technical support, capacity-building training, and technologies to combat piracy, terrorism, and instability, and to better equip African organizations to respond to security challenges. China specifically supports the building of Africa’s continental and regional peace and security architecture, including key institutions like the AU’s Peace and Security Council (PSC) and regional Peace Support Operations (PSOs), and finances AU peacekeeping missions in African countries such as Somalia and Sudan. It has also provided equipment to regional economic communities (RECs), particularly ECOWAS, for the establishment of a logistics base. Additionally, China has sent personnel to peacekeeping operations in over a dozen African countries over the past two decades.⁶ While all of these efforts are laudable, it is important to place China’s increasing engagement in peacekeeping missions in Africa within a framework that allows for the exploration of how best to enhance African peacebuilding policies.

³ Shogo Suzuki, “Chinese Soft Power, Insecurity Studies, Myopia and Fantasy,” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2009): 779–793.

⁴ Jianwei Wang and Jing Zou, “China Goes to Africa: A Strategic Move?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 90 (2014): 1113–1132.

⁵ “Chinese President Pledges Support for UN Peacekeeping,” *Xinhua*, September 29, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/29/c_134671138.htm.

⁶ Jianwei Wang and Jing Zou, “China Goes to Africa: A Strategic Move?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 90 (2014): 1113–1132.

CHALLENGES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

China uses its engagement with international organizations as a gateway to pursue its interests globally. Although it might give African countries and intergovernmental bodies the opportunity to expand their options and experiment with the “Beijing model” of development and peace and security approaches, there is no guarantee that this new chapter in relations will be fully harnessed to the advantage of Africa’s economic, political, and security interests in the medium to long-term. It should also be noted that Beijing’s “new frontiers” of diplomacy are not without challenges. First and foremost, despite its self-representation as a non-colonizing and true partner, some critics are of the view that China remains another actor in the scramble for African resources and portray its peacekeeping missions as part of a larger strategy to establish a stronger foothold on the continent. Second, China’s increased trade with and involvement in Africa poses a diplomatic and strategic threat to Western powers and may contribute to a new rivalry over Africa among competing global powers. Third, observers caution that the new engagement may lead to the reproduction or exacerbation of Africa’s reliance on external powers, rather than the use of internal solutions and resources with which to resolve its own challenges.

In conclusion, the emerging partnership between China and Africa may be a positive and welcome development, but the long-term success of this will depend on both China’s continued engagement with the AU, African RECs, and governments, as well as the capacity of African leaders and organizations to engage an emerging global power on terms that favor the continent’s priorities and interests.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To advance this partnership in ways that serve the shared interests of Africa and China in relation to African peace and security, it is suggested that:

- The AU and China strengthen their partnership in areas of soft skills, including supporting knowledge production, developing skills, and transferring technology in the fields of African peace and security;
- The AU consolidate its strengths and comparative advantage in the areas of human and natural resources and strategic influence, and pragmatically leverage the partnership with China to address the challenges facing the continent in the areas of security, economic development, and infrastructure;
- African governments actively promote the study of Chinese history, politics, economics, and international relations by students, media practitioners, and policymakers; and,
- African governments, RECs, and the AU harmonize their strategies of engagement with and policies towards China to promote the continent’s long-term interests in ways that ensure equity, stability, and sustainability.