

# China's Strategic Involvement in Africa and its Regional Implications (1949-2022)

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## Abstract

China's strategic involvement in the African region is multi-faceted as it seeks to bolster economic, political, and security ties. Chinese security and political engagement with African countries are driven by its interest in stimulating its economic rise. This research is qualitative and exploratory in nature and utilizes the concept of strategic culture to analyze the motivations behind Beijing's interests and behavior in the African continent. Confucian-Mencian and Parabellum form two major strands of Chinese Strategic Culture, making it a unique *Cult of Defense*. Three important case studies have been analyzed through the prism of the country's strategic culture, i.e. Chinese economic engagement with one of its largest trading partners—South Africa—, Chinese political engagement in the conflicts of Sudan and South Sudan, and lastly, its security engagement in Djibouti where it established its first foreign military base. Chinese three-dimensional engagements in Africa have had both positive and negative implications for the region. This research concludes that Chinese strategic culture is not static and likely to adapt itself in accordance with the opportunities available for Beijing and its goals in Africa.

## Keywords

Strategic culture, Sino-African relations, China's foreign policy, peaceful coexistence

## Introduction

China's pursuit of natural resources and expansion of its markets overseas have strengthened its ties with Africa. Although China's association with Africa is not new, it has considerably expanded and evolved. During the Maoist period, it was limited to geopolitical and ideological gains, but in recent times, Beijing's engagement has

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expanded to include security, economic and political ties (Hartmann & Noesselt, 2019; Korvig, 2018).

Africa holds immense economic, political, and security significance for China. The economic interest of Beijing includes; African natural resources, access to markets for investment and exports, and global expansion of Chinese businesses. In this context, its relationship with South Africa is significant as it is one of China's largest economic partners in Africa (Usman & Lyu, 2021). China also has four main political interests in the continent, i.e. to improve its image and enhance the influence of China, isolate Taiwan to promote its 'One China' policy, assure its economic partners' stability, and counter international norms that China deems problematic. Particularly China's controversial political involvement in Sudan and South Sudan is crucial. Lastly, China's political and economic interests define its security interests as "to safeguard developments made in the economic domain and growing political influence." China has, multilaterally and bilaterally, expanded its security and defense relationship with many states, such as Djibouti (Saleh, 2021). Establishing the country's first overseas naval base in Djibouti represents Chinese willingness to enhance its regional power projection capabilities (Chaziza, 2018).

Chinese presence in Africa has varying implications for the region. Its strategic engagement presents certain opportunities and challenges to the continent. While flexible Chinese loans, trade finance, and low-priced industrial products are of great importance for African countries, local labor and factories are suffering at the hand of Chinese commercial expansion. China's support for African regimes violating human rights has also received criticism from the west. Furthermore, countries are also skeptical about the nature of Chinese unconditional loans to African Countries (Thrall, 2015).

China is also enhancing its security footprint and involvement in African conflicts, raising speculations about its non-interference approach. There is a lack of transparency in Chinese development cooperation with African states, which does not always result in a win-win situation. This research analyzes Chinese engagement in the African region through the prism of its strategic culture. Chinese strategic culture provides an alternative lens to assess how Chinese norms, history, identity, culture, and traditions are reflected in its engagement with other actors. According to Beijing, its strategic culture is embedded in five principles of peaceful coexistence (Lei & Sui, 2022). However, Chinese strategic culture is not static and continues to evolve due to its widening interests and growing international power and influence. The article addresses the following research questions:

- How have Sino-African relations evolved since the Maoist regime?
- How is the strategic culture of China reflected in its engagement with the African region?
- What are the security, economic, and political interests and behavior of China in Africa?
- What are the regional implications of Chinese strategic involvement in Africa?

## **Historical Evolution of Sino-African Relations (1950s-Present)**

### ***Early Years (1955-1977)***

The development of Sino-African relations was a gradual process that took place over a long period of time. The official diplomatic ties between Africa and Beijing began with the culmination of the Bandung Conference, organized by Mao Zedong, which took place from 18-24 April 1955, the first-ever meeting of African states and Asian

Nations. The primary objective was to promote economic and cultural relations between Asia and Africa and to resist western imperialism and decolonization (Dirlik, 2015). With the rise of African nationalist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, China took advantage by stressing its anti-imperialist stance and supporting these movements morally and materially. As a result of such assistance, the newly independent countries began establishing diplomatic relations with China. For example, Mao provided aid to the Algerian nationalist rebels who recognised mainland China upon attaining independence in 1962. By the decade of 1960s, more than 10 African countries, including Algeria, Sudan, and Morocco, had established diplomatic ties with China. In the 1970s, among the 50 newly independent African nations, 44 extended diplomatic recognition of mainland China (Hanauer & Morris, 2014).

After the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, the main aim of China was to counter not just the USA but the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as well and to isolate Taiwan in Africa. But from 1965, African countries began resenting for being used as mere political weapons in the squabble between the Soviet Union and China. As a result, China's progress in the region deteriorated. The African states also grew suspicious of China's support of revolutionary movements. Another major setback in Sino-African relations was caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) in China, further halting the expansion of new economic aid and augmentation of the country's diplomatic relations. After Mauritania recognized mainland China in 1965, no other country established diplomatic relations with China for the next five years (Zabella, 2020). In 1969, as China's domestic order was restored, China's policy was focused on cultivating good bilateral relations with any state that extended recognition to communist China. Due to Chinese engagement in Africa, it was able to secure a permanent seat in the United Nations with the support of 26 African states. Sino-African relations further improved as Beijing halted its support for revolutionary movements in Africa, allowing it to cultivate relations with more conservative governments (Shinn, 2019).

### ***Sino-African Relations in Post-Economic Reforms Era (1978-1990's)***

In the post-economic reforms era, Chinese foreign policy towards Africa was transformed from solely based on ideological alliances to a more diversified and pragmatic approach towards the region. As a result of economic uncertainty, internal development, and modern political orientation in China, the early 1980s saw a temporary downgrade in Sino-African relations. China was mainly concerned about fostering economic ties with USA and Japan. Resultantly, Chinese economic aid and assistance towards Africa were reoriented as China devoted more resources to its economic development (Rugumamu, 2014). Chinese engagement in the region in that time period was more commercialized. In 1982, during the 12th National Congress of CPC, China officially announced a shift from a policy that stressed 'war and revolution' to one stressing 'peace and development.' (Shinn, 2019). In 1989, the Tiananmen protests led to the international isolation of China due to widespread condemnation from the Western world. It rejuvenated Chinese political interests in Africa and paved the way for proactive diplomacy (Tisdell, 2009).

### ***Post-1990 Reforms in Africa***

Under the supervision of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the African states' economies and political systems underwent significant changes. Since Pan-Africanism, the region has always wanted to manage its own affairs. In the post-

1990s, Africans had no choice but to comply with the Bretton Woods institutions through structural adjustment programs. Nevertheless, the system of multiparty democracy was introduced, and their economies were liberalized (Gwekwerere, 2020). As China witnessed these trends in the region, it decided to direct its developmental assistance to the growth of the African private sectors and concentrate on how Chinese businesses can participate in the continent's markets. Thus, the State Council of China introduced new policies regarding foreign aid at the Working Conference in October 1995 (Kobayashi, 2008). The purpose was to encourage qualified corporations in China to invest and partake in foreign technical assistance and economic cooperation projects.

### ***Developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

In 2000, China and the African countries held their First Ministerial Conference to conduct mutual consultations, deepen understanding, broaden consensus, strengthen friendly ties, and promote cooperation. The outcomes of the Conference were the adoption of the Program for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development and the Beijing Declaration. The creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 was one of the greatest successes of the First Ministerial Conference as it established a new platform to increase dialogue and cooperation between China and the African continent. Since the creation of FOCAC, eight ministerial conferences have been held to strengthen Sino-African ties in various domains. In 2021, the eighth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC was held with the theme of "Deepen China-Africa Partnership and Promote Sustainable Development to Build a China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era" (Pairault, 2021). The discussion in FOCAC 8 revolved around bolstering health cooperation, post-pandemic economic recovery, and developmental assistance.

The strategic vision of China in its relationship with the African continent was further strengthened and enhanced in January 2006, when the country published its first white paper on Africa named 'China's African Policy' (Meidan, 2006). The four crucial principles of this paper were; equality, sincerity, and friendship; collective advantages, mutual prosperity and reciprocity; coordination and support; and mutual development. In August 2013, the Chinese government issued a White Paper on China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation, highlighting the progress between China and Africa in terms of economy and bilateral trade through mutually beneficial cooperation. Chinese investment extended to different fields, including mining, agriculture, manufacturing, construction, real estate, finance, etc. The Chinese government published China's second Africa Policy Paper in 2015. In this White Paper, China set forth a new approach and vision toward Africa, coinciding with China's 'Two Centennial Goals' and Africa's 'Agenda 2063' (Bearak, 2019). The White Paper clarified further regarding Chinese goodwill to strengthen Sino-African relations to guide multidimensional exchanges and collaboration.

### ***Recent Developments***

Africa holds immense diplomatic significance for China on the international front and vice versa. Both support each other on controversial human rights issues. In 2019, African countries supported the Chinese treatment of Uyghur people in the Xinjiang province (Olewe, 2021). Under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global development strategy adopted by President Xi Jinping in 2013, China has made significant advancements in the African region. This includes Chinese investments in developing

critical infrastructure in Africa and connectivity for growth in exchange for raw materials and resources. This is enhancing China's political prestige among the African states. As of June 2020, 43 of 54 African countries have already signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China for cooperation under the BRI (Venkateswaran, 2020).

Africa is central to China's project primarily due to its potential for energy, roads, and railways. On average, Chinese annual investment in African infrastructure projects amounts to nearly \$10 billion (Risberg, 2019). FOCAC and BRI constitute the largest platforms for Beijing's engagement with Africa. While FOCAC forms the foundations of China's Africa policy, BRI is a multilateral platform emphasizing connectivity. Compared to FOCAC, BRI can potentially incorporate Africa into the global market. Such a relationship would prove fruitful for many African countries, though integrating into the two mechanisms would be time-taking.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Strategic culture is not a new concept. Scholars have used it to examine the primary aspects of the security policies of countries, security institutions, and regions in different ways. The framework helps to explain why actors continue with or change their respective national security policies. Strategic culture aims to understand why states pursue certain policy options as opposed to others. However, the failure of the US scientists to accurately predict the reaction of the USSR in the 1970s shifted the focus of scholars in determining the role of the national culture of a state in motivating its actions and decisions, thus, developing the concept of strategic culture. Alastair Iain Johnston distinguished strategic culture scholars into three generations. He defined strategic culture as an amalgamation of ideas shaped by emotional responses and habitual behavioral patterns shared by a national strategic community and its members regarding nuclear strategy (Johnston, 1995). Strategic culture rejects the universal model of rationality, highlighting that a decision considered rational by one state may be thought of as irrational by another state based on its respective histories and experiences (Snyder, 1977).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of strategic culture expanded beyond the nuclear debate to focus on other security issues. The second-generation scholars exploited crucial ideational independent variables and widened the concept by introducing new elements to the discourse. According to Kerry Longhurst, strategic culture refers to a distinct system of attitudes, practices, and beliefs related to using force, which are collectively held and arise slowly over time through a unique prolonged historical process. Therefore, strategic culture is persistent but neither permanent nor static (2000).

Elizabeth Kier is one of the prominent third-generation strategic culture scholars. She saw political-military culture as a result of varying domestic political situations, changing with a country's domestic politics (Bloomfield, 2012). The third generation of strategic culture scholars focused on competitive theory testing and left room for other supplementary factors to be considered that impact state behavior (Lantis, 2002).

### **China's Strategic Culture**

Various cultural, historical, religious, and philosophical factors affected China's strategic culture during the course of its evolution. As termed by China, the 'century of humiliation' (1839-1949) was marked by external interventions and subjugation of the Chinese Empire by the West, Russia and Japan (Kaufman, 2010). China faced

fragmentation in its domestic policies, lost several wars, including the First and Second Opium Wars, and was forced to offer a major concession to the western powers after the treaties such as those of Nanking, Peaking, Aigun, Shimonoseki (Kaufman, 2010). Western interference during the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a considerable impact on China's foreign policy initiatives, which are visible even in the present times (Farwa, 2018). The identity of a country is greatly influenced by how it perceives and conceives itself. Confucian philosophy had a considerable impact on the cultural values of Chinese society, which in turn influenced Chinese thinking and conduct. Three major factors have led to the evolution of Chinese strategic culture in a particular manner giving it a distinct identity, namely its traditions and culture, Chinese ideology, i.e. communism, and Western liberal values (Farwa, 2018). Alastair Iain Johnston (1995) highlighted that two major attributes of Chinese strategic culture (Confucian-Mencian and Parabellum) exist simultaneously.

### ***Confucian-Mencian***

According to this notion, conflicts can be handled through or avoided with good governance as well as through co-opting with foreign threats. This outlook prescribes using force as a last resort and should only be used when it could be justified on moral grounds (Feng, 2007). Thus, Chinese strategic preferences are accommodation, use of defensive force, and lastly, offensive policies.

### ***Parabellum***

It is a Latin word that literally means 'prepare for war.' This notion suggests the use of coercion against the opponent. As the wave of globalization swept, China amalgamated modern western values into its strategic culture (Zhang, 2002). Certain strategic factors directly counteract the Confucius elements of the Chinese strategic culture. These elements justify the external use of military force, negating the passive impact of the former elements. This includes China's just war theory and the concept of Active Defense. Chinese strategic culture illustrates its evolving nature, suggesting that passive defense is no longer effective for China in safeguarding its global interests (Gady, 2015).

### **China's unique Cult of Defense: Contemporary Strategic Culture**

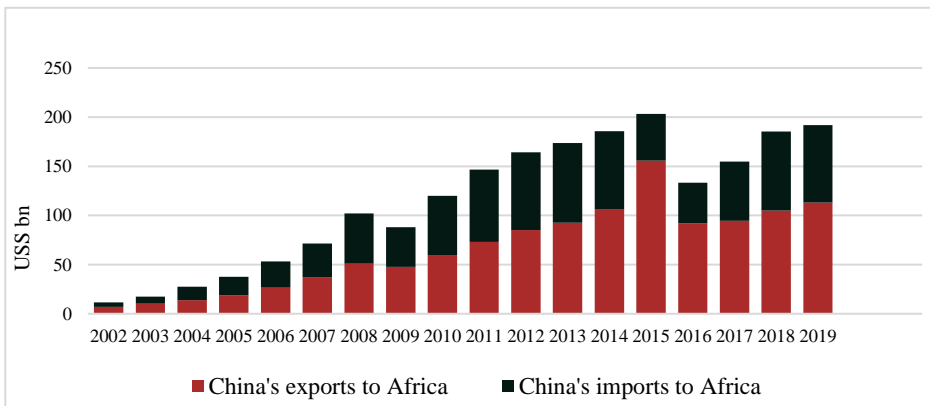
Andrew Scobell highlights that both elements, Confucian-Mencian and Parabellum, are functional, and the interplay between the two strands leads to the culmination of 'China's Cult of Defense' (Scobell, 2002). The predisposition of this cult is that China might paradoxically involve itself in offensive military conduct to pursue its national interests while rationalizing its conduct to be entirely defensive in nature and the only viable option. This highlights that China possesses a dualistic strategic culture: assertive protection and aggressive promotion of its national objective under its rhetoric of self-defense and just war.

### **China's Economic Interests in Africa**

The commercial and government actors of China view the African continent as a source of natural resources, possessing a vast yet underutilized market for investments and exports. This provides an opportunity for Chinese firms to gain experience and increase domestic employment. The investments of China in Africa also take place under the broad framework of Beijing's "Go Global" commercial strategy, which aims to expand China's commercial presence globally (Thrall, 2015).

There are three main economic actors of China in Africa: big State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), large to medium-sized private enterprises, and small enterprises. More than 90 percent of Chinese Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows through SOEs, half of which accounts for oil projects. Since 2000, the Sino-African trade volume has experienced enormous growth at about 16 percent per year. In 2019, Angola became the largest exporter to China, followed by South Africa and the Republic of Congo. Africa’s largest trading partner is China, and in the opening months of 2020, exports bound for China from Africa also decreased by 17.5 percent (Nyabiage, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the growing Sino-African trade since 2002. However, African exports experienced a temporary downturn owing to the weakening of commodity prices since 2014. It is critical to note the apparent imbalance in China’s favor as its exports to Africa are greater than imports.

**Figure 1.** China-Africa Trade (2002-2019)

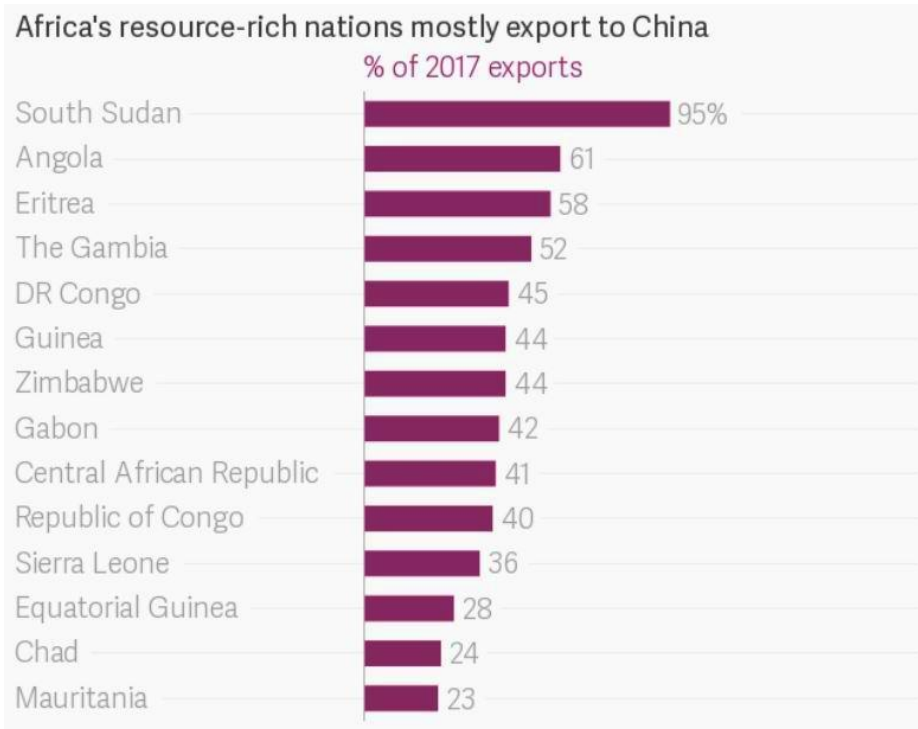


Source: (China Africa Research Initiative, 2021)

The African continent is crucial in China’s search to diversify the supply of natural resources to ensure an uninterrupted flow. Notable African mineral exports to China include Angola and South Sudan’s crude petroleum export, Eritrea’s zinc and copper export, DR Congo’s cobalt, Zimbabwe’s export of raw tobacco, and Sierra Leone’s export of iron and titanium. South Sudan also exports 95 percent of its crude petroleum to China (Dahir, 2019). Figure 2 depicts the percentage of exports to China by different African Nations in 2017.



**Figure 2.** Africa’s resource-rich nations’ exports to China (2017)



Source: Dahir (2019)

**Sino-South African Economic Relations**

On 01<sup>st</sup> January 1998, China and South Africa formally established diplomatic relations, and in 2000, South Africa-China Bi-National Commission was established. Since then, the two countries have enhanced economic cooperation on multiple levels and in various domains. In 2010, the bilateral cooperation between China and South Africa was elevated to a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’. This was a significant step in their economic relationship and outlined three crucial pillars of cooperation: strategic, mutually beneficial, and multidimensional. Four main cooperation platforms underpin the constructive Sino-South African relationship: (i) FOCAC, (ii) Brazil-Russia-India-China and South Africa (BRICS), (iii) BRI, (iv) and South-South Cooperation (SSC) (Grobler, 2020).

***Sino-South African Trade***

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1998, economic relations between both states have continued to grow at unprecedented rates. Through the FOCAC Business Forum held in 2015, twenty-five economic agreements were concluded between China and South Africa valued at up to US \$16.5 billion (Breitenbach & Ryno, 2015). Over the last 25 years, Chinese exports to South Africa have witnessed



an annual increase of 13.4 percent, amounting to 14.7 billion dollars in 2020 from 640 million dollars in 1995 (OEC, 2022). While during the same period, South African exports to China have increased at an annual rate of 14.4 percent, totaling 11.9 billion dollars in 2020 from 408 million dollars in 1995 (OEC, 2022).

### ***Finance and Development Cooperation between China and South Africa***

In December 2015, during a Chinese state officials' visit to South Africa, 26 bilateral agreements worth \$94 billion were agreed upon between President Xi Jinping and President Zuma (Mills & Merew, 2020). By 2016, nearly 150 medium-sized Chinese firms were operational in South Africa with an actual investment of US\$ 13 billion, providing employment to about 30,000 people. In 2020, South Africa owed China the equivalent of its 4% annual GDP. The two countries have also signed MoU for cooperation under BRI, and South Africa has also remained the vanguard of Sino-South Africa cooperation on renewable energy (Baker & Shen, 2017).

### **China's Strategic Culture and Economic Behavior in South Africa**

China's economic approach to Africa is inspired by the Confucian principles inherent in the state's strategic culture. All these principles can be witnessed in China's economic relationship with South Africa. Their bilateral trade patterns highlight that China is fulfilling its need for natural resources while South Africa is acquiring needed manufactured goods; mutually benefitting both countries. Moreover, South Africa is also investing in China, signifying their two-way balanced relationship. China has highlighted this approach in Africa through FOCAC, i.e. to promote partnership rather than just investing in African economies.

The country provides 'no strings attached' financing for sustainable infrastructure development. Its economic interests have no underlying political motives or interests; instead, it focuses on the continent's long-term development and economic progress (Li, 2018). After the opening of China, the only political conditions relevant for Chinese economic aid and investment are not to recognize Taiwan and uphold the principle of non-interference. China has often faced international backlash for adopting such a policy.

### **China's Political Interests and Behavior in Africa**

Although less significant than economic interests, Chinese political interests in Africa includes; reputation building; promotion of the 'One China' policy; gathering support for Chinese norms, and ensuring the stability of its key economic partners. China emphasizes a commitment to a peaceful rise to gain tangible diplomatic advantages through African support (Muekalia, 2004). One of the ways to characterize Sino-African political interaction is high-level visits, which constitute an important part of China's international diplomacy. China's increased economic interaction with Africa, beginning in the 1990s, was supplemented by a rise in diplomatic initiatives.

Regarding soft power projection, China has also pursued various projects in Africa. One of the many notable projects is the inauguration of the new headquarters of the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa in 2012, which was a facility jointly constructed and donated by China, costing about 200 million dollars (BBC News, 2012). Furthermore, China has also funded various engagement programs that include foreign assistance programs such as the Peace Corps, youth leadership exchanges, providing Chinese doctors, developing centers of cultural outreach in twenty-two states and initiation of television and radio broadcasting (Yinan, 2011).

### **China's Involvement in African Conflicts: A Case Study of South Sudan**

Sudan and China established diplomatic ties in 1959. Initially, political engagement between the two countries was limited, but in 1995, Sino-Sudanese political relations experienced a critical shift as Sino-Sudanese oil cooperation was initiated. Consequently, Sudan became an oil exporter. Oil became a crucial medium in promoting further economic and trade cooperation. Bilateral trade between the two countries increased to \$3.35 billion in 2006 from \$ 350 million in 1998 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, n.d.).

South Sudan acquired independence in 2011 and was immediately recognized by China. Both countries established diplomatic relations, and China indicated that it pursues a balanced strategy in its diplomatic dealings with Sudan and South Sudan (Johanson, 2016). However, unfortunately, South Sudan went into a state of chaos as a civil war broke out in 2013. From then onwards, China adjusted its development-oriented business policy toward South Sudan and focused on conflict mediation.

#### ***China's Involvement in South Sudan Civil War***

Chinese involvement in the South Sudan civil war is guided by three major components, i.e. oil resources, business, and political advantages. Immediately after the escalation of hostilities due to war, China's vice Foreign Minister conducted a meeting with diplomatic envoys to China from countries of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in order to exchange perspectives on recent happenings. Moreover, Zhong Jianhua conducted shuttle diplomacy between the AU, Sudan, South Sudan, USA, Ethiopia, UK, Uganda, and IGDA to resolve the conflict peacefully. In continuation of its efforts, China did not halt developmental projects and even initiated a series of new projects in South Sudan to lay down a premise for post-war restoration (Abdulmelik, 2015).

However, military support ignited widespread criticism of China's intentions regarding Sudan's peace process. In September 2014, the Chinese embassy in South Sudan declared that it would halt remaining arms transactions and announced the dispatching of an infantry battalion to the UN peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan (Elmahly & Sun, 2018).

### **China's Strategic Culture and Political Behavior in South Sudan**

China's economic ambitions have forced it to revisit its policy of non-interference. For this purpose, the case study of Sino-Sudan political relations is important in understanding the critical shift in China's strategic culture as it commits itself to conflict resolution in conflict-ridden states. There were mainly three reasons why China was receiving criticism from the global community, the UN, and regional African bodies such as the AU. Firstly, developing Sudan's oil resources provided it with ample financial capital to prolong the civil war and commit human rights violations in the Darfur crisis.

Secondly, the country had been supplying arms and weapons to the Sudanese government, and lastly, it had been blocking international sanctions against the government of Sudan to ensure its uninterrupted access to the country's oil reserves (Thrall, 2015). Since China wanted to promote its image as a responsible global power, the role of China evolved from a 'reluctant bystander' to a 'responsible mediator'. China has openly announced that it is willing to play a constructive role in the peace and security of the African continent and has included this in the China-Africa policy paper of 2006 as well. This change in China's political engagement in

Africa is not divorced from its economic and security interests but rather aimed at ensuring the protection of its trade and investment in the region (Brosig, 2020).

While Beijing is actively involved in the South Sudan conflict, its approach to conflict resolution greatly differs from its Western counterparts. Beijing does not believe in forcing its desired outcomes, rather utilizes its political and economic influence to bring the conflicting parties to the negotiating table and reach a mutually beneficial solution. China promotes the narrative that African problems require African solutions, claiming that the region needs to be in charge of its own fate. China's flexibility towards its non-interference policy would allow it to efficiently pursue its national and international ambitions by devoting more significant resources and efforts towards meeting its growth, foreign policy objectives, and resource security. As China's economic interests continue to grow, it may experience difficulty managing a positive balance with its non-interference policy.

### **China's Security Interests and Behavior in Africa**

The growing political and economic footprint of China in Africa defines its emerging security interests within the continent. According to the McKinsey & Company report, Chinese construction enterprises won almost half of all engineering, procurement, and construction contracts throughout the continent, including those funded by international organizations like the World Bank (2017). Therefore, there are mainly three security interests confronting China in Africa, i.e. protection of citizens and assets, bolstering its 'responsible power' image internationally, and enhancing the experience of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Although PLA has played little role in Sino-African relations, several security interests are at stake for China in Africa, generating various potential missions for PLA in the region. These include peacekeeping missions, preservation of assets, Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs), and protection of expatriates and personnel (Heath et al., 2016). Beijing has promoted assistance and training programs to benefit the African militaries. These programs include military training exercises, donation of training equipment and vehicles, and sending maintenance teams etc.; with time, China's security footprint in Africa is expanding. As of May 2022, two thousand Chinese troops are permanently stationed at the base in Djibouti. Beijing has also constructed a pier at the base with the capacity to hold an aircraft carrier, enabling China to project its power beyond the coast of the Western Pacific. Moreover, concerns over a potential second Chinese military base on the Atlantic Coast have stroked fears among African nations pertaining to their sovereignty (Nantulya, 2022).

### **China's Military Diplomacy: A Case of Djibouti**

In 1979, two years after Djibouti gained independence from France, China recognized the country, and diplomatic relations were formally established. China's security relationship with Djibouti is guided by its heightening economic and political stakes. As a result, China constructed its first overseas military base in Djibouti, signaling a drastic shift from its previous defense and military doctrine (Downs et al., 2020). China has recently completed work on the first of its kind large pier at Djibouti. The pier is contemplated to be used for berthing aircraft carriers. The second aircraft carrier of PLA is already commissioned, while a third is under rapid construction. Carriers are perfect instruments for 'sea control and 'power projection' (Hadano, 2021).

### ***China's Geo-Strategic Motivations behind Military Base***

Djibouti is strategically located on the world's busiest trade routes and shipping lanes, linking East Africa and the Middle East. Bab el-Mandeb strait, a critical maritime chokepoint, serves as a crucial trade link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea via the Red sea, the Suez Canal, and the Gulf of Aden. Therefore, the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti could bring several strategic benefits to China (Chaziza, 2021), such as:

- Enhancement of power projection capabilities of PLA in the Indian Ocean and even beyond, giving it a global reach
- Conducting anti-piracy missions in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden
- Challenging USA's geopolitical ambitions in the MENA region and Africa
- Adopting a more proactive role in regional and international conflicts

### ***China's Geo-Economic Motivations***

The strategic location of Djibouti serves as a significant asset for China's growing economic interests. China's trade with the EU, amounting to over \$1 billion, passes through the Gulf of Aden daily, and 40% of Chinese oil imports pass via the Indian Ocean (Alden & Mendez, 2021). Djibouti's location at the mouth of the Red sea makes it an epicenter for transporting cargo in and out of the MENA region. Moreover, since the initiation of BRI in 2013, Djibouti has been a crucial logistical and trading hub in China's Maritime Silk Road, extending from Beijing to the Indian Ocean region, to the Gulf of Aden, and via the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean (Perlez & Buckley, 2015).

Moreover, securing access to vital energy resources could be another reason for installing the military base in Djibouti, as 4% of China's natural gas and 3% of crude oil imports pass through the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb (US Energy Information Agency, 2014). A Naval base would therefore assist the transportation of China's oil from the strait and safeguard its oil imports from the Middle East, traversing the Indian Ocean region on their journey back.

### ***China's Strategic Culture with Its Security Behavior in Djibouti***

Chinese security posture, which includes strong adherence to the principle of sovereignty and non-interference, has been greatly influenced by its historical defeats and humiliation at the hands of imperialist power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, embedded in the Five Principles of Coexistence, China's foreign policy agenda towards Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been largely guided by a non-interference approach. Throughout Deng Xiaoping's tenure, China adopted a low profile towards the defense and security of African states and endorsed an opposing stance towards UNPKO. However, beginning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, China's strategic thought has evolved, leading to the developing of a maritime strategy based on 'preemption' and 'active defense' (Jenner, 2019). However, this change has been gradual, starting with PLA's involvement in UN peacekeeping missions, counter-piracy, and non-combat evacuation operations, to the development of a logistical support base in Djibouti which has now become a full-blown military and naval base (Cabestan, 2020).

However, it is important to highlight the historical context of China's formative conduct. China's aspiration to embark on military modernization and enhancement of power projection capabilities has mainly been influenced by the revelation of PLA's deficiency and losses in both the Vietnam and Third Indo-China

war. Therefore, historical lessons constitute an important component of China's security culture (Mayer, 2018).

Moreover, the decision to set up a logistical support base is directly linked with the developing international political situations. In the current era, 'pragmatism' has been a dominant component in China's strategic thought, which means nationalist sentiment should not come in the way of Chinese political stability and economic modernization. Therefore, China's military modernization has been driven by its expanding economic interests overseas and the need to safeguard the Chinese workforce and protect and preserve vital sea lines of communication (Alden & Yixiao, 2018). Thus, China's military posture in Africa represents a response to the growing Chinese role in the international system and ever-changing global environment.

## **Regional Implications of Chinese Strategic Involvement in Africa**

### ***Economic Implications***

The implications of Chinese economic engagement with Africa have garnered mixed results for the countries of the continent. Due to Chinese inward investment, the African countries recovered from the global financial crisis of 2008 as their GDP experienced a growth of 0.5 percent each year (Whalley & Weisbrod, 2012). Moreover, the Chinese Foreign Ministry noted that from 2000 to 2013, China's investments increased the continent's economic growth rate by more than 20 percent (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). On the other hand, the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) built by China have, as of yet, not yielded the anticipated benefits and will be draining the future income of the African nations to repay Beijing for its construction services.

However, SEZs in Mauritius and Ethiopia have proved to be relatively successful. But overall, the SEZs in the African continent have been performing weakly due to a poor investment environment, lack of infrastructure, inept trade facilitation systems, inadequate institutional, legal, and regulatory frameworks, and lack of strategic planning and skilled labor. The Belt and Road Initiative is critical to Chinese economic engagement with Africa. It possesses the capacity to contribute to the infrastructural development of Africa and promote connectivity. But over the years, African countries are becoming apprehensive of BRI and China's actions and motives in the region. In April 2017, protests erupted in Nigeria against Chinese companies that failed to compensate for the buildings they demolished for the Lagos-Ibadan Railway Line's construction (Venkateswaran, 2020). Similar protests have broken out in other African countries as well. African Nations are also concerned about a Chinese debt trap; for example, Kenya's external debt to China now amounts to 74 percent of its GDP (Dahir, 2018). In recent years, many African countries have canceled or postponed major projects in China, claiming that Beijing is not abiding by environmental standards, has irregular paperwork, and has poor safety measures for local workers.

### ***Political Implications***

The implication of Chinese engagement in Africa's political and governance process is highly varied and context-specific. There are three categories of African states in which China's behavior has influenced the process of democratization: states undergoing democratic transition benefit via joint ventures and technical grants and, at the same time, serve as useful markets and geopolitical allies such as Ghana. Chinese involvement with states that possess vital strategic resources, such as Angola,

has resulted in neo-patrimonialism and the legitimization of autocratic governments. Chinese involvement in conflict-driven states such as Liberia has resulted in the consolidation of peace and stability, positively impacting democratic governance. Secondly, Beijing has received a positive response from African Governments over its diplomatic initiatives. Party-to-party training programs constitute a significant part of China's diplomatic engagement in Africa. This initiative has led various African states to acknowledge the success of the Chinese model, and they have become insistent on gaining insight through the Chinese experience and merging them with domestic conditions.

Moreover, China has formulated its media strategy as a part of its broader soft power push in the African continent. But African governments perceive little benefit from such outlets for their local audiences (Wasserman, 2018). The state control over Chinese media, along with its officials and positive orientation, has raised concerns that Chinese media would influence African journalism to be uncritical of its politics and governments; hence, curtailing freedom of speech.

### ***Security Implications***

While China benefits from stable and peaceful Africa, the continent aims to eliminate insecurity for increased growth and development. Security relations with China allow African states to enhance their capacity-building efforts, including the construction of infrastructure, logistical assistance, healthcare, training of local police, etc.; this has proved beneficial for many African states (Benabdallah, 2016). However, the negative orientation of China's security role in Africa includes its role in arms deals that African regimes use either to fuel conflicts or for self-preservation. Secondly, the Chinese military base in Djibouti has reaped many benefits for the African state and has great potential for enhancing the country's and, subsequently, the region's economic prosperity and political stability. Djibouti has also become an active participant in BRI as the East African country is a crucial trading hub and logistics base. With the help of China, Djibouti is pursuing its 'Vision Djibouti 2035' which aims to turn the country into a regional and international commercial trading hub (Debelo, 2017). Djibouti's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Ali Youssef, stated that though the country's debt to China is 71 percent of its GDP, they were in dire need of the infrastructure Beijing provided (Ahmed, 2021). But China's ambiguous security policy may create challenges if China seeks to expand its military presence in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Chinese involvement in the African region is not new, but it has grown substantially and evolved with the changes in the international political arena. This research paper assesses the political, economic, and security interests and behavior of China in Africa through the prism of its evolving strategic culture. With regard to its economic engagement, the country's pacifist strategic culture showcases itself in China's 'no strings attached' financing for the development of sustainable infrastructure and its focus on the long-term development and prosperity of Africa. The only political condition of China in its economic dealings is the recognition of its 'One China' policy and principle of non-interference. On the other hand, Chinese political engagement can be witnessed in its role in the South Sudan conflict. China's economic ambitions have forced it to revisit its policy of non-interference, representing a critical shift in its strategic culture as it commits itself to conflict resolution in conflict-ridden states. However, the trends dictate that China favors a



multilateral approach to conflict resolution. Chinese security interests are tied to its political and economic interests. The most remarkable security engagement of China in Africa is undoubtedly the establishment of its first foreign military base in the African state of Djibouti. China has also developed a maritime strategy based on preemption and active defense. Pragmatism has become a dominant component of contemporary Chinese strategic culture.

Chinese economic, political, and security engagement has had significant implications for the African continent. Chinese aid, investment, and infrastructural development have played a positive role in increasing the economic growth rate of the continent. However, in terms of job creation and the labor market, Chinese companies favor their own people. Furthermore, Chinese investments and businesses have undercut Africa's local businesses and manufacturers. African countries have reaped little trade and employment benefits from the SEZs. Though some SEZs are doing well, most have been performing weakly. BRI could bring about many benefits for Africa but many countries have grown apprehensive of China's projects due to potential debt traps, violation of environmental standards, irregularities in paperwork, and poor safety measures for local workers. China's political role varies in different states of Africa, and its engagement greatly impacts the process of democratization. China's party-to-party training programs have been received well by African countries.

Moreover, diplomatic initiative such as high-level state visits has played an important role in supplementing economic interaction and enhancing political relations. China has been exceptionally successful in its security engagement as Africa has appreciated and supported its UN peacekeeping missions and its military base in Djibouti. However, Africa must remain watchful of the country's evolving security foreign policy towards the region.

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