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"*Tianxia*" Cosmovision and the "new" China's Military Presence in Africa

Luís Bernardino
Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Portugal
lbernardino@autonoma.pt

Luís Pestana
Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas (ISCSP)
Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal
luis.pestana@ipor.org.mo

"*Tianxia*" cosmovision and the "new" China's military presence in Africa

The tianxia *(天下) cosmovision has resurfaced as part of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) political discourse. As Beijing attempts to reframe it as the "Community with Shared Future for Mankind," China has viewed Africa as key partner in creating a new world order, which includes a comprehensive military strategy aimed at ensuring the sort of global harmony that safeguards its interests abroad. The present article seeks to clarify the historical and philosophical origins of* tianxia, *how it is reflected in China's foreign policy, particularly about its evolving relations with Africa and how a "new" Chinese military strategy for Africa is being developed. Focusing on historical data and current investments in key communication, logistical and broader technological sectors, this paper shows how China places itself at the center of a novel order and how it will impact the African continent presently and in the future.*

Keywords: tianxia, Global Security Initiative, FOCAC, China-Africa military cooperation, China-Africa relations, Community with Shared Future for Mankind

Cosmovisão "*tianxia*" e a "nova" presença militar da China em África

*A cosmovisão "*tianxia*" (天下) ressurgiu como parte do discurso político da República Popular da China (RPC). À medida que Pequim tenta reformulá-la como a "Comunidade com Futuro Partilhado para a Humanidade", a China considera África um parceiro fundamental na criação de uma nova ordem mundial, que inclui uma estratégia militar abrangente destinada a garantir o tipo de harmonia global que salvaguarda os seus interesses no estrangeiro. O presente artigo procura esclarecer as origens históricas e filosóficas da* tianxia, *como se reflete na política externa da China, particularmente em relação à evolução das suas relações com África, e como está a ser desenvolvida uma "nova" estratégia militar chinesa para África. Com foco em dados históricos e investimentos atuais em setores-chave da comunicação, logística e tecnologia em geral, este artigo mostra como a China se coloca no centro de uma nova ordem e como esta irá impactar o continente africano no presente e no futuro.*

Palavras-chave: tianxia, Iniciativa de Segurança Global, FOCAC, cooperação militar China-África, relações China-África, Comunidade com Futuro Partilhado para a Humanidade

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has a long-standing close relationship with Africa. In the 1950's, under the umbrella of the Third World denomination, Beijing looked at the end of colonialism as an opportunity to enhance its position as a loyal ideological partner to the newly founded states. As the Mao era ended and China's development skyrocketed in the Deng Xiaoping years, Africa's connection to the Middle Kingdom became less ideological and more pragmatic, closely associated to mutually beneficial agreements with the PRC. Through bilateral dialogue and multilateral forums, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Beijing has solidified its position in Africa and initiated a process of expanding its types of cooperation with African nations. When it comes to military cooperation, the Chinese have become more engaged as it deepens its interests in the region. For African leaders, this sort of strategic partnership enhances its surveillance and operational capabilities while strengthening its military capability.

As China promotes the Community with Shared Future for Mankind, which includes Africa, the more it is possible to trace back to ancient times the origin of this project. The *tianxia (*天下*)* or All Under Heaven has stood the test of time as a model for cosmopolitanism which some scholars believe to be the ultimate framework to tackle global issues. For China, it is an opportunity to stand as a leader, the core of a system theoretically elaborated to promote common interest and mutually beneficial relations. For Africa, it poses both a challenge and an opportunity as it navigates an increasingly interconnected relationship with Beijing.

This paper aims not only to explore the historical and philosophical underpins of the *tianxia* cosmovision, but also how it manifests itself in China's policy and discourse, particularly when it comes to its engagement with Africa and the gamble in increasing its military presence in the continent. This is especially noteworthy since the *tianxia* is often portrayed as a benign, all-encompassing system while omitting the usage of military force as a way of achieving a form of greater social harmony.

This study adopts a qualitative and analytically oriented methodological framework to examine China's contemporary foreign and defense policy. The analysis combines three main complementary dimensions: the systematic review of Chinese official documentation and specialized scholarly literature, including works that relate classical strategic concepts to current geopolitical dynamics; field-based research experience in China, providing direct insight into the institutional and academic environments where strategic doctrines are formulated and operationalized; and long-term military experience in African contexts, offering

empirical understanding of how Chinese policies are implemented, adapted, and perceived on the ground. The integration of these documentary, doctrinal, and experiential perspectives establishes a robust foundation for assessing how ancestral strategic traditions shape China's current global posture. Within this framework, the study examines China's new engagement with Africa, particularly under the "Belt and Road Initiative" since 2013, highlighting how historical strategic culture intersects with contemporary geopolitical ambitions across the continent.

Tianxia or "All Under Heaven": history of a cosmovision

The *tianxia* was, first and foremost, conceived in China as a new form of political order. After the fall of the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BC), the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC) was not in a particularly favorable position. Despite their efforts to replace the former rulers, Emperor Wu, the first Zhou ruler, governed over a state that did not possess vast material wealth, nor enough human capital to sustain a leading position (Zhao, 2019, pp. 4-5). The Duke of Zhou and brother to the Emperor, Dan, was instrumental in building the *tianxia* to rule over a vast and ethnically diverse territory. The feudal system (*fengjian* 封建) was formally implemented (Veira, 2021, p. 7) during this period precisely to facilitate governance.

Puranen (2020, p. 49) states that having vassal states under the stewardship of the Empire offered them a certain degree of autonomy, while having a central authority figure. Imperial emissaries were tasked with travelling to distant lands, collecting information and presenting it to the emperor, facilitating the decision-making process. Using similar values and practices, Zhou promoted the idea of mutually beneficial relations among all participants under Heaven, while warning the outsiders of the pitfalls of not embracing it (Pestana & Gomes, 2022, p. 107).

By means of marriage, vassal states gained a direct connection to the emperor as they became part of this extended family. This was very much in line with Confucian thought, a source of great admiration for the Duke of Zhou. The family was placed at the core of social interactions. As the family grew and expanded beyond the confines of the household, familial relations were not as strong and yet would not necessarily break (Confucius, 1979, pp. 17-19). Other authors offer perspectives that reinforce the sense of a great community at play. Benjamin Schwartz, for instance, mentions how bloodlines led to a sort of universal affinity (Wang, 2016). Marriage provided the means to achieve the workings of feudalism by which the new rulers of ancient China were legally bonded to the defeated

Shang (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 139). In the end, more than 50 vassal states were under the umbrella of the new Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子), a system that peaked during the subsequent Ming dynasty (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 139).

According to Zhang (2019, p. 17), the inclusiveness of the system was not based on ethnic considerations. Enemies of the Zhou dynasty, as was the case of the Rong (Theobald, 2013), could be drawn into the *tianxia* by following the leadership of the Zhou ruling class and the tributary system, by which vassal states would recognize the superiority of the governing polity of the Central Plains (Theobald, 2021). Puranen (2020, pp. 84-85) also stresses that the subjects of the realm were submissive under this arrangement. However, the *tianxia* should not be viewed solely as a great family under the guidance of the emperor. Only those that are generous with the people have the right to rule, as Confucius (1979, p. 78) illustrated the need to govern by virtue (*de* 德): "Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves." (Confucius, 1979, p. 63)

A crucial aspect of the *tianxia* system is that it not only established physical borders for the sinocentric world (Puranen, 2020, p. 84), but also a connection with the divine. Liang Qichao, as Wang (2012, pp. 338-339) highlights, understood All Under Heaven as having three main elements: the heavens, earth and all space in between. These different strata interacted with one another while the Mandate of Heaven, bestowed upon the Son of Heaven (Emperor), served as a reminder that the land did not belong to a single individual. Liang (2018) indicates that the civilizational moral order of the *tianxia* was kept by the emperor. The ruler had to govern with virtue and was tasked to set the moral example to both the people of China and beyond its borders (Liang, 2018).

Yet, harmony under Heaven was achieved by a combination of military means and shared cultural values. This was especially evident during the latter stages of the Zhou dynasty, the Warring States period (476 BC-221 BC). As the Son of Heaven lost control over the realm, conflict became crucial to ensure harmony under Heaven. According to Pines (2002, pp. 106-107), the emergence of rival states, like the Chu or Qin, compelled Zhou rulers to project power via long-distance military campaigns. Combined with economic integration and easily traversable borders, different realms and fiefdoms in the *tianxia* shared a common destiny. Thus, the All Under Heaven "myth" persisted through the ages. In this sense, Confucianism played a key role. The Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) envisioned a realm in which people retained their own cultural identity (Zhao, 2019, p. 37). The Mongols under Khublai Khan, that swept China, perpetuated these ideals, a principle that was equally followed by the Qing (Clemens, 2010, p.

221; Hang, 2016, p. 11). Even in today's China, there is active government promotion of "harmony without uniformity" (Pestana & Pires, 2026, p. 58).

These considerations lead to an extension into the realm of international relations. Several authors have viewed the expansion of All Under Heaven as the only source of stability and justice among nations (Pestana & Gomes, 2022, pp. 109-113). Zhao Tingyang famously advocates for the establishment of a brand-new form of *tianxia*, stemming from the failure of the liberal international order, comprised of three aspects: geographical, psychological and institutional. While it still represents the physical boundaries under Heaven, *tianxia* should also be understood as "all the people" and a "world institution." According to Zhao (2019, pp. 4-5), this normative construction is the only feasible way to realize a more cooperative world purged from ancient rivalries and competition. His writings are an extension of Sheng Hong's (1996) earlier work on how the world needed a fairer and more inclusive form of governance.

Zhao (2019, pp. 14-16) acknowledges, however, that relations among states in the Zhou dynasty were determined by hierarchical considerations different from our current state of global affairs. Yet, as Zhao states:

> a society devoid of all hierarchy has yet to be realized because such a world is an ideal lacking the conditions to bring itself about. Not only were all ancient societies hierarchical, but today's world is in reality still thoroughly hierarchical in nature. This indicates that even though hierarchical institutions run contrary to the values of equality, hierarchy is still a necessary feature of social interaction. (Zhao, 2021, pp. 57-58)

Zhao Suisheng (2018, p. 644) adds, however, that it is difficult to promote a full revamp of the world order, particularly to China's neighboring countries. What China proposes, therefore, is to maintain the structure based on nation-states while revising the hierarchic order (Zhao, 2018, p. 644). This sentiment is shared by other authors. Xu Jilin (2018) views the multicultural society of the Qing dynasty as a role model for the establishment of the *tianxia* today, firstly, to solve tensions between the Han and minorities, and secondly, as the core for the creation of an order based on values and not simply common interests. Ge Zhaoguang (2020), while criticizing the possibility that a true All Under Heaven system ever existed, acknowledges that China does need an international order that could replace the current American neoliberal system. This is mostly because, according to these authors, the current global structure has ultimately failed humanity, generating issues that cannot be solved by the set of rules and hierarchies that exist. It is, nonetheless, a utopia, as Callahan puts it:

> *Tianxia* is presented as a legitimate world order that is very different from Western imperialism. Thus, *Tianxia* is a Utopia that sets the analytical and institutional framework that is necessary for solving the world's problems. In other worlds, *Tianxia* is presented as a Utopia that has practical applications. (Callahan, 2008, p. 751)

Utopia or not, *tianxia* has made its way back to the academic debate and, consequently, straight into the PRC's discourse. As García (2020) mentions, China is much more than a state, but a civilization-state that has been perpetuated for more than 5000 years. This, however, does not necessarily mean that we will come across this exact nomenclature. Additionally, as China becomes increasingly more engaged in a multipolar world, accomplishing said harmony at a global scale requires major strategic efforts that include the safety of its national interests.

Why does *tianxia* matter to Africa?

China's approach to the world has been characterized by an attempt to deem itself as benevolent. For its leadership, it is a question of distancing itself from the geopolitical current situation of non-interference. With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia, Iran, among others, Beijing has doubled down on portraying the country as a more stable and reliable member of the international community. However, present-day insecurity is not the main reason why China has garnered momentum in the international stage. Having a decades-long presence in Africa, even during the latter stages of the colonial presence in the region, like for example in Angola (Bridgland, 1988, pp. 72-73), strengthened Beijing's approach to safeguarding its interests in the developing world. For China, it is all part of keeping the world connected under its guidance of non-interference and mutual benefits.

To achieve these objectives, the Xi Jinping thought on diplomacy has been pushed by the CCP since 2021 (Bandurski, 2025). Furthermore, it has manifested itself in the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) and the Global Governance Initiative (GGoI). The GDI serves as the central piece in promoting China's global vision and intention to set agendas at the multilateral level (Rudyak, 2023, p. 8) and tackling the global development deficit through a people-centered approach that includes a more harmonious relation between development and nature (Bandurski, 2025). Zhao (2025) states that it follows the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development while taking a more concrete shape with the Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI) (Bandurski, 2025). Launched in 2013, the BRI was envisioned to ensure a better future for infrastructure construction. Although it has lost some of its initial momentum given the increasing concerns that some of the projects were simply not viable economically, it has enabled China to become a key donor of foreign investment for nations like Pakistan or Iran. The development goals set by the Chinese state for the world are, nonetheless, faced with what Xi calls peace and security deficits (Zhao, 2025). This is the core reason for the creation of the GSI:

> There is a growing consensus among nations that the world needs peace and security, which is not only the premise of development and the basic condition for national prosperity and stability, but also an international public good indispensable to improved global governance. (Zhao, 2025)

Bandurski (2025) summarizes the GSI as an opposing paradigm to the US's security policy to what China perceives as being the embodiment of a zero-sum game. Instead, cooperation should be the main driving force in ensuring a more efficient global security framework. This can only be achieved by means of respecting diversity and "the common values of humanity" (Zhao, 2025). The GCI was devised to allow China to promote its take on how nations can interact, while challenging the notion that individual rights should take precedence. Bandurski (2025) summarizes by stating: "formula emphasizes the power of the nation state over citizens and communities – the 'rights' of countries and their systems taking precedence over individual rights."

This element of Xi Jinping's thought on diplomacy plays into the growing dissatisfaction in certain parts of the world with regard to the West. By claiming that the GCI serves common objectives and does not impose political models or values, it fuels the aforementioned discontent and challenges the liberal world order (Ellis, 2023). Finally, the Global Governance Initiative, introduced in 2025, calls for respecting sovereignty and, in turn, defending multilateralism and international law (MOFA, 2025). Ultimately, it reaffirms China's rejection of the current American leadership and calls for nations to follow Beijing's stewardship (Bandurski, 2025).

Terminology and discourse power (Friedman, 2022) are crucial for the CCP can mold its narrative to align with its geopolitical goals. When it comes to *tianxia* its expression is often hidden, as Tatlow (2018) mentions. For China's leadership, the equivalent nomenclature is the Community of a Shared Future for Mankind (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), a continuation of Hu Jintao's "Harmonious World" (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界) (Puranen, 2019, p. 261). Presented

in 2013, it is a central element of Xi Jinping's thought on diplomacy.[1] Although vague, just like *tianxia*, it is characterized by the Chinese leadership as a series of guidelines for a fairer order while, at the same time, critiquing what it perceived as Western hegemony (Puranen, 2019, pp. 263-264).

Furthermore, it connects directly to the claim that China has always possessed an international worldview symbolized by *tianxia* (Puranen, 2019, p. 263). In its current Community of a Shared Future narrative, it aims at achieving five major goals, as described by the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Center (2025): promoting dialogue and consultation for conflict resolution, constructing a common security framework, mutually beneficial cooperation, promoting culture exchanges as a means to achieve openness and inclusiveness and tackling environmental issues in a unified manner.

Tatlow (2018) concludes that *tianxia* and the Community of a Shared Future for Mankind are inherently abstract. They do not serve as a blueprint to how China intends to be the core of world politics and, yet, either carry the same principle that from the country stems the moral framework necessary to generate a truly harmonious world, fueled by interdependency and, as Qin Yaqing would put it, stronger relations among states willing to be part of the system (Pestana & Gomes, 2022, p. 112).

The *tianxia* has, thus, a certain appeal as the West's influence seems to wane. Western countries have, for decades, been unsuccessful in promoting Africa's development, mainly through its financial institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Moyo, 2010; Pestana, 2013). For Africa, having a reliable partner in China is fundamental for the continent's development and, as Beijing deepens its ties with its partners in the developing world, more concrete investment in protecting its interests abroad will be part of the nation's long-term goals. To ensure All Under Heaven, Africa is to be incorporated into the Community of Shared Future for Mankind which, in turn, will contribute to China's reemergence (Pairault, 2021) as a centrifugal force that attracts the external into its system.

China's military presence in Africa: an evolving connection

The Bandung Conference that launched the Non-Aligned Movement (April 18-24, 1955) and the subsequent establishment of strategic relations between China and Egypt in 1956 (Hamchi, 2017, p. 578) symbolized the beginning of a political-diplomatic relationship that has reached the present day and that serves

[1] The Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Center, 2025.

as a justification for much of what is the current strategic posture of China in Africa.

During Mao Zedong's rule, Zhou En-lai's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Pestana, 2013, p. 114) were a major driving force for Beijing to establish diplomatic relations in a post-colonial world, as it separated itself from Soviet and American attempts to engulf newly formed states into their ideological camps (Pestana, 2013, p. 116).

In Angola, for instance, it is possible to witness the first signs of China's pragmatic foreign policy, combined with Maoist guidance. Before reaching power in 1974, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) received vast support from the Soviet Union. As a response, the PRC pledged to aid the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), movements closely tied to the United States (Taylor, 2006, pp. 76-77; Pestana, 2013, pp. 178-179) and officially recognized by the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Narrowing down on UNITA, China's support was, however, quite modest. As Jackson (1995, p. 397) points out, Jonas Malheiro Savimbi and UNITA's top brass attempted to garner attention from Beijing, alleging that the movement followed Maoist doctrine since at least 1966. However, according to Jackson (1995, pp. 397-398), China had a role to play in UNITA's war efforts, particularly when it came to the lack of armament provision.

After the difficulties posed by the Cultural Revolution (Taylor, 2006, pp. 32-33), Beijing became more engaged with Africa, specifically in the 1990s. While the first years of Deng Xiaoping's era represented a period of less intense engagement with Africa (Li, 2007, p. 72; Taylor, 1998, pp. 43 e 44) and a greater focus on dealing with the Cold War superpowers (Taylor, 2006, pp. 60-61), the tide would soon change. Starting in 1982 with Premier Zhao Ziyang (Wren, 1982), China launched a series of African tours that last to this day. The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 were also crucial to the strengthening of ties with Africa. While the West, with whom China had attempted to deepen its relations, condemned the crackdown on protesters, many African nations showed support for Beijing. African economies showed significant signs of improvement in the 1990s and China viewed the continent as a key market to export its goods to (Pestana, 2013, pp. 126-127).

In 2000, the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)[2] highlighted the importance that Africa had gained in Chinese foreign policy and opened space for strategic multidimensional cooperation. This forum became one of the main bulwarks of Beijing's relationship with states and the main African organization – the OAU and, starting from 2002, the African Union. A total of 44 African nations were represented in a gathering hosted by Jiang Zemnin which promised greater debt relief and the creation of investment funds for the continent (Brautigam, 2009, p. 77).

Since the 2nd Ministerial Meeting of FOCAC, which took place in mid-2003 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, this bi-multilateral cooperation relationship[3] between the PRC and the AU has been guided by action plans. These set very precise goals and indicators for the following three years, that is, between each ministerial meeting, in a cycle of constant and stable cooperation that has allowed the optimization of this process of bi-multilateral cooperation.

Although the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was created as a broader and more strategic cooperation area, focused mainly on actions related to socio-economic development and global trade, throughout its editions, the themes of diplomacy, and especially defense and security, have gained more acuity and relevance. In the first China Action Plan – AU (2003), "Political Relations, Peace and Security," the principles established in the so-called "Beijing Declaration" (2000) were reaffirmed and emphasized, by way of example, in the growing participation and commitment of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations Peace Operations on the African continent and cooperation in new security issues and in the fight against terrorism, among other strategic areas.

In this context, in 2006, when "*China's African Policy*" was published (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2006), it was the first time that the Beijing government issued a document with precise guidelines and decisions on the political-strategic relationship with Africa, symbolizing, once again, the growing importance of the African continent in China's international relations

[2] The "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation" is the main multilateral cooperation mechanism between China and 53 African nations (plus the African Union), founded in the mid-2000s. It meets every three years to strengthen economic ties, infrastructure, trade and diplomacy, with the motto of "building a community with a shared future". https://bricspolicycenter.org/forum-de-cooperacao-china-africa-focac/

[3] "Bi-multilateral" cooperation represents a more adaptable, dynamic and practical way of conducting cooperation within states and organizations, allowing a greater approximation between the multiple actors in a framework of development aid and strengthening the conditions of security and multidimensional cooperation, which requires a better understanding between the values of the state and the commitments linked to the organization. It represents a new paradigm that points to a redefinition of traditional cooperation strategies (bilateral and multilateral), requiring a greater commitment in the organizations and a commitment to the connection between them and the member states, which leads us to the need to have a better understanding of the conjunctural realities and clearly understand the priorities of the states and organizations, adjusting traditional cooperation models to the bi-multilateral paradigm, which becomes necessary in today's world (Bernardino, 2023a, pp. 773-784).

with the world. The CAP emphasized the mutually beneficial nature of China's engagement in Africa, the respect for the One China Policy and strengthening political, economic, cultural and security cooperation (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2006; Grimm et al., 2006, p. 2). With regard to security and defense, the deployment of military personnel and the PRC's participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and scientific-technological cooperation in the area of military equipment are explicitly mentioned, along with the provision of training to African troops and betting on the advice and expert consultancy provided by private Chinese companies in the media military that began to trigger this new reality.

At the end of 2021, the PRC developed a political-strategic document that would define the relationship with Africa and enable greater engagement of African countries and African Regional Organizations (ARO), providing context. The aforementioned document, called "*China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*"[4] reaffirms the relevance of strategic cooperation with the African continent and elevates the relationship with some key countries to a political-strategic relationship.

More recently, in mid-2023, China launched the so-called Global Security Initiative (GSI), a document that complements its sectoral strategies, namely the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilizational Initiative, creating strategic conditions for the strengthening of security and defense cooperation and necessarily the Chinese military presence in Africa. Broadly, the GSI must be articulated, according to Herman (2025), with the "*2025 White Paper on China's National Security*," a key document that highlights Beijing's forthcoming objectives when it comes to political, economic, as well as military science, technology, culture, social and international issues. As with *tianxia*, Tang (2025) claims, there is a promise of a moral order that not only defies the Westphalian one but also serves as its replacement in the environmental and technological battlegrounds.

In mid-2024, during the last ministerial meeting of the FOCAC, advances in peace and security cooperation were emphasized, such as the holding of the 3rd China-Africa Defense and Security Forum in 2023 and especially the actions of the Chinese Navy off the African coast and in the Gulf of Aden, where it has its main naval base outside China – Djibouti.[5]

According to Nantulya (2024), both the resources for the training of the Chinese Armed Forces and the appropriations for the sales of military equipment, as well as the strengthening of operational capacities for peacekeeping operations and

[4] https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367447.html

[5] Additional information is available on the FOCAC website: https://2024focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/

counterterrorism will come from the agreements defined in the FOCAC. These are intended to contribute to a more secure and much more developed Africa, because the bivalent relationship between security and development is understood as structural. It seems to us to be significant, for example, that in Xi Jinping's speech at the opening of the 2024 conference, the importance of the PRC's assistance so that Africa can strengthen its capacities to establish (and maintain) peace and security was emphasized, mentioning by name the Global Security Initiative[6] as structuring for this purpose. The final declaration of this conference is the one with the most commitments in the military area in the history of FOCAC and everything points to a new military strategy that leads to greater engagement by China in African security and defense (Nantulya, 2025b).

President Xi considers the "FOCAC 2025-2027 Action Plan" as an example of how the GSI might be implemented, as well as placing "target to train 6000 senior and 500 early-career African military officers, as well as 1000 police officers, by September 2027, ahead of the next FOCAC Summit" (Herman, 2025). These objectives must also be placed in the context of the broader Chinese military presence in Africa. It is important to remember that, since mid-2017, China has had a military base in Djibouti, being its first military camp outside its territory and aligning with the strategy adopted by other regional/global powers that already had a military presence in the region (USA, France, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, India, etc.).

In recent years, unofficial information indicated that China would have the strategic objective of building a second military base on the African continent, this time on the Atlantic coast, which would be a significant step in the military positioning and geostrategy of the Atlantic region, namely in the South Atlantic. In these circumstances, the strengthening of military relations with some countries in the Atlantic basin, namely Ghana, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, with the perfusion of exercises by the Chinese Navy in the Gulf of Guinea, and in particular the engagement in the modernization of the Port of Bata, would be strong indications that Beijing was planning the installation of a military base in the region (Kardon, 2022).

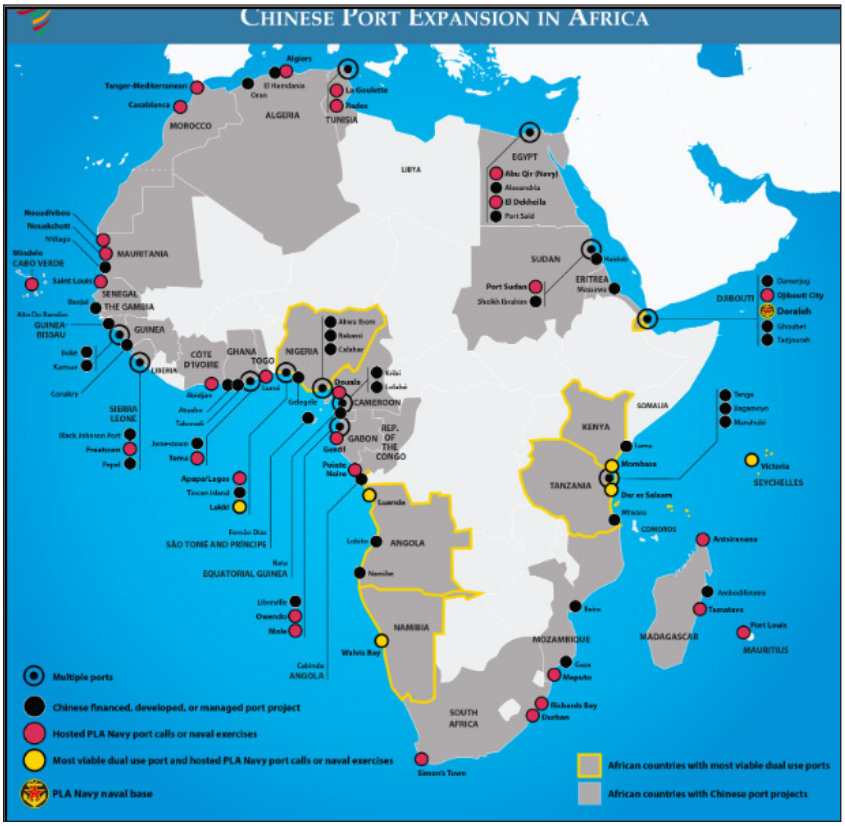
According to the most recent information from the Beijing government, around one hundred African ports have been built and/or financed by Chinese companies, and most of them are operated by Chinese state-owned carriers (Vines et al., 2024). We also note that some analysts report that this data may be overestimated and that the confirmed numbers indicate that of the 38 African coastal states, about 30 have ports invested and/or operated by Beijing, and ac-

[6] Keynote address by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the 2024 FOCAC Summit.

cording to Kardon (2022), more than a quarter of all African ports have some type of Chinese presence, including military.

In this context, we have seen that most of these ports are built with a mixed structure, that is, they are commercial ports, but they have the capacity to receive military vessels and operate as if it were a naval base. According to Nantulya (2025), since 2000, the Chinese Armed Forces have carried out 55 visits to African ports, with 19 military exercises with African naval forces, both multi- and bilateral, involving 36 different ports in practically all countries in the region, but with special attention in the southern half of the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea region (Bernardino, 2023b).

Figure 1
Ports with Chinese investment or presence in Africa (2025)



Source: Nantulya (2025)

The recent increase in Chinese presence in African ports is closely linked to the New Silk Road, as several of these ports serve as connectors to other infrastructures (roads and railways) converging economic interests with a more as-

sertive military posture, even in the defense of their interests in these regions. In addition, considering the other Chinese investments in the region, in the most diverse areas, it is expected that China will maintain strategies to ensure the security of these resources and investments, namely of its employees and the working community, and thus combine the best of both worlds, i.e., expand its military presence in these spaces of strategic conjunctural interest and at the same time improve its ability to protect its investments. Consequently, it presents the Middle Kingdom as the centerpiece whose appeal may bring harmony to a restless and chaotic neoliberal order.

Military training and cross-training are one of Beijing's main ways to extend its influence in African countries, allowing interaction and greater involvement in the construction and operational capabilities of the armed forces of these countries, namely those (few) that can develop a maritime capability. According to Arduino (2024), China sees in this strategy the possibility of promoting its governance model in terms of defense and security and leading to greater involvement in training, advisory and sale of military equipment. Reflections on the relevance of this policy was the recent construction, in Tanzania, of a military training center, being the first Chinese military training school abroad, where a military exercise recently took place that allowed the operational projection of a battalion by air means from China to Africa (Nantulya, 2023).

Added to this are the possible medium/long-term advantages, considering the relevant role that defense cooperation and the armed forces have in most African countries, and that the military personnel selected to receive military training will potentially occupy leadership positions in the future, Chinese ties and influence in these countries will tend to deepen over the years. This training model would be part of the operational assistance process to the military forces and security services, which would be materialized through the provision of technology and specific training, fully covered or largely financed by China, to strengthen the operational capacity of the armed forces and security forces of African countries, as do the United States, France, United Kingdom or Arab nations (Ikpa, 2025).

There is also another area, linked to Security and Defense Cooperation, in which the PRC has been expanding its presence in Africa, namely in the supply of surveillance, communication and radar technology systems that allow the command and control of military operations. It should be noted that about 70% of the digital communication infrastructure in Africa is provided by China (Prakash, 2025). These investments include a 4,000 km fiber optic project in Guinea, the participation of Huawei in Safaricom, Kenya's telecommunications network, and

the expansion of 4G and 5G networks in countries like Ethiopia, Nigeria or South Africa (Prakash, 2025).

Consequently, surveillance tools are part of broader contracts and agreements, which include other technologies such as data centers and artificial intelligence resources, among other more advanced technologies that are gradually equipping the main African armed forces. These tools, however, have been considered highly controversial. In Zambia, the Smart Zambia Project was approved without parliamentary oversight, and supervision from the Zambia Public Procurement Authority only occurred after the deal was done (Li, 2026). The facial recognition technology provided by CloudWalk to the Zimbabwean government has also come under scrutiny, as personal data is provided to the Chinese company without any supervision and protection of personal data (Chutel, 2022).

Regardless of the inherent dangers associated with these technological advancements, we find that at least 22 African countries have already adopted Chinese monitoring and surveillance systems, which denotes a dependence in the future for a critical capability for any armed forces (Nantulya, 2025b). From a Chinese perspective, it is certainly of enormous pragmatism and a medium/long-term strategic vision where these armed forces and these intelligence and command and control services will be dependent on a technological upgrade in the future.

Figure 2
PLA Navy soldiers in Chinese waters after completing escort missions off the coast of Somalia, February 2024



Source: Paul Nantulya (2025)
https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-africa-maritime-networks/

Furthermore, greater Chinese presence in Africa's communication and cyberspace may be perceived as a new way of integrating the continent into its

tianxia via the Digital Silk Road (DSR), an offshoot of the Belt and Road Initiative. Launched back in 2015, it emphasized the export of Chinese technologies and the contribution to digital infrastructure and governance (Heeks et al., 2024).

The field of infrastructure has garnered considerable attention. From 2013 to 2019, China through its companies invested $17 billion US dollars into the DSR, the majority of which ($10 billion) was directed at e-commerce and mobile payment services and around $7 billion in foreign direct investment and loans was focused on fiber-optic cable and telecommunication networks (Eder et al., 2019). The Chinese government has sought to include its tech companies in these efforts, both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (China Telecom and Unicom) and private-owned enterprises (POEs) (China Mobile, Huawei and Dahua). The main targets of these companies are emerging markets and developing countries.

As described, private companies have also taken part in this strategy. Huawei has been extremely active, even raking in support from Chinese policy banks. This makes it an outlier when the BRI is discussed. Typically, SOEs are the ones leading the way when it comes to participating in China's foreign policy efforts. But the two companies aforementioned have been key to providing technological services on China's behalf.

As previously highlighted, the PRC has carried out several military exercises in Africa together with most African states, evidencing a strategy of expanding defense cooperation, in support and strengthening of economic activities that are dominating the agenda in the China-Africa relationship. More recently, between July and August 2024, the Peace-Unity 2024 exercise was carried out in Tanzania and Mozambique. This military exercise combined land and sea forces, and lasted two weeks, employing land, naval, air and sea forces of the Liberation Army of the PRC and more than a thousand soldiers. For the first time, the exercise was carried out with troops deployed directly from China (which were designed with strategic intra-theater transport capabilities), and not employing the resident detachments at the Djibouti base. This fact is of great relevance, because it

> showed the PLA's growing ability to project infantry, armor, artillery, and support units over great distances. It also underlined the importance of Africa as a testing ground for the PLA's power projection, readiness and combat capabilities. (Nantulya, 2024, p. 1)

The sale of weapons and military equipment is also part of the strategy to expand the Chinese presence in Africa. Currently, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)[7] about 15% of the

[7] https://www.sipri.org/

weapons imported by African countries come from the PRC. A figure lower than Russia, the main supplier of arms to Africa, which corresponds to about 35% of total arms imports on the African continent. It is important, however, to note that, according to military experts, there is a growing trend in the sale of Chinese weapons to African countries, largely due to the need for African countries to seek alternatives to Russian military equipment, in view of the conflict in Ukraine. In addition, according to this year's SIPRI data, these exports are not uniform for the entire continent, and there are different approaches and different relationships with different African countries, although the countries in conflict are those that bet more on the acquisition of weapons.

In 2024, the PRC was the fourth country among the main arms suppliers in the world, behind the United States of America, Russia and France. The main destination of its exports, however, is not African countries. More than 50% of exports go to Pakistan and countries in the Middle East. In Africa, the main buyer of Chinese military equipment is Algeria, with just over 3% of the total, followed by Nigeria, with 2%, and a myriad of countries that have a growing dependence in economic terms and that now have a dependence in terms of defense technology.

China's arms trade with Africa, therefore, although it has gained strategic value in recent times, is not so representative, neither from the point of view of total Chinese exports nor in relation to African suppliers. In this context, and entering into a more detailed analysis, we can effectively ask ourselves if there is a "new" Chinese military strategy for Africa. We will try to answer this question in the next section.

The "new" Chinese military strategy in Africa

The PRC in the current framework of international relations is a global player seeking to assume a global role (Tomé, 2025). China has recently emerged into this reality, as a result of its foreign policy called the Going Out Strategy, officially launched in 2001 and more specifically since 2013, as we have seen, after the presentation of the Belt and Road Initiative, emerging as an important economic, political, diplomatic, but also a security and defense actor, namely in Africa, where its presence is unavoidable and, for many, unquestionable (Bernardino, 2023b).

According to Arduino (2024) the presence of Chinese citizens and economic interests in Africa has grown substantially since 2001 due to the expansion of China's trade with African states and organizations, financing projects related to the construction of critical infrastructures necessary for the development of

these countries, establishing medium- to long-term economic agreements with clear advantage for Beijing. In 2024, bilateral trade between China and Africa had reached around US$278 billion (China Africa Research Initiative, 2025a) and FDI had recorded US$3.37 billion (China Africa Research Initiative, 2025). These partnerships are almost always based on the supply to China of strategic mineral resources, such as oil, natural gas or rare earths (and others) and the provision of vast plots of land for agricultural production, contributing decisively to the African economy and, increasingly, to Africa's regional and continental security. This model has been designated as "Angola model,"[8] and for the Portuguese speaking countries has been a prime example of how China obtains natural resources while providing loans for construction projects (Pestana, 2013, p. 4).

Currently, on this continent, many countries and regional organizations are involved in intra-state armed conflicts, and are plagued by Jihadist terrorism, various illegal traffic and banditry or maritime piracy off their coasts, with a growing feeling of regional insecurity. Conflict in the African continent is a problem that has gone beyond the regional or continental dimension and has become a global problem, with an impact on the world economy (Bernardino, 2023b).

In this context, the increase in the number of violent attacks against Chinese workers and interests in Africa has led to the awareness of the Chinese community (and political leaders) for the necessity of assuring protection, associated with the consequent economic loss that these kidnappings and security incidents cause. One of the first examples dates to 2011, when the Chinese military assisted in evacuating 38,000 workers from Libya amidst the fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime (Leonard, 2012, p. 21). These aspects are thus some of the main factors that persuaded the Chinese government to react and bet on strengthening the security of its citizens and its economic and financial interests in Africa, in what seems to be, in our opinion, a "new" Chinese military strategy for Africa.

China has integrated into the "new" framework of defense foreign policy the creation of bilateral and multilateral (and bi-multilateral) cooperation and assistance programs and, likewise, has maintained the intransigent principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries. According to this new paradigm, which aims at morphing the country's role into that of a major security and defense player in Africa, two major vectors can be identified: first, to defend its economic and security interests, and secondly, to expand its influence in Africa and consequently in the world.

[8] The "Angola model" represents a strategic partnership relationship between China and Angola, where the African partner largely depends on Chinese investment for its development, compromising the national reserves of strategic resources in the coming years. To a certain extent it is a strategy of cooperation that creates economic dependence, which is also happening in investments in security and defense.

China's growing involvement in peacekeeping operations in Africa has also provided the opportunity to accelerate the construction of the so-called "Blue Water Navy," to be more present in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, having established its first overseas military base, as we saw in 2017 in Djibouti, precisely in Africa. On the other hand, it has expanded its military presence by bilaterally involving African countries through joint military exercises, strengthening military training and advice, establishing protocols for the provision of information systems related to cybersecurity, and also reinforcing the sale (and donation for consideration) of war material, and establishing programs for the construction of military infrastructures that have ensured a strengthening of defense cooperation with practically all African countries, particularly the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP).

The bilateral strand is strengthened, multilaterally, through an increasingly privileged and strategic relationship with the AU and the AROs, and the newly established China-Africa Security Forum (with seven meetings held so far), combining the two strands of cooperation in a strategic bi-multilateral approach.

Currently, FOCAC, as we have seen, covers practically the entire African continent and relates to states and regional organizations. China currently has embassies in 50 African states and is represented in all AROs, guiding China's relations with the AU and the regional economic communities, as this cooperation has increasingly become institutionalized and strategic for China. This reference framework has created opportunities to align the PRC and Africa with bi-multilateral norms and agreements, resulting in a strategic partnership with African organizations and states, involving several areas of cooperation, namely economic-financial and security and defense included in the Action Plan 2019-2021 and many measures replicated and increased in the current Action Plan 2025-2027 (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2024).

At the end of 2022, China ranked 9th in terms of troop contributions to all UN missions with a total of 2,235 military and police personnel and became the largest troop contributor among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. In recent years, the PRC has increased its contribution to the budget of peacekeeping operations of the aforementioned organization, representing about 19% of the budget of the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, being in 2nd place after the USA (26.95%) (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2026). These indicators were adjusted at the end of 2025, when China became the 8th contributor of troops to United Nations missions, involving about 1,800 blue helmets, of which 64 are women).[9]

[9] https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/02_country_ranking_82_january_2025.pdf

In the bilateral dimension, still the primary vector of defense cooperation in Africa, the last decade registered a significant increase in joint military exercises and port visits by Chinese Navy ships, namely through the participation in an UN-led anti-piracy operation of the Horn of Africa, in which the Chinese Navy's port visits to African countries (from the naval base in Djibouti) have become increasingly important and much more frequent, particularly in the South Atlantic area.

Thus, the presence of the so-called "security contractors," Chinese securAfrica, which respect the principle of non-interference, has asserted themselves in the African security context, aiming to fill, on the one hand, the problems African governments have in guaranteeing the security of Chinese companies and workers; and on the other hand, to strengthen cooperation and influence in Africa, resulting in a contribution to the Chinese defense economy and a source of employment for the military reservists of the Chinese Armed Forces who are integrated into these semi-state security enterprises.

The use of these security companies is understood as a relevant point of the "new" strategy in Africa, helping regional security and benefiting China by increasing business revenues in the area of the defense economy. Estimates indicate that Chinese private security companies operate in 14 African countries (Suadoni, 2025[10]) and collaborate with local contractors to provide protection to China's investments and, by extension, Chinese workers (Africa Defense Forum, 2025). In fact, these companies have been called into action, as the African Defense Forum reports:

> In July 2024, militia fighters killed nine Chinese nationals at a Chinese-linked mining site in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo's Ituri province. Analysts say incidents like this – and a 2023 attack that killed nine Chinese nationals at a gold-mining site in the Central African Republic – resulted in the deployment of more Chinese security companies. (African Defense Forum, 2025)

In short, the "new" Chinese military strategy for Africa has been developing recently, based on a growing dynamic of selective involvement, always privileging non-interference in the internal affairs of African states. However, this bi-multilateral strategy has led China to be more interventionist and to assume itself as one of the main actors for regional Security and Defense in Africa (Bernardino, 2023b).

[10] Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and Mali.

This aspect, what we call a "new" Chinese military strategy in Africa, combines elements of continuity and some innovative aspects that are characterized by greater involvement in the multilateral framework of peace operations, the strengthening of the presence of Chinese private military companies and the strengthening of cooperation, military advice and advice, along with an increase in arms sales and the number of military technical and technological assistance programs with the African countries, namely in the PALOP. For some leaders in the continent, however, their dealings with China have been met with less scrutiny, as many attempt to perpetuate their status. As Herman puts it, when referring to the GSI: "For African governments, perceived advantages of engaging with the GSI include enhanced access to economic aid, infrastructure financing and affordable, less regulated security equipment" (Herman, 2025).

In the future, everything points to this influence growing and expanding to other latitudes within the African continent, leading to engagement in naval operations in the Atlantic Ocean and involvement in land operations within the framework of the UN and the AU, thus increasingly reinforcing its relevance and military presence in Africa, as a relevant part of a strategy of globalization of its foreign defense policy. In this context, it is important in the future to analyze the relationship of the PRC in the dimension of Defense cooperation with the Portuguese-speaking African countries.

Conclusion

As China attempts to protect its interests abroad, its strategy towards Africa has also shifted. Long gone are the days of ideological engagement, but the strengthening of its military presence on the continent is a reality. Through FOCAC, the UN and regional frameworks, Beijing has been able to generate bi-multilateral relations which give greater presence in Africa. Africa's leaders, who have set a path of finding new sources of development, have found China to be more than willing to contribute. The interdependency that has been generated has surpassed trade and foreign direct investment and firmly entered the realm of security and defense. As this article has suggested, the "new" Chinese military strategy for Africa is an extension of Beijing's worldview and an important element for its proposal as a novel center for the international order.

This is in line with *tianxia*, an ancient cosmovision that symbolizes, for its proponents, the right direction to lead global affairs. Through its modern variation, the Community of Shared Future for Mankind, China will push forward an alternative perspective to the neoliberal order of today. Africa, as an "old friend,"

will remain central to China, despite the concerns related to some of the Chinese investments in the fields of communication infrastructure and data storage.

Fundamentally, the concept of *tianxia* is difficult to define, since it has different dimensions, whether geographic, political or philosophical and yet, it has gained prominence in Chinese discourse with the expression "Community of Shared Future for Mankind." The active promotion of this initiative serves a purpose like the past *tianxia*: China, at the center, is a centrifugal force that attracts the outside into its system. Africa, which has lived through periods of colonialism and has found to an extent that China has a more pragmatic and win-win policy towards the continent, has been keen to embrace China's influence as a key player. In the end, China's connection to Africa will certainly progress into the future, specifically in the fields of defense and security. Whether this will lead to a new order with Beijing at the center, remains to be seen.

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