

Evolving Dynamics of China-Africa Strategic Ties

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Three recent developments in the realm of China-Africa relations merit attention. First, the 'Vision and Action Plan on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road'¹, released in March 2015 by National Development and Reform Commission of People's Republic of China (PRC), for the first time, confirmed Africa's role in the Chinese flagship 'One Belt One Road' initiative (OBOR). Second, after carrying out the successful Yemen evacuation mission via Djibouti, China not only declared 'the birth of its truly global Chinese Navy'², but also announced in its 2014 Defence White Paper³ that 'offshore waters defence and open seas protection' (i.e. protection of China's overseas interests, such as supply of energy and resources, strategic sea lanes, assets/investments as well as overseas population) will now be the key focus of PLA Navy (PLAN). Third, amidst rising tension with the U.S. and its other neighbours in the South China Sea over reclamation of islands issue, there were reports of China having talks with the Republic of Djibouti to establish a military base in that country⁴.

Although Africa's role in the first two cases has generated limited response, the third development has conspicuously raised eyebrows worldwide. It further fanned the already prevalent speculation⁵ over China's prospective overseas military base, which has been doing round among the strategic community since the development of the theory of 'string of pearls' in 2005. In December 2011, media reports surfaced about China building its first military base at Seychelles; then in March 2013, when Chinese president Xi Jinping visited Tanzania and signed a US\$10 billion deal to develop a port near the capital Dar-es-Salaam, the debate over Chinese military base in East Africa

received fresh impetus. Last year, the Namibian Times stirred up fresh controversy when it reported on China's plan to build 18 military naval bases (including one at Walvis Bay, Namibia). Later that year, the deployment of Chinese submarine in the Indian Ocean for an anti-piracy mission displayed China's growing maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). However, in all these cases the Chinese government was prompt to deny reports and reiterated its peaceful posture. However, this time, in a marked difference from its earlier stands, China neither confirmed nor denied the overseas base report, which is mostly perceived as a subtle affirmation from the Chinese.

Some scholars interpreted this development as the first explicit sign of China exerting its military muscle, its 'peaceful rise' façade lying in tatters, and as has been always feared, China is finally "showing its claws"⁶. They argued that China's maritime strategy or its proposals of reviving historic Silk Roads might not be purely economic in nature, rather it is designed to disguise military bases across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, all the way to Africa. Others, however, defended that a military base does not necessarily mean Beijing is all set to challenge the regional security heavy-weights, rather it is a part of its geo-economic strategy aimed at protecting its own overseas commercial interests and its overseas population while also contributing for global public good⁷.

Whatever be the case, these developments taken together, do indicate an evolving trend -- that of Africa's rising strategic significance in Chinese strategic calculus.

Pre-eminence of Economics

China-Africa relationship is mostly analysed from the economic prism. China has been Africa's largest trading partner for more than five consecutive years now and the bilateral trade has exceeded U.S. \$ 200 billion, which is also pegged to reach the U.S. \$ 400 billion mark by 2020⁸. China is one of the key investors in Africa whose cumulative investment exceeds \$ 70 billion⁹ in certain estimates and accounts for 16.3 percent of Africa's total trade¹⁰. China is also one of the biggest humanitarian aid provider to the African nations. From 2010 to 2012, 51.8 percent of its total 89.34 billion yuan provided in humanitarian assistance went to the continent¹¹. As a part of its investment and development assistance, China claims to have completed 1,046 projects in Africa, built

2,233 km of railways and 3,530 km of roads.¹² The proposed 1,402 km coastal railway in Nigeria (China's largest overseas project so far), the ongoing Mombasa-Nairobi railway in Kenya and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti rail projects in East Africa are some of its high profile investments in the continent¹³. In return, Africa caters to China's mounting energy needs and requirements for new markets. The continent is China's second largest source of crude oil, making for 23 per cent¹⁴ of China's crude import. Clearly, the transactional nature of China-Africa relationship has gained considerable prominence and has invited global attention.

China too has played an important role in creating this cliché of 'economics being the be all and end all of China-Africa ties'. Some Chinese scholars project the idea that China's Africa policy is not free from flaws and more often than not, "its commercial interests overtake and even undercut its other national interests"¹⁵. They argue that in spite of the growing trade between the two sides, Africa actually forms a very small part of China's overall foreign trade (2.2 per cent of its overall outbound foreign direct investment (OFDI) in 2011¹⁶). Since several African nations enjoy good relations with China and do not have any major dispute or conflict of interest with the Chinese counterpart, the continent "figures relatively low in Chinese foreign policy priorities". As a result, China fundamentally lacks a comprehensive Africa strategy and is often sporadically driven by narrow commercial interests¹⁷.

However, the counter-argument in this context is that Africa is right at the centre of China's geo-economics driven foreign policy,¹⁸ and China is one of the most serious players in Africa with the ultimate objective of strengthening its foothold in the continent. In that case it appears that China has tactically hyped up the economic and other softer aspects of China-Africa relations while playing down the strategic/military part, given the global outcry in earlier years over China's supply of weapons to pariah states in the continent like Sudan and Zimbabwe, and Chinese weapons being used by non-state actors while committing heinous crimes against humanity¹⁹. Accordingly, no foreign visits by Chinese or African leaders or foreign ministers in recent past, not even the forum for Africa-China cooperation which is portrayed as the cornerstone of the China-Africa relations ever mention about existing/growing strategic/military relations between Africa and China.

Underlying Rationale

History is witness that almost all external powers who vied for Africa's mineral wealth to support their own industrial growth, had to back up their economic engagements with military might, either to suppress local resistance or to drive away imperialist competitors. Scholars argue that China is merely following the footsteps of its predecessors²⁰. They say that today China has reached a stage of economic development, which requires relentless supplies of African raw materials. But competition from other players and lack of political stability in the continent render the Chinese insecure and vulnerable, which in turn, is leading to the increasing presence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Africa.

The first and most important reason behind China's intensifying security ties with the African nations is the serious security threats faced by Chinese nationals and Chinese investments in the continent. As is well known, Chinese mining activities have often fallen victim to endemic instability and violence in partner states. Since 2004, several Chinese companies have ended up at the centre of internal conflicts; violent protests, revoking of contracts on charges of corruption, nepotism, attacks on oil industry targets, kidnapping, killing of Chinese workers, racial riots, have been a common phenomenon. Given the security threat to Chinese investment and assets abroad, a section of Chinese scholars have urged the government not to push overseas investments blindly and provide local awareness to Chinese companies²¹.

On the other hand, China's interest of safeguarding its own investments and people in the continent converges well with the interest of several African nations who expect and insist on receiving security assistance from the Chinese side in maintaining peace and stability in the continent²². For instance, Chad in 2007 and Ethiopia in 2006²³ had urged Chinese government's involvement to get involved in African internal politics and pressurise governments like Sudan or Somalia, which are believed to be close to China, to end violence and maintain stability. Also, many African governments look up to China for supply of military equipment, weapons, and training. While some seek Chinese assistance to supplement what they acquire from the Western world and other key partners, others (on whom the West has imposed sanctions) have little option but to rest heavily on Chinese military supply.

The third reason is China's growing concern over other major powers' renewed thrust on the continent. The U.S. which has the biggest presence in Africa as compared to others, established the Africa Command (AFRICOM), in 2006, and increased its military presence from 220 personnel to nearly 1,000 between 2000-2006. AFRICOM officially maintains 2,000 military and civilian personnel in about 38 African countries, although the number often surges to 5,000 or more during certain operations and training missions²⁴. To further build on President Obama's commitment to Africa during his trip in the summer of 2013, the U.S. organized the first ever U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit last year and reiterated its renewed focus on the continent²⁵. Not only the U.S., other countries too have lately shown interest in renewing their ties with the African leaders. The EU-Africa Summit in Brussels in April 2014²⁶ is yet another example. India too intended to organize the third India-Africa Summit in 2014 but the programme had to be postponed due to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa²⁷ and has been rescheduled for October 2015.

Lastly; China is well aware of its own shortcomings vis-à-vis its potential competitors in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which it defines as a part of its geostrategic frontiers. As has been noted by scholars²⁸, being a predominantly export-led economy, China is overly dependent on the IOR for supply and transit of natural resources. However, geographically it is severely constrained to have direct access to the Indian Ocean. Making matters worse, the PLA Navy does not have sufficient experience and capability to undertake sustained operation in the region. As a result, warming up strategic ties with Indian Ocean littorals and along the African coast appears to be one of the top most priorities for the Chinese.

A Different Approach

Given the lack of transparency, the extent of China-Africa military tie remains difficult to ascertain. However, existing literature highlight that China's bilateral military relations with Africa remains modest, as compared to its military engagement with other nations. In fact, increasing number of Chinese trade officers posted in African countries far outweigh its military presence in the continent. China does provide military aid to particular African nations, but not necessarily they are driven by a

coherent strategy aimed at protecting its security interests. Deployment of troops, training friendly armed forces etc. are also not of alarming magnitude²⁹.

However, it is not the hard military presence that has been notably intensified; rather China's changed stand is more pronounced in the realm of soft military presence in Africa. Under the banner of peace and development, the non-military functions of the PLA Navy have expanded manifold. Anti-piracy operations, relief and rescue, naval diplomacy- all have become important functions of the PLA Navy in recent years. "Building up soft military control in distant places and establishing logistical supporting sites are currently the top priorities of Chinese military diplomacy", notes some government funded think tanks in China³⁰. China's soft military presence in Africa can be broadly classified under three categories.

PLA Navy's Anti-Piracy Mission

Since 2008, Chinese taskforces have maintained a good record in anti-piracy missions, dispatched 20 naval escort fleets to the Gulf of Aden and the Somali waters. It has carried out escort missions for more than 5,800 merchant ships in 798 batches in the Gulf of Aden and in the waters along the Somali coast³¹. It also played an active role in important global emergencies such as the evacuation of Chinese personnel in Libya, providing maritime escort for foreign ships and ships for the World Food Programme, and for transportation of Syrian chemical weapons, in addition to the recent Yemen evacuation³². In 2014, the PLA Navy took its first round tour of Africa and made maiden port calls in Tunisia, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola, Namibia³³.

Chinese Peacekeeping Forces in Africa

From dispatching just five military observers for UN peacekeeping operation in 1990, China is now the largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping missions among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council with around 2,720 peacekeepers, deployed at different peacekeeping missions. In Africa, it has dispatched peacekeepers in various countries like Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Western Sahara. As per available literature, of the total number of Chinese peacekeepers deployed worldwide, a majority (around 1,622) is in Africa³⁴.

Also, until recently, Chinese contribution to the UN Missions largely constituted ‘non-combatant’ peacekeepers such as military observers, civilian police or infrastructure, medical, logistical or transport support teams. However, in 2014, China, for the first time, sent a 700-strong organic infantry battalion for peacekeeping mission in South Sudan³⁵.

PLA Navy’s Overseas Access Facilities

Partly due to compulsions of naval force sustenance during anti-piracy missions, and also to hedge its interests in a crisis situation³⁶, PLAN intends to build up several “technical service halts” or replenishment facilities, if not elaborate military bases, in Africa and the Gulf region. These halts, according to some Chinese scholars, are likely to be categorized into three types. The first kind is meant for fuel and material resupply, which is expected to be located in the ports of Djibouti, Aden, Jeddah, and Salalah. Others are meant for short term berthing and fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft take-off and landing, likely to be located in Seychelles. The third kind is based on long-term agreement with the host nation and is meant for a complete recharge/ rest of weaponry and providing access to large ship repair centres. Pakistan is presumed to be the ideal place for such a stop.³⁷.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that despite the rising strategic importance of Africa, China, so far, has not attempted to safeguard its interest in the continent by projecting hard military power. Instead, it has preferred intensifying its soft military influence over the continent by joining collective security mechanisms within the framework of the UN and African regional organisations. However, given its growing economic/ military capability and rising global stature, there lies a real possibility that in future China may be tempted to abandon its collective security strategy in Africa and pursue a more unilaterally driven assertive security policy marked by “politico-military interventions” and “military coercions”. It is also not guaranteed that China will not use its growing “soft control” on the continent for military mapping and intelligence gathering against nations, which it considers to be its adversaries.

However, any such unilaterally driven stringent security policy will upset the prevailing power equilibrium and will draw China into yet another round of animosity with the traditional powers of the region. It is unlikely that China, which is already at the centre of an international embroilment in the Western Pacific, will like to pick yet another fight in the region which it considers to be not just its extended neighbourhood but also the lifeline for its economy. On the other hand, its cooperative security strategy, based on amity and cooperation, has served it well, not just in securing the safety of its long supply lines, but also in creating much goodwill and favourable image for China within the international community. It will be interesting to see how Beijing weighs the situation in Africa in the future.

Notes

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