

China's presence in Africa comes with a new edge

By Uju Okoye

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A new Silk Road running between China and Africa promises a boost in trade for Beijing. Long focused on commercial activities, the Chinese government is now expanding its remit to bolster military relations and pursue subtler, soft-power strategies across the continent. But, as the US retreats, what tools will Beijing use-and should the West be worried?



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The Communist party wants to redefine its military engagement with countries across Africa and expand its power-projection capabilities. As part of this initiative, China invited top brass from 50 African nations last month to attend an inaugural *Defence and Security Forum*. From counter-piracy to counter-terrorism, China has vowed to provide these countries with “comprehensive support”, including equipment, personnel and tech.

One goal is to ensure the security of Chinese business interests in Africa, where President Xi Jinping’s government is entrenched as a crucial investor and trade partner. Between 2012 and 2016, China’s foreign investment in Africa more than doubled, from around \$40bn to \$90bn.

Beijing has positioned the Suez Canal into its Belt and Road Initiative - President Xi’s multi-billion-dollar trade project building roads and railways to connect China with markets in Africa and Europe.

China's military footprint is at its most visible in Djibouti, a small country with a strategic location in the Horn of Africa, allowing it to punch above its weight.

There, the US has its only permanent military base on the continent, stationing 4,000 soldiers at Camp Lemonnier - a launch pad for operations in Yemen and Somalia. Last August, the Chinese military opened its first overseas base in the country, which overlooks the Gulf of Aden, one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

This development prompted concerns in Washington - and allegations that Chinese troops there were blinding US Air Force pilots with lasers haven't helped matters. There is talk of building a new massive dock there, which could accommodate Chinese destroyers and supply ships.

Djibouti has hosted numerous Chinese infrastructure projects, including the first electric transnational railway in Africa and plans for a \$4bn natural gas deal. Beijing watchers say China's activities in Djibouti are a blend of commercial and military interests - a model that the Far Eastern powerhouse may replicate elsewhere.

This next port of call could be a paradise archipelago off the continent's western gulf.

At the end of a recent trip to Africa, China's Foreign Minister visited Sao Tome and Principe. This tiny island nation is tipped to be a strategic transport hub for Beijing, which has reportedly pledged tens of millions of dollars to revamp its international airport and construct a deep-sea container port.

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