

## **THE IMPACT OF CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE ON SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA**

### **Introduction**

The bulk of the discourse on the China-Africa relationship has centred on economics, trade, and infrastructural development. However, China's influence on the continent has spread rapidly across the four elements of national power namely; Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economic (DIME). As Dyrenforth (2021) notes, China's influence includes diplomatic relations with African countries and the African Union (AU), expanded military to military cooperation with African partners, the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, the proliferation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs) across the continent and extensive investment via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While there has been much focus given to diplomacy, economics and infrastructural development, the attention paid in academic literature to China's influence on security in Africa is negligible despite how tightly woven it is to the other three areas highlighted. Beyond this contribution, this study is also necessary given the prediction of Alden (2011) that engagement on Africa's peace and security is in China's interest and that it will increasingly become a focus for policy makers in Beijing. This research aligns with this view, as it examines the influence of China on security in Africa from the perspective of the '*Alternative Narrative*'.

The '*Alternative Narrative*' in the context of this research examines both the Western/Dominant Narrative referred to by Adichie (2009) as the '*Single Story*' and the emergent/Chinese/Eastern Narrative. The '*Alternative Narrative*' expatiates events from an indigenous (minority status) perspective. The views of the indigenous collective have been ignored for too long, so what dominates academic literature and the international media are the Western and Emergent (Chinese) Narratives. This schema pervades discussions even on issues peculiar to indigenous peoples and communities of the developing south. This paper therefore examines the Dominant Narrative that warns of the dangers of China's growing influence especially in Africa's security realm and what it means for democracy, and the Emergent Narrative that China is a partner in Africa's development programme. Adopting the Alternative Narrative, this paper takes cognizance of past and recent events, and presents Africa's views to

China's growing influence.

This paper contends that given the West's exploitative relationship with Africa for over 500 years, there is no justification to warn Africa of sinister motives behind China's overtures. This research contends too that China's cooperative gestures should be accepted, but with the aim of building capacity so that the continent relies less on external assistance, and so prevent Beijing from dictating the (foreign) policy trajectory of African States. This paper gives thought too to the implications for Taiwan - China relationship.

### **Methodology**

Through all of modern history, western paradigms and perspectives have dominated academic literature, hence the argument of Adichie's (2009) '*Dangers of a Single Story*' in reference to the Dominant Narrative. The dominance of Western perspectives draws on their authority from colonial times, modern advances in science (which often ignores scientific developments from the much larger developing world), control of global institutions like the UN, the international media and the Church, all of which promote Western influence over non-western cultures and thought. As a result, indigenous thought, cultures, scientific advances from other regions are seldom acknowledged and in some cases become forgotten. The Dominant Narrative ensures that non-western practices are analysed from the prism of western lenses, and indigenous cultures are consequently viewed as mundane when measured against western paradigms rather than on the intrinsic values they hold given local dynamics.

This applies to the literature on China in Africa where the Dominant Narrative echoes the dangers of China's increasing influence on the continent, and why Africans should be wary and resist China's burgeoning incursion. In recent times, there is an 'Emergent Narrative' facilitated by China's elite and scholars that aims to counter the Dominant Narrative. This narrative encourages Africa to welcome China's expanding influence on the continent. As China's influence spreads in Africa, so also has the Emergent Narrative.

Given these two overarching narratives, where is the African viewpoint? What do Africans really think of China's expanding influence? The African perspective to events on the continent becomes the 'Alternative Narrative'. African views and analyses are

seldom heard even in matters relating to the continent, and in this case, the impact of China on security in Africa. The Alternative Narrative is the expression of what Africans really think of China's influence free of the bias of western perspectives, and the cajoling endearments of China's soft diplomacy. This paper, through the Alternative Narrative examines the influence of China on Africa's Security and Democracy. However, the research first evaluates the Dominant Narrative and subsequently the Emergent Narrative on China's influence in Africa.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts liberal realism given China's utilisation of its cooperation with Africa to boost its influence in global affairs. Liberal realism is a fusion of two key concepts to the resolution of international problems, or the benign pursuit of realist goals. At its foundation, it entails pursuing realist ends through liberal means (Drinkwater, 2005; Harth, 2005). The postulations of liberal realism rest majorly on three propositions; First is multilateral cooperation which forestalls rather than invites competitive behaviour; Next is channelling comparative advantages into cooperative partnerships in support of global norms. Finally, though the security of the State and its interests matter, the need for unity (regional/global) should be given primacy as well (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 2004). In the context of this study, the liberal realist approach emphasises that international cooperation does not exist merely to carry out important functions for States, but to help States overcome problems through fostering collective action. Such collective action is also used in promoting the interest of major actors among the cooperating States. Liberal Realism aptly explains China's pursuit of greater regional and global influence (realist goals) through cooperation with African States (liberal means). The fact that the end goal is the attainment of greater influence through cooperation, exhorts both the values of realism and liberalism in one.

### **The Western Narrative**

Africa has been synonymous with conflicts, especially during the Cold War when the world's rival power blocs engendered proxy wars on the continent (Adebajo, 2010; Cilliers and Sisk, 2013). With the major powers of the West victorious at the end of the Cold War, Africa's leaders were compelled to transform their States in line with western norms, and democracy swept across the continent. Since accountability was often a condition for much needed developmental aid from the West, many of Africa's

leaders became responsive to the needs of their people. Consequently, by the turn of the century (1995-2006), African leaders were compelled to address the needs of their people and there was a marked reduction in violent conflict on the continent (Curtis, 2012: 2).

With the West's declining engagement in Africa due to global economic recession, the refugee crisis in Europe, the conflicts in the Middle East, China's rise to fill the gap, and its *laissez-faire* concern for good governance have impacted negatively on Africa's peace. Gehrold and Tietze (2011: 90-91) argue that "China is not supporting these African countries in order to put pressure on them to introduce democratic reforms of government; on the contrary, Beijing is simply trying to ensure that it has all the resources it needs." The Dominant Narrative contends that China's approach to providing economic relief for ailing African States impacts negatively on security as the period from 2011 witnessed a rise in conflict on the continent (see Conley-Zilkic, 2016: 2; Gebrehiwot and de Waal, 2016: 1). This narrative contends too, that having China as an alternative partner, the West has lost its leverage and African leaders can shun western liberal democratic norms.

The Western Narrative contends that China's economic intervention in Africa, which is devoid of clauses that demand accountability (Mlambo, et al, 2016), makes it the preferred partner for many African leaders since they stand to benefit from such low standards of responsibility (Gerson, 2011). As such, the Western Narrative holds that conflicts that abound are often products of high-handed leadership as civil strife is on the increase on the continent. China's policy of non-interference in Africa's domestic affairs, the argument goes, encourages government corruption and oppression which exacerbates poverty, widens the gulf and distrust between Africa's leaders and their people, and stirs conflict (Nkwanyana, 2021).

China's willingness to ignore the enforcement of international sanctions or multinational control mechanisms toward repressive African governments, and equipping them in the process, thwarts the hope of Africans toward a better life (Emmerson and Solomon, 2016; Horn Review, 2023). The claim that Africa has witnessed an increase in conflict since 2010 (see World Peace Foundation, 2016), coincides with China's stature as a dominant player on the continent. With Russia's decline in the sales of arms to Africa by 44%, China became the leading exporter of

weapons to Africa (Malyasov, 2024). China's increased arms sales perpetuates and exacerbates conflict and tensions between/within States, especially when these arms end up in the possession of Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) thereby worsening conflicts and insurgencies (Horn Review, 2023). Given the dangers of China's growing influence in security as well as other areas, African governments are warned to be wary and take steps to check China's expanding influence on security. It is from this perspective that Krukowska (2024) warns that ignoring China's increased assertiveness and security undertakings in Africa is a future threat for the West.

### **The Chinese Narrative**

China sees in Africa a collaborator with shared experience given that they both suffered colonisation, and it was due to Africa's bloc votes that the People's Republic of China (PRC) got control of China's seat as the UN in 1971 at the expense of the Republic of China (ROC) also known as Taiwan (Gariba, 2023; Vines and Wallace, 2023).<sup>1</sup> China's relationship with Africa can be categorised into three epochs namely; 1956-1978 that was governed by the five principles of peaceful co-existence and eight principles of economic aid and technical assistance in a period when bi-lateral economic aid without conditions served China's national interest.<sup>2</sup> The second era 1979-2000 which was a period of domestic reform in China that saw the lessening of economic investments and the reduction of concessional loans to African countries. However, China was still active in Africa as it offered a steady supply of technical expertise, doctors and scholarships; 2000 to present day marks the third epoch with the formation of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, and the African Policy Paper in 2006

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<sup>1</sup> The end of the Chinese civil war that began immediately after WWII in 1945 and lasted till 1949 saw the overthrow of the Nationalist party and the birth of the regime of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While the Nationalist party moved to Taiwan laying claim to China's sovereignty, the CCP took control of the mainland and laid claim to same. Having just one seat for China, the UN had to put this to a vote in 1971 where 26 of Africa's 41 independent States voted for the CCP/PRC that won. This further strengthened the ties between China and Africa. See, Kristina Kironka, 2022, and Alex Vines and Jon Wallace, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> China's five principles of peaceful co-existence are; mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non interference in others internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence. These principles were originally proposed to address China's relations with India, and were formally incorporated in 1954 into the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse with India and the Tibet region of China. These principles were also adopted as the guidelines for China's relations with Burma (now Myanmar) during China's Premier, Zhou Enlai's visit to Burma the next day, June 29, 1954. These five principles were part of ten principles adopted at the Asian-African conference held in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. Hence the five principles of peace got adopted by a large number of developing countries, and a cornerstone of China's policy toward Africa (see Wei, Ye, 2021; and Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014.

and 2015. The economic ties forged during these periods resulted in China becoming Africa's largest trading partner (as at 2009) with emphasis on a win-win approach for all parties (Ye, 2021; Gariba, 2023 ). Since the FOCAC was established, collaboration with Africa has usually been either through the forum or bilateral agreements, and cooperation on security has been a vital component of this relationship (Mudavanhu, 2022).

It was inevitable that China would become Africa's largest trading partner. This was a natural consequence to China's adoption of Angola's Resource-for-Infrastructure scheme, also known as R41, that the latter developed between the 1980s and the 1990s. Angola's R41 was a form of barter trade where in return for natural resources or to secure rights to resources, foreign countries would undertake the building of infrastructure that include roads, rails, hospitals. Angola used this method in trading its natural resources to compensate for its infrastructural deficit after twenty-seven years (1975-2002) of war and instability (Carvalho et al, 2021; Baker, 2023). The provision of services by foreign countries also included the supply of weapons and training of the nation's security forces which were considered non-public infrastructure (Baker, 2023). By adopting this approach from the 1970s in its dealings with African countries that had suffered huge infrastructural deficits and having provided interest free loans and grants from the 1950s up till this time, China gradually became the trading and development partner of choice among African States (Corking, 2013).

China's trading approach to Africa was implemented on the basis of the five principles of peaceful co-existence especially the principle of 'mutual benefit' as China sought to present itself as Africa's reliable alternative to Europe and the US.<sup>3</sup> In consonance with this objective, China's first infrastructural project in this era was the railway from Tanzania to Zambia. It was built between 1970-75, at a cost of US\$406 million, and covered approximately 1,860km. At the end of the Cold War, China's policy toward Africa evolved to embodying China's 21<sup>st</sup> century trade framework of profit based joint ventures, mutual economic benefits, neutrality, self-reliance, and respect for autonomy and non-interference (Baker, 2023; Gariba, 2023). As noted by Li Anshan (in Johnston,

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<sup>3</sup> In 1982, Premier Zhao Ziyang introduced China's four principles in interacting with Africa, namely; a mutually beneficial relationship, strong economic performance in Africa, greater variety of projects, and self-reliance of both sides in Sino-African partnership. Hence a mutually benefitting relationship was at the centre of Premiers Enlai and Ziyang's principles for relating with Africa

2014), China's policies on Africa may change, but the underlying principles do not.

Having presented China's policy approach toward Africa from the Emergent Narrative, this paper turns to China's influence on security on the continent. (Baker, 2023).

### **China's Security Policy in Africa**

With its increasing influence on the continent, China is also deepening its role in security in Africa as it has become increasingly involved in the provision of arms, participating in peacekeeping, conflict mediation, training of military personnel and establishing military bases. All these are tied to China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) that president Xi Jinping described as "a new and better approach to global security." (Freeman, 2024). Stating the level of security interaction between China and Africa, Bayes (2020: 20) notes:

Beijing is actively seeking a greater peace and security role in Africa. As Chinese interests and exposure have grown on the continent, security issues have become steadily more important within FOCAC interactions and outcomes. The 2012 FOCAC established the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security, while the 2018 FOCAC elevated peace and security to one of the eight 'major initiatives' to be pursued in Sino-African relations between 2018 and 2021. The FOCAC 2018 Action Plan pledged that 'China will increase defence and security assistance to Africa, and the two sides will enhance cooperation and strategies and experience sharing'. The Action Plan also announced the launch of 50 'security assistance programmes', including a China-Africa Peace and Security Fund. In 2018, China hosted the first China-Africa Defence and Security Forum, relaunched the following year, with a subtle name change as the first China-Africa Peace and Security Forum. The week-long forum included military representatives from 50 African countries and the AU, as well as 15 defence ministers, and is intended to be a recurring format sustaining focus on Chinese engagement with African security issues.

One issue of significance at the inaugural summit of the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in 2000 was that all but one country, Eswatini, were in attendance (Yu, 2022a). This strongly demonstrates how influential China had become in African security affairs and it was only a matter of time for China to establish its military presence on the continent.

Despite projecting and promoting its military capabilities in Africa, the efficiency of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is technically doubtful. Aside minor skirmishes with neighbours, PLA's last venture of major combat was in the Sino-Vietnam war in 1979 which was half a century ago. This lack of combat has been

termed the ‘peace disease,’ and places doubt on the efficiency of the PLA (Wen, 2015; Jones, 2019; Van Oudenaren, 2022). Van Oudenaren (2022) contends that the peace disease debilitates soldiers through making them faintly aware of the enemy, increases abandoned military equipment, ensures a reduction in skills of the use of military machinery and a general degradation in the professionalism of the military’s top brass as they become more pleasure seeking (also see Tian and Chen, 2023).<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the five principles of peace, this was a logical consequence. Nevertheless, given China’s need for external power projection in far-away places, and its investment and increasing number of nationals in these places, possessing the capability to protect them is an indispensable necessity.

China has been active in Africa’s security through peacekeeping, conflict resolution, arms supply and the utilisation of Defence Attaches. The China-Africa Policy Paper 2018 (see China’s State Council Information Office, 2021) States that:

Through various means such as port calls and joint exercises and training, China has provided strong support to African countries in strengthening national defense and the armed forces, and to countries in the Sahel region and those bordering the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea in upholding security and combating terrorism in their regions. China has launched assistance programs and helped train African military personnel under the Belt and Road Initiative, and in areas of law and order, UN peacekeeping missions, fighting piracy and combating terrorism.

Given these events, authors non-aligned with the Dominant Narrative consider it alarmist on the basis that China has been in Africa long before the turn of the century and has been influential in trade on the continent, yet China was never a part of the four waves of conquest and plunder that Africa has experienced beginning with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century with neo-colonialisation (Brautigam, 2011; Abidde, 2021). Drawing from recent events, Beijing was not privy to the plundering and proliferation of Muammar Gaddafi’s sophisticated arms stockpiles in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan revolution which found its way into the hands of armed groups and jihadist organisations across parts of North and West Africa (Small Arms Survey, 2015). This event that was masterminded by NATO made

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<sup>4</sup> Yen Lun Tian and Laurie Chen, 2023, report the sacking of nine military generals of the PLA in 2023 for corruption. This purge, they claim would widen and undoubtedly dent the confidence of Xi Jing Ping in his military, given his acknowledgement of the other effects of the peace disease.



Africa's Sahel increasingly unstable (Coleman and Job, 2021; Cocodia, 2024).

### **The Alternative Narrative: Assessing China's Security Footprints in Africa**

As China's continental and global influence increases, so too have its policies and principles in relating with Africa evolved, and in some cases, away from the original policies and principles. For instance, on the issue of non-interference, China has subtly interfered with the external policies of African States having used its influence to ensure the severance of ties of most African States from Taiwan which it considers a renegade province (Kironska, 2022; Gariba, 2023; Garguilo, 2024). In so doing, China acted outside the confines of the FOCAC that had at its onset - equal consultation, enhancing understanding, expanding consensus, strengthening friendship and promoting cooperation (Yu, 2022b). Such influence on African affairs by China will continue.

Being Africa's largest trading partner, it was a matter of time before China got more involved in security on the continent as it was ill-advised to leave these assets to the protection of the poorly equipped military of many of Africa's fragile and unpredictable governments. By virtue of its investments, China has over one million citizens in Africa and this provides good justification for a stake in the continent's security. Having a stake in security on the continent allows China greater influence at state, regional and continental levels (Bayes, 2020).

*China's Security Imprints Through Peacekeeping:* China has increasingly invested in security on the continent and this began with its role in peacekeeping in April 2007, when China's President Hu Jintao intervened in Sudan's Darfur crisis and convinced an uncompromising president Omar Bashir to concede to a UN peacekeeping contingent in Sudan (Cabestan, 2018; Cocodia, 2018). Ever since this period, China has sought to increase its mark on security in Africa, through peacekeeping and other means. China eventually established its mark in 2012 through the formation of the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security (CACPPS) (Alden, 2014).

Notably, from its 5<sup>th</sup> position in 2014, China became the second largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping by 2019, paying 10.25% of the UN peacekeeping budget, and placed it second only to the US with 27.89%. China still holds this position in 2024 with 18.68%, while the US pays 26.94% (Congressional Research Service, 2019 and 2024). From its first deployment of 20 military personnel in 1990 to assist in

monitoring elections in Namibia under the UN Transition Assistance Group (Gill and Huang, 2009; Saferworld 2011), China has deployed approximately 40,000 troops to UN peace operations between 1990 and 2019, of which over 80% have been deployed to Africa. In 2019, China had 2,517 peacekeepers in Africa (twice as many as the other four United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members combined). In 2024, of a total of 2,267 peacekeepers, China deployed approximately 2000 to Africa (Shah, 2024). In these deployments to Africa, China has recorded 16 deaths (Cabestan, 2018; Zurcher, 2019; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2020).<sup>5</sup> China, through such commitment indicates that it is ready to be a more responsible power broker on the continent and in global affairs. In September 2015, president Xi announced at the UN Leaders Summit on peacekeeping that China would provide \$100 million in military aid to the AU.

At the launch of the China-Africa Peace and Security Initiative (CAPSI) in September 2018, China fulfilled its promise of the \$100 million military aid pledged three years earlier, and provided an additional \$80 million military aid to assist the AU in building its peacekeeping capacity. China also provided approximately \$42.3 million to support the construction of the G5 Sahel Joint Force made up of the West African Sahel countries Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger (China's State Council Information Office, 2021). China's peacekeepers are sometimes deployed to some of the toughest spots which owes to the fact that the country places few caveats on the troops it pledges, a fact that the UN appreciates. This in turn heightens the recognition of China as a major player in the peacekeeping arena (Zürcher, 2019).

Chinese peacekeepers have received accolades for discipline and upholding the cause of peacekeeping. It is in this regard that some 332 Chinese peacekeepers, including 16 women, have received the prestigious UN medal for their service to the cause of durable peace in South Sudan. The UN Peacekeeping report (2023) notes:

For Blue Helmets serving for peace with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), personal reward remains second to helping conflict-affected populations feel safe. However, 332 dedicated women and men from China deployed as engineers and medical peacekeepers to this young nation's Western Bahr El Ghazal state recently received the

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<sup>5</sup> While China's official fatality figure is captured above, slight discrepancies are seen across other texts. Renan Montenegro (2021: 420) reports 14 deaths between same period which indicates lesser deaths than the China's official figure. Jean-Pierre Cabestan (2018: 728) on the other hand states that 18 peacekeepers had died as at 2017 which exceeds China's official figure.

prestigious UN medal for their unceasing efforts to improve the lives of communities here.

With this growing reputation and with Africa's support, China is gradually re-writing the UN's approach to peacekeeping As Bayes (2020) and Coleman and Job (2021) point out, there is a gradual shift in UN peacekeeping from the western approach of pushing for the establishment of democratic regimes, to a Chinese approach of ensuring regime stability, and from the model of the Liberal International Order (LIO) to a decentralised model where regions would have greater influence over UN peace operations decisions. Coleman and Job (2021) contend too that, "China endorses globalized UN peacekeeping but proposes a non-liberal (and non-western led) notion of 'developmental peace' to guide it. The complementarities between African and Chinese priorities raise the possibility of a profound challenge to LIO peacekeeping." There has been good reason for this clamour.

NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 that ousted Muammar Gaddafi was approved by the UN and spearheaded by the US, France and Germany. Though Russia and China did not veto the action, it turned China against the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle that was the mantra for the intervention and weakened the support of African States for the same tenet. The African Heads of State argue that, the R2P was employed as excuse for regime change rather than the protection of civilians which was the basis for its formation. Along with Africa, China showed disdain for the intervention and together they advocate for a Protection of Civilians (POC) approach that would focus on facilitating ceasefires, prompting conflict prevention and supporting peaceful resolution to conflict (Cabestan, 2019; Zürcher, 2019; Coleman and Job, 2021). Such actions of disregard for the African approach by the west, and China's respect for same, has seen African leaders drifting closer to China.

While China's stance with African States seems noble, the Alternative Narrative acknowledges that China's motives are not entirely altruistic. China incurred huge losses from the actions of the UN and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Libya, and so sought to prevent a repeat. This same reason has prompted China to intensify its security role in Africa. As Cabestan (2019: 719-720) notes:

In any event, the Libyan crisis had two consequences for China. The first was a growing awareness that it needed to better protect its nationals and interests abroad following the ill-prepared but successful evacuation of

some 36,000 Chinese from Libya and the loss of 50 Chinese projects, the total contractual value of which amounted to around US\$18.8 billion. The second was the growing risk of radical Islam's dissemination in the Sahel region, where Chinese companies are increasingly present: after Gaddafi's fall, Libya's southern borders became more porous, facilitating the movement of terrorist organizations into Niger, Mali, Mauritania and even Burkina Faso.

The spread of the crisis to these States would further endanger Chinese lives and businesses and place greater pressure on Beijing. To avoid this, an immediate solution would be to have more military presence on ground (through peacekeeping), while a long-term measure would be to establish military bases from where deployments can be rapidly made. To this end, with a military base in Djibouti, Beijing is considering bases in Angola, Kenya, Seychelles and Tanzania, and there are plans already to build one in Gabon. China's 2015 defense white paper identified protecting their overseas interests as a strategic task for the PLA. Then in 2019, China's defense white paper stated that the PLA was actively developing overseas logistical facilities to address deficiencies in overseas operations and support for contingencies including "overseas evacuation (Miller, 2022; Dalton, 2024).

China's losses from the undue interference of the West in Africa's domestic affairs compelled China's security focus in Africa. Thus, while China's support for the African/regional cause is welcome by Africans, in the final analysis, it is because it secures China's interest. Secondly, such sacrifices would not be made if it would not attract greater influence for China in Africa (Bayes, 2020). This applies to influence at the UN where China hopes it could, through Africa's support, change the current Western approach of pushing for the establishment of democratic regimes, to a Chinese approach of ensuring regime stability.

In support of the argument that China's support for Africa is to use it as a springboard to greater influence over UN security approaches, Coleman and Job (2021: 1466) note that China's support for African actors;

Would also enhance China's own influence, given its increasingly close relationship with the AU and African regional organizations, and its aspiration 'to build an identity as an economic partner and an ally in addressing the multifaceted security challenges on the continent. In 2017, China endorsed 'respecting African countries' ownership to solve African security problems as the precondition and foundation for supporting Africa-led peace operations.... China's interests in empowering African influence

over UN peace operations in Africa also serves its own broader positioning in global affairs.

It can also be argued that China's burgeoning peacekeeping role is necessary to keep its troops active in view of the peace disease that pervades the PLA. Peacekeeping deployments offer several advantages for the PLA namely field/battle experience, theatres to test new Chinese weapons, information and intelligence gathering of mission areas and beyond, and diplomacy/conflict management which peacekeepers are trained in. The diplomacy and conflict management skills that peacekeepers are trained in are sometimes placed at the service of the national governments of peacekeepers to keep aggrieved regions quiet, even when the causes for grievance are justified (Sotomayor 2014; Cunliffe, 2017). So given China's experience with its regions where grievances run high, the conflict management and diplomacy skills of its peacekeepers become valuable tools in helping the regime keep the peace. So here again, China's commitment to Africa attends to China's interest.

*Arms Supply, Security Programmes and Strategies in Africa:* China is currently the leading arms supplier in Africa having overtaken Russia and the reasons for this are obvious. The Russia-Ukraine war has diverted Russia's attention from supply of arms to Africa to its war with Ukraine, and the international sanctions placed on Russia's exports also affects the sale of weapons. China gladly stepped in to fill this gap using its economic influence in Africa, support for the greater relevance of African States in International affairs, and flexibility pricing in arms sales (which makes it more affordable) to its advantage. (Hull and Markov, 2012; Mariana, 2021; ADF, 2024; Militarnyi, 2024). China's arms sales to Africa has been on the rise since 2010. Between 2017 and 2020 China's weapons sales to Sub-Saharan Africa had tripled that of the US Bartlett (2023). In 2021 for example, Nigeria purchased 34.4% of its military equipment from China, 6% from Russia, and just over 2% from the US.<sup>6</sup> As observed by the ADF (2024), China's efforts were initially focused on East and Central Africa, but the waning influence of France in West Africa has seen China project its influence into the region.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The US placed an Arms Embargo on Nigeria in 2014 based on the highhandedness of the military leading to human rights accusations. The embargo was lifted in 2015, but 2021 saw another round of limited arms sales with human rights issues against the military being the reason. See, BBC, 2014; Chris Ochayi, 2015, and Al Jazeera, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Voice of America, 2023, Africa Coups Show Changing Ties With France. France's waning influence in West Africa is evidenced by the military coups in five out of nine Francophone countries. The affected countries are Burkina-Faso (January 2022), Chad (April, 2021), Gabon (August, 2023), Mali (August,

The consequence of these events, as noted by the US Department of Defense (in Hull and Markov, 2021), is that China is currently the leading supplier of arms to at least 21 African countries (ADF, 2024; Malyasov, 2024). Weapons sold to these countries include drones, rockets, artillery, armoured vehicles, aircraft, space systems, radar and electronic warfare systems. Given the peace disease of the PLA, and the multiplicity of conflicts in Africa, the latter becomes a test ground for the former's weapons.

Africa has become a driver of China's war economy hence Chinese weapons manufacturing companies are spreading over Africa. As noted by the ADF (2024) "Norinco, China's largest weapons producer, opened a new sales office in Senegal in August 2023. The company, which supplies small arms, artillery and armored vehicles, already had offices in Angola, Nigeria and South Africa, and there are plans to establish offices in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali."

The West is uncomfortable with these developments and warns that if things continue this way, conflicts in Africa could become inter-state wars beyond peacekeeping mediation efforts (Hull and Markov, 2012). The argument is also made based on the possession of Chinese weapons in the hands of Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) that China has been quite reckless in its sale of arms and uses its clout in the UN to hinder investigations into its dealings (Lynch, 2012). In Sudan, for example, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces used Chinese suicide drones to attack Sudan Armed Forces military bases in April 2024 (ADF, 2024).

Arguments from Bromley et al (2013) Mariani (2021) and Kadiri (interview, 2024) contend that China recognises that the illicit transfer of arms destabilises nations. Consequently, China has more to lose if weapons are proliferated given its investments on the continent and as already experienced from its economic losses in Libya. As such, China has stressed its commitment to preventing and combating the illegal sales of small and light weapons (SAWLS). In cases where weapons from China have been

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2020) and Niger (September, 2023). These make up approximately 56% of French speaking countries in West Africa. Of these five, the military regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger display strong anti-France sentiment and China's increased economic influence and Russia's increased military presence serve as buffers against France's interference unlike in the past where regime such changes in erstwhile French colonies could not happen without France's approval or involvement (see Ezenwa Olumba and John Ojo, 2024. Russia has Tightened its Hold Over the Sahel Region – And Now its Looking to Africa's West Coast; also see Reuters, 2023, Recent Coups in West and Central Africa;

found with VNSA's, it is likely that corrupt practices by government and military officials, or the sponsorship of rebel groups by neighbouring States are responsible for such proliferation. Such occurrences are not new in Africa or elsewhere.

*China's AI and Cyber Technology Dominance in Africa:* On the issue of Cyberspace technology that is crucial to security in modern time, China has been accused of sponsoring hacks or cyberespionage on African governments systems to glean information or even blackmail officials to give it a competitive edge over rivals. Africa owes its digital revolution to China's cost-effective, yet high quality equipment and service delivery (Gariba, 2023). Being a defining force of Africa's evolution enables China shape policies and trajectories of African States, and as such become more involved in their internal affairs (Kovacs, 2023). Such control is inevitable when majority of African governments invite China to assist them with their security challenges. The fields of cooperation of China's International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace (ISCC) have expanded to include online security. Consequently, Sino-African cybersecurity cooperation has emerged as a key component of China's new strategic alliance with Africa (Mudavanhu, 2022). Huawei, has been in the vanguard of China's initiatives in Africa. It is responsible for over 50% of Africa's 3G network and for 70% of 4G networks making China the dominant player in this area. These projects include:

- Burkina Faso – an EUR 80 million project to build a 650-kilometer fiber-optic network that will connect all of the country's major cities to a new Huawei-powered Smart City platform, commenced in July of 2021.
- Senegal – a national Huawei-built data center was opened, with the Senegalese government moving all government data and digital platforms from foreign servers to a new national data center, in June of 2021.
- Cameroon – the USD 15 million Zamengoe National Data Centre was built by a Chinese consortium, including Huawei.
- Zambia – the building of a USD 75 million National Data Center as part of the Smart Zambia 2030 project, with the prospect of an estimated USD 365 million to spend on a computer assembly plant at the same site.
- Cape Verde – a 720km submarine cable system, developed by HMN Technologies in January of 2022, with landfalls in Cape Verde and Senegal which, by way of a branching unit, can incorporate other countries in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
- Multiple Countries – a 45,000 km '2Africa' subsea cable developed by China Mobile and seven other partners has landings in 16 countries.

These investments are a direct development plan under the Digital Silk Road initiative, which itself is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was launched in 2013. The Digital Silk Road seeks to connect BRI priority countries through cross-border optical cables and communications networks. As at 2022, 40 of Africa's 54 States had signed the BRI agreements (Nkwanyana, 2021; Mudavanhu, 2022).

The argument of the Dominant Narrative to these developments is that China intends to use its dominance in this sector to promote its model of authoritarian governance that relies heavily on surveillance technology.<sup>8</sup> The narrative argues that this poses a challenge to democracy on the African continent (Nkwanyana, 2021). To lend credence to this claim, certain repressive democratic regimes (such as Uganda) that acquired these technologies for the purpose of controlling crime, have expanded its use to tracking government critics (Jili, 2020). Gordon Moyo (in Langa, 2024) notes thus; "We need to understand the honey we get from China, and the sting that digital technologies from China have on Africa because this has a visible impact on civil liberties." Similarly, Samantha Hoffman (in Nkanwana, 2021) argues that:

Beijing's technological expansion is particularly worrisome because of the areas it focuses on. The ability of smart cities technologies to enhance and streamline service provision can obscure their invasiveness and advancement of political control, eliciting cooperation from users who are focused on immediate and tangible benefits rather than (typically) less immediate drawbacks.

Gwagwa and Garbe (2018), Gavett (2020), and the Economist (2024) (amongst a host of numerous analysts of the Dominant Narrative) present such views of the democratic challenges occasioned by China's growing influence in Africa. In response, Lin (2023) notes that "existing analysis of China's AI impact in Africa habitually falls into a Cold War-style Narrative of 'authoritarianism' against the backdrop of 'liberal democracy.'.... The 'authoritarianism vs liberal democracy' model is problematic, if not outdated." The Western Narrative is hypocritical in this respect given that Germany, Italy, UK and US are among countries that also supply surveillance technologies to African States renowned for adopting repressive strategies (Gariba, 2023). There is no

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<sup>8</sup> Deng Kai, David Demes and Chih-Jou Jay Chen, 2024, Xi Jinping's Surveillance State: Merging Digital Technology and Grassroots Organisations. Discuss the use of digital technology in the repression of the regions of Tibet, Xinjiang and Zhejiang in China.



indication that these States have been selective of their African clients using human rights records as the basis for doing business. Most African States fall short of the required democratic and human rights standards, thus clients in this regard would be hard to come by. Only nine countries in Africa meet the standard of full or flawed democracies with the others being either authoritarian or hybrid regimes that are repressive, though boasting few freedoms (Freedom House, 2024). Interestingly, the patronage of surveillance and related technologies supplied by the West has not been limited to only these nine robust democracies.

Since the independence of African States, the West has undermined democracy on the continent through usurping progressive regimes and installing puppet governments whose priorities would be to attend to the interest of their patrons at the expense of their people (Jonathan, interview 2018; Chihombori-Quao, 2019). Repressive tactics are often applied by these hybrid or authoritarian democracies to fulfil this task thereby making the governments unpopular and inefficient (see Cheeseman, 2020). Consequently, if China's dominance of the digital and cyber security sectors ends up challenging democratic norms in Africa, it should be noted that the West has undermined Africa's democracy since the onset of independence (Nicholas, 2015; Terreblanche, 2018; Kadiri, interview 2024, Amobi, interview 2024, Cocodia, interview 2024).

A South African Expert (SAE, interview 2024) on China-Africa relations contends that China has made access to funds easier for African leaders to develop capacity and infrastructure. This, ideally, should rub off positively on the quality of democracy since it offers these leaders some leverage to plan and improve the lives of their people. China cannot be held responsible when Africa's leaders fail to responsibly utilise these funds and are unable to meet the terms of contracts. As Amobi (interview, 2024) argues, "if leaders do not sit up, others will come and take what they have, China inclusive." It should be stated that loans from the West to African States neither improved democracy nor the quality of life on the continent as infrastructural deficit, poverty and poor democratic ratings have persisted since independence, well before the advent of China's economic forays into Africa (Nicholas, 2015; Lumumba, Action, 2023)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Howard Nicholas, Patrice Lumumba and Action Aid discuss how the international political economic terrain fashioned by the west has been booby trapped through international institutions such as the

## **Training Programmes and Smoke Screens**

China, Tanzania, and Mozambique commenced a trilateral counter terrorism exercise “Peace Unity-2024” in early August. This marked Beijing’s renewed focus on military diplomacy in Africa. The drill involved ground units from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), Central Theatre Command and a naval flotilla from the Southern Theatre Command. The exercises that were carried out on land and at sea were aimed at strengthening military capabilities of the forces involved and build closer ties between the participating countries (Martin, 2024; Massango, 2024).

China's increasing naval presence in the region, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, has included port calls and joint exercises with local naval commands. However, the establishment of Chinese-operated ports and logistical hubs has raised alarm over long-term strategic control, potentially undermining the sovereignty of African host States (Brewster, 2018). Chinese fishing vessels have been reported to engage in Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in the waters off West Africa. In 2017, Ghanaian authorities expressed concerns over the increased presence of Chinese fishing vessels engaged in IUU fishing in their territorial waters. Interestingly, at the same time, Chinese naval vessels were conducting "friendly port calls" and joint training exercises with Ghana's navy. The timing and proximity of these naval visits raised suspicions that the presence of Chinese naval ships was to deter local enforcement attempts against the Chinese fishing vessels. This has not been the only reported case. In 2016, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Fisheries reported an increase in IUU fishing activities by Chinese fishing fleets. This coincided too with Chinese naval vessels making routine port calls in Freetown (Belhabib, Sumaila and Pauly; 2015, Environmental Justice Foundation, 2022).

China has been accused of focusing on training programmes for military officers from across the continent, much more than it does on joint military exercises. The criticism here is that China aims at building influence among Africa’s military now and in the near future. Even when military drills are conducted there is always an objective whether mutually benefitting or self-serving.

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world bank and the IMF whose policies have ensured that Africa, and much of the developing world stay stuck in a debt trap. The same scheme that China is accused of, that Africa should be wary of.

## Concluding Thoughts

Contrary to what the Dominant Narrative implies, citizens on the African continent can contemplate for themselves what China intends. The Dominant Narrative of the West has been overtly critical of China's growing influence on the continent and the seeming approval from Africans (Campbell et al, 2012). Through all the criticisms, the West bears greater responsibility for Africa's exploitation. For five hundred years it ruthlessly exploited Africa, an abuse that is still prevalent, albeit under less brutal, yet equally devastating policies. As such it possesses no moral standing to warn Africans of China's overtures toward a second colonisation.

The need to examine the popular narratives due to their biases is made evident in the following extract from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP):

Beijing's growing security focus comes out of its recognition that exposure to risk resulting from intrastate conflict could result in high economic losses. China drew many lessons from the conflict in Sudan and oil-rich South Sudan's independence in 2011. Since then, China's security involvement on the continent has been expanding, becoming a routine facet of FOCAC and China's activities in Africa.... Beijing's growing security focus comes out of its recognition that exposure to risk resulting from intrastate conflict could result in high economic losses (Freeman, 2024).

This is a classic example of the dominant construct that Adichie (2009) warns of its dangers;<sup>10</sup> a narrative crafted to absolve the West of blame and which would dominate the international media and much of academic literature. The conflict in South Sudan began in 2013. China made known its focus on security in Africa in 2012 with the formation of the CACPPS (Alden, 2014). China's focus on security was necessitated by western intervention in Libya in 2011 where China lost US\$18.8 billion in investments and hurriedly evacuated over 36,000 Chinese nationals. NATO's interference in Libya made the Sahel more unstable thereby placing more Chinese investments and citizens at risk. The Alternative Narrative would therefore aver that China's incursion into security in Africa was necessitated by undue Western interference in Africa's domestic affairs that left China's interests exposed to consequences that Beijing was not responsible for. Any responsible government would take proactive steps to protect its citizens and interests, and based on the power it

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<sup>10</sup> See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009, 'The Dangers of a Single Story' where the author discusses the bias of one-sided constructs that deliberately fail to capture the totality of events.

projects, China did so.

In view of the push by the West to discredit China's presence in Africa, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania is acclaimed to have told the US and its Western allies that 'we are friends and partners, but please do not choose for us who will be our enemy. Let us decide this ourselves'. (Kadiri, interview 2024). The West has directly or indirectly been linked to majority of Africa's wars, but none has been linked to China. Africa's bitter colonial history under Europe, especially in Belgian and Portuguese colonies continued into post-colonial times. The American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Whitehouse were prime actors in the death of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and the sequence of events that marked the beginning of decades of poverty, dictatorship and war in a crisis that reverberated far beyond the Congo (Reid, 2023; Lawal, 2024). Israel's role in the blood diamonds trade and Congo's crisis (Jay, 2023). The role of the US, France and Belgium in Rwanda's genocidal civil war (Chossudovsky, 2003; Dallaire, 2004). The assassinations of presidents, coups and proxy wars of the Cold War era on the continent and the rabid exploitation from colonial times till date as evidenced in the reasons for the murder of Muammar Gaddafi are all tied to Western interventions to keep Africa poor (Nicholas 2015; Chihombori-Quao, 2019; Amobi, interview 2024; Cocodia, interview 2024; Kadiri, interview, 2024). These actions (and more) have undermined democracy and the quality of democracy on the continent and not China's influence. China's approach so far has steered clear of dictating governance styles in Africa, and this will likely continue into the near future. There is no doubt that Africa is still conflict prone largely due to Western-exploitation-based-interference, distrust among African States, inept leadership that exhibits a lack of political will on the part of African leaders to get things done right.

Amobi (interview 2024), Cocodia (interview 2024) and Kadiri (interview 2024) all agree that China's dealings have been beneficial to Africa, but just as well, they acknowledge that it has been more beneficial for the Chinese. They agree too that African leaders have not made good use of the opportunities offered by China and this gives Beijing a lot more leverage for exploitation and this is what currently persists on the continent. They agree too that what China has offered in terms of development and security assistance has been a much better deal than what the West offered in its 500 years of interaction with Africa. Africa should accept this assistance, but with the aim of bridging the gap with the rest of the world, and to stand without being constantly

propped up by external aid. Here, the Alternative Narrative agrees with the Dominant Narrative of Africa's need to be wary of a second colonisation, but this time, from the East.

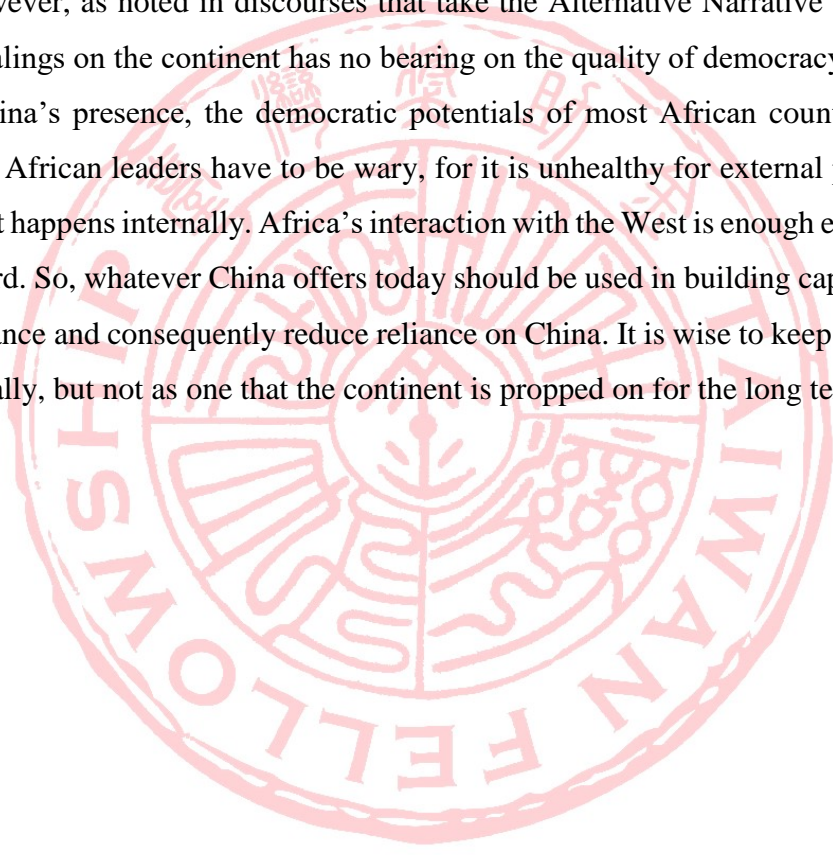
Finally, this discourse holds some importance for Taiwan. There is the African adage that the wise man learns from the experience of others as well as his own. China has been a direct beneficiary of the Russia-Ukraine war. Russia's divided focus due to the war gave China the opportunity to become Africa's top weapons supplier. China has capitalised on this as several Chinese weapons producing companies have set up outlets in Africa. This is a position that China would not want to lose. So, unlike Russia in its conflict with Ukraine, China should be willing to mitigate tensions with Taiwan. Taiwan on one hand is gaining a lot of international goodwill in Africa. China on the other, would be unwilling to lose the gains it has taken three decades to achieve on the continent, especially in view of its current domestic financial crisis (Prasad, 2023; Liu, 2024). Africa (represented by the AU) could therefore be a salient factor in mediation in the China-Taiwan crisis. This unfortunately is an avenue yet to be explored.

## **Conclusion**

Capturing the Western Narrative that calls on Africa to be wary of China's incursions into the continent, and the Chinese narrative that presents Beijing as a benevolent partner in development, the Alternative Narrative focuses on the African perspective to this issue. The West has plundered and controlled Africa's resources and politics for over half a millennium. It is understandable to see why it is difficult to let go, or have some other group share in this exploitation. To ensure that it remains Africa's preferred partner, the West took on the role of thinking for Africans. The Alternative Narrative that has been expressed by authors such as Adichie (2009) and Otopo (2020) asserts that Africa has come of age to have its voice heard in global affairs. The Alternative Narrative is not a mid-point between the views of the Dominant and Emergent Narratives of the West and China respectively, but how global, national and local minorities, the poorly represented, view issues that relate to them.

Whether from a benevolent or self-interested viewpoint, China has certainly done well for Africa. However, China's relationship with Africa as espoused in the Five Principles of Peace, has evolved from a benevolent partner with shared colonial experiences, to an influential partner whose benevolence is tied to greater influence and who interferes

in the foreign policies of African client States against its tenets of non-interference. The unwillingness of many African leaders to take responsibility for their growth has given China greater leverage in this relationship that extends to security issues. That China is deeply involved in peacekeeping in Africa, stems from the fact that Africa is still conflict ridden needing the presence of peacekeepers in the continent's five geopolitical regions. The shortfall in the security capacity of most African States found China willingly filling the gap through the provision of cybersecurity gadgets, military hardware and training programmes for military officers, all of which further China's influence on the continent and provide leverage in dictating policy directions of African States. However, as noted in discourses that take the Alternative Narrative approach, China's dealings on the continent has no bearing on the quality of democracy. With or without China's presence, the democratic potentials of most African countries have been weak. African leaders have to be wary, for it is unhealthy for external powers to dictate what happens internally. Africa's interaction with the West is enough experience in this regard. So, whatever China offers today should be used in building capacity and self-sustenance and consequently reduce reliance on China. It is wise to keep Beijing as a strategic ally, but not as one that the continent is propped on for the long term.



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