



In Africa, China Learns Development May Not Improve Security

OE Watch Commentary: China has learned some hard lessons regarding development work and security in Africa, and how the two are linked. At least those are some of the findings described in the excerpted accompanying article from South Africa's *Institute for Security Studies*, a South African nonprofit that works to improve African security, which took a close look at China's sometimes frustrated attempts at development on the continent.

China's negative experiences in Africa are due in part to its overemphasizing the impact of development on security, insisting on dealing only with fellow sovereigns even when those individuals are responsible for poor governance, and adhering to a strict principle of noninterference. The article's author provides examples of these missteps, beginning with the country's belief that development would lead to security. In Mali, China invested heavily in schools, clinics, and transportation infrastructure, but insurgents regularly destroyed these, ostensibly so that they could provide the villagers with such services, in the process garnering goodwill and increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of the locals.

This brings up another of China's problems, its insistence on dealing only with sovereigns and not other actors. By only working through Malian government officials, its standing in the community is not as prominent had it also worked with villagers or their local representatives.

With regards to China's policy of noninterference, this results in Chinese peacekeepers being portrayed as risk averse. Interestingly, the article says this goes back to China's strong belief that development is necessary for security, with the result that security efforts are not emphasized as much as development.

In fairness, China's significant engagement with security affairs in Africa is still relatively recent, only coming about with the 2011 Libyan conflict. Previously, it had some involvement providing noncombatants for African peace operations, but when 35,000 of its citizens in Libya were caught in the crossfire of a bombing campaign and civil war, it realized it could not stay out of the conflict. Since then, China's involvement with security has been, as the article explains, often related to its increasing business ventures on the continent.

It is in Mali that China's approach to security issues on the continent changed again. From originally condemning French armed involvement, it eventually deployed combat troops to the troubled nation. Thus, with increasing Chinese military forces in Africa involved in increasing numbers of operations, as the author states, Chinese security beliefs, such as development leads to security, are undergoing a reality check. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**



Chinese Peacekeeping Battalion in South Sudan being awarded UN Medal for Service.

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“The belief that development is not only a necessary but also almost a sufficient condition for security is quite widespread. In many conflicts the dearth of development is indeed the critical factor. But just as often, if not more so, it is also the lack of governance and the state’s inability to exercise a monopoly of violence over its entire territory.”

Source: “Mali gives China a reality check,” *Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)*, 16 October 2020. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/mali-gives-china-a-reality-check>

Since then, China's increasing engagement on security has largely followed its growing commercial involvement in Africa, turning on its head the old colonial-era maxim of trade following the flag. Its key objective initially in beefing up security has been to protect its business people and projects in Africa. That was the focus for its first peacekeeping mission in South Sudan, where it had oil interests to safeguard.

Another reality check on China's notions about the development-security nexus was the discovery that good governance is essential to the success of development projects. The scholars cited several examples of Chinese development projects such as schools and universities, which simply didn't operate because of lack of political will and competence by Malian officials.

These lessons apply beyond Mali and perhaps even beyond China. The belief that development is not only a necessary but also almost a sufficient condition for security is quite widespread. In many conflicts the dearth of development is indeed the critical factor. But just as often, if not more so, it is also the lack of governance and the state's inability to exercise a monopoly of violence over its entire territory.

As Benabdallah and Large discovered in Mali, the three forces of development, security and government relate to each other in a dynamic and alternating flow of cause and effect.

The growing number of Chinese boots on African ground provides a reality check on Beijing's core beliefs.