

# An Assessment on The Effect of China's Engagement and Strategic Partnership on Regional Security in West Africa

ONOME ODOKUMA<sup>1</sup>, ABRAHAM E. ORHERO<sup>2</sup>, LAZ ETEMIKE<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>*Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria*

*Abstract—This study assessed the effect of China's engagement and strategic partnership on regional security in West Africa, focusing on five key states, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Mali. Using a qualitative research design that integrates documentary analysis, policy review, and comparative case studies, the research interrogates how Chinese loans, trade, and infrastructure investments reshape political economy dynamics and strategic dependencies across the sub-region. The method adopted for the study is the historical method relying on the Marxist imperialism and the dependency theories which revealed a contemporary form of economic imperialism which has led to security dependency given the security terrain in West Africa and her inability to tackle such security issues while China is willing to assist even in training security personnel. Findings reveal that China's security engagement no doubt has enormously assisted West African states especially in sophisticated surveillance however, it has also deepened debt exposure, and dependence, thereby constraining the policy autonomy of weaker states. Mali's fragile security environment, compounded by external interventions, restricts China's operational depth but still influences sovereignty calculations. Across all cases, China's involvement intersects with regional security through dual-use infrastructure, elite capture, and environmental risks. The study revealed that China's increasing role in West Africa's security from arms sales and peacekeeping to digital surveillance networks has strengthened state capacity to tackle insecurity. Such engagements reveal an extension of imperial control into the security domain where technology becomes a tool of soft domination while the export of these surveillance infrastructures reproduce a technological dependency.*

**Keywords:** *China's engagement, regional security, strategic partnership,*

## I. INTRODUCTION

China-Africa relations have undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades, emerging as one of the most important geopolitical and economic partnerships in contemporary international relations. China's rapid economic rise, which has positioned it as the world's second-largest industrial

nation after the United States, has driven its global expansion in search of markets, raw materials, and strategic influence. Africa, particularly West Africa, has become central to this expansion. China is now Africa's largest trading partner and a major source of foreign direct investment, financing infrastructure, promoting trade, and deepening diplomatic and military relations. This growing engagement has generated intense scholarly debate and policy concern over its implications for governance, sovereignty, and regional security (Ditter et al., 2024).

China's engagement in West Africa differs from the historically fragmented approach of Western actors, who often separate economic aid from military and political cooperation. Instead, China adopts an integrated strategy combining economic investment with security cooperation. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China finances major infrastructure projects including ports, roads, railways, and telecommunications networks, while strengthening military partnerships, providing arms, and supporting security training programs. These investments facilitate development but also create strategic interests that China seeks to protect through coordinated security engagement. This interconnected approach challenges the traditional distinction between economic cooperation and security policy and demonstrates that China's economic expansion is closely linked to its strategic objectives (Ditter et al., 2024).

China's expanding military presence in Africa reflects its growing global ambitions and desire to safeguard overseas interests. The establishment of China's first overseas naval base in Djibouti, located near a key maritime chokepoint through which approximately 12.5 to 20 percent of global trade passes, illustrates this objective (Devermont, 2018). Although outside West Africa, it signals China's broader intention to project military power and

protect its interests across the continent. The Gulf of Guinea, a critical hub for oil shipments, has become an area of concern due to piracy and instability. In response, China has expanded maritime security cooperation, arms sales, and military training programs with West African states. African leaders have largely welcomed this involvement, viewing China as a partner capable of providing investment and security assistance without strict political conditions (Gokoluk, 2018).

China's growing influence has also been facilitated by the decline of traditional Western security partners in parts of West Africa. Political instability, military coups, and deteriorating relations with Western countries have created opportunities for China to expand its presence. China has filled this vacuum by strengthening bilateral military cooperation, supplying arms, and assisting governments confronting terrorism and insurgency. Chinese weapons are often cheaper, delivered faster, and provided without political conditionalities, making them attractive to governments facing urgent threats (Guenov, 2025; Zenn, 2025). These partnerships enable China to convert economic engagement into strategic and political influence.

Beyond military assistance, China has expanded its role through peacekeeping participation, security training, and diplomatic initiatives. It has promoted its Global Security Initiative (GSI), which emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and state-centric cooperation (Hofstede, 2025). Military training and exchanges enable China to influence security norms and institutional practices, extending its influence beyond material support to strategic alignment.

A major dimension of China's engagement is its growing role in digital infrastructure and surveillance technology. Through the Digital Silk Road, China exports telecommunications networks and surveillance systems incorporating artificial intelligence and facial recognition. These technologies enhance state security capacity but raise concerns about digital sovereignty and dependency (Gravett, 2020; Jili, 2025). Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE provide much of Africa's digital infrastructure, creating vulnerabilities related to external influence. The reported data breach at the African Union headquarters highlighted risks

associated with reliance on foreign digital systems (Gimbals, 2025).

China's involvement in infrastructure development, particularly port construction, has also raised concerns about strategic dependency. Chinese companies finance, construct, or operate significant portions of Africa's ports, including Lekki in Nigeria and Lomé in Togo. While these projects enhance connectivity, they raise questions about sovereignty and long-term control (Ecofin Agency, 2025; Nantulya, 2025).

These developments are significant given West Africa's fragile security environment, characterized by terrorism, piracy, organized crime, and weak institutions. China's willingness to provide financial and military support without governance conditions makes it an attractive partner but also raises concerns about dependency and reduced policy autonomy. China has become Africa's largest supplier of arms, highlighting its expanding influence on regional security dynamics (SIPRI, 2023).

While China's engagement has contributed to infrastructure development and security capacity, it has also introduced challenges, including rising debt, dependency, and risks to sovereignty. These competing dynamics highlight the dual nature of China's engagement as both an opportunity and a strategic concern.

Given the scale and complexity of China's involvement, it is necessary to critically examine its implications for regional security in West Africa.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to assess the effect of China's engagement and strategic partnership on regional security in West Africa. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Examine the nature and scope of China's security engagement in West Africa.
- ii. Analyse how China's strategic partnerships influence regional security dynamics and state security capacity.
- iii. Evaluate the implications of China's engagement for sovereignty, dependency, and policy autonomy in West African states.

### III. LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

#### Regional Security in the West African Context

West Africa has historically been characterized by complex socio-political dynamics, economic vulnerabilities, and persistent security challenges that threaten both state stability and regional cohesion. These challenges have intensified in recent decades due to political instability, insurgency, transnational crime, maritime insecurity, and external influences. The colonial legacy of artificial borders and fragile nation-states contributed to weak institutions, corruption, and authoritarian governance patterns, which continue to shape the region's security environment (Adebajo & Ibrahim, 2011). Many countries experience recurring coups, contested elections, and weak democratic consolidation, creating conditions conducive to insurgency and communal violence (Odon, 2014). Nigeria, for instance, faces terrorism, insurgency, and communal conflicts that highlight governance fragility (Fouad & Atoyebi, 2020), while Mali's repeated military coups and instability following the 2012 rebellion illustrate the vulnerability of democratic transitions (Nederveen & Rivas, 2020).

Security threats in West Africa are multidimensional and increasingly transnational. Violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have destabilized northeastern Nigeria and neighboring countries since 2009, causing widespread displacement and casualties (Onuoha, 2014). Similarly, Mali's Tuareg rebellion and subsequent expansion of jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS demonstrate how insurgencies exploit governance vacuums (Nederveen & Rivas, 2020). Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, including piracy, armed robbery, and illegal fishing, poses significant risks to economic development and regional stability (Baptiste & Teixeira, 2021). Furthermore, the region serves as a major transit hub for transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and illicit resource exploitation, which fuel corruption and violence (Ojo, 2018). These threats are further exacerbated by socio-economic vulnerabilities, including widespread poverty, unemployment, and marginalization, with over 40% of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022).

Such conditions provide fertile ground for recruitment into insurgent and criminal networks.

Regional security in West Africa extends beyond the absence of conflict and includes institutional cooperation, governance mechanisms, and collective responses to shared threats (Buzan & Waeber, 2003). In the African context, security is closely tied to state capacity, legitimacy, and colonial legacies, which influence both the nature of threats and the effectiveness of responses (Aning & Bah, 2019). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975 primarily to promote economic integration, has evolved into a central actor in maintaining peace and security. Its creation reflected the recognition that regional integration and stability are interconnected, especially in a context where individual states often lack sufficient capacity to address security threats independently (Adebajo & Ibrahim, 2011).

ECOWAS's involvement in regional security expanded significantly in response to conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s. The establishment of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) marked its first major peacekeeping initiative and demonstrated a willingness to intervene in member states to restore stability (Adebajo, 2002). These efforts were later institutionalized through the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, which authorized ECOWAS to intervene in cases of internal conflict, human rights violations, and unconstitutional changes of government (ECOWAS, 1999). ECOWAS also demonstrated its commitment to democratic governance through its intervention in The Gambia in 2017, successfully enforcing election results and restoring constitutional order (Olowu, 2018). However, its response to violent extremism and recent coups has been less effective, partly due to institutional and operational limitations. The ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted in 2013 represented progress, but its implementation has remained inconsistent (UNODC, 2018).

Several structural challenges constrain ECOWAS's effectiveness. Financial and logistical limitations restrict member states' ability to contribute to peace operations, resulting in dependence on external partners such as the European Union and the United

Nations (Bah, 2014). Sovereignty concerns and lack of political will often limit collective action, as demonstrated by Mali's resistance to ECOWAS mediation after the 2021 coup (Arhin-Sam, 2022). Coordination challenges with continental and international organizations and inconsistencies in enforcing democratic norms have also undermined ECOWAS's credibility (Simbine, 2022).

Despite these limitations, ECOWAS remains a key pillar of regional security governance. Strengthening institutional capacity through mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and early warning systems could enhance preventive diplomacy and rapid response. Promoting democratic civil-military relations and professionalizing armed forces would help reduce coups and strengthen peacekeeping contributions. Greater political commitment among member states and stronger partnerships with civil society organizations would also improve intelligence gathering and long-term peacebuilding efforts (Adetula, 2015).

Overall, regional security in West Africa is shaped by the interaction of governance challenges, socio-economic vulnerabilities, insurgency, and transnational crime. While ECOWAS has demonstrated leadership through peacekeeping interventions and democracy enforcement, persistent insecurity, institutional weaknesses, and political constraints highlight the need for reforms. Strengthening ECOWAS's institutional capacity, enhancing cooperation with continental and global partners, and addressing the root socio-economic and governance drivers of insecurity remain essential for achieving sustainable regional peace and stability.

#### External Influences on West African Security

External actors significantly influence West Africa's security landscape both within the region and internationally. Traditional actors such as the United States, France, and regional actors like Nigeria and South Africa have long been engaged in security operations, capacity-building, and diplomatic peace initiatives. Their involvement reflects strategic interests, including regional stability, counterterrorism, and resource security (Williams, 2010). However, in recent years, emerging powers such as China have increased their footprint, primarily through economic investments, infrastructure projects, and, increasingly, security cooperation (Jin & Liang, 2020). China's engagement

has implications for regional security, complicating geopolitics but also providing potential opportunities for capacity-building and resource security. ECOWAS remains central to regional security efforts, deploying peacekeeping missions and mediating conflicts. Its intervention in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire demonstrated its capacity for conflict resolution. Nonetheless, its resources are limited, and some member states are reluctant to surrender sovereignty or accept external military interventions (Adebajo & Ibrahim, 2011). The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) was established to enhance rapid deployment capabilities. Yet, logistical limitations and political will continue to constrain efficacy, especially in complex insurgencies and crises like Mali and Burkina Faso (Odon, 2014). Beyond regional mechanisms, international organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union, and bilateral security arrangements provide support through peacekeeping operations, training, and intelligence sharing. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) exemplifies such efforts but faces challenges related to mandate limitations and operational risks (Nederveen & Rivas, 2020).

Despite existing frameworks, numerous hurdles impede effective regional security cooperation. These include sovereignty concerns, resource limitations, political fragmentation, and divergent interests among member states (Fouad & Atoyebe, 2020). Additionally, asymmetric warfare tactics employed by insurgents and criminal groups necessitate capabilities that many West African states lack. Furthermore, external influences, especially the strategic interests of global powers, shape regional security policies. The proliferation of military aid and infrastructure projects risks creating dependency or exacerbating tensions if not managed within a comprehensive, sovereignty-respecting framework.

While traditional Western powers have historically played significant roles in West Africa, the rising influence of China warrants particular attention. Unlike Western interventions that often emphasize nation-building and governance, China's approach tends to focus on economic investment and infrastructure, with security cooperation being a relatively recent phenomenon (Bräutigam, 2018). Chinese security engagement includes military-technical assistance, peacekeeping contributions, and

port construction to secure maritime trade routes. For instance, Chinese naval visits and port projects, such as the development of the Doraleh port in Djibouti, are components of a broader strategic framework aimed at safeguarding economic interests and expanding geopolitical influence (Jin & Liang, 2020). Critics argue that China's activities may deepen risks associated with sovereignty violations, lack of transparency, and competition with existing security frameworks (Acheampong & Pirozzi, 2021). On the other hand, its contributions could complement regional efforts if integrated within multilateral frameworks. West Africa's security environment is inherently complex, driven by internal fragilities, transnational threats, and external influences. The region faces persistent challenges from insurgency, terrorism, maritime insecurity, and transnational crime, all compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities and governance deficits. Existing regional cooperation mechanisms, while vital, are often overstretched and constrained by internal politics and resource limitations. The increasing external presence, particularly of China, introduces new dynamics. While Chinese engagement offers opportunities for infrastructure development and capacity building, it also raises concerns about sovereignty, strategic dependency, and geopolitical rivalries. These factors underscore the necessity for coordinated, inclusive security strategies that respect sovereignty while leveraging multilateral and multi-actor cooperation.

#### China's Foreign Policy and Strategic Engagement in Africa

China's foreign policy toward Africa is closely linked to its broader strategic interests, including economic development, geopolitical influence, sovereignty protection, and global power projection. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has significantly expanded military cooperation with African states through training, technology transfer, and equipment provision. This military engagement serves dual purposes. For China, military assistance enhances its political influence, strengthens its image as a responsible global actor adhering to non-interference and respect for sovereignty, secures access to natural resources and energy, protects overseas interests, and balances Western influence on the continent. For African states, Chinese military support provides opportunities to strengthen security capabilities, combat terrorism and piracy, maintain regional

stability, and support national development objectives (Devecioglu & Akcomak, 2024).

China's involvement in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa further illustrates its strategic and diplomatic engagement. China has contributed troops and support to missions in Mali, South Sudan, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Western Sahara. These contributions align with China's strategy of peaceful development and reinforce its image as a responsible major power committed to international peace and security. Additionally, participation in peacekeeping allows China to protect its economic interests and citizens abroad, strengthen diplomatic ties with African countries, enhance its influence within the UN system, and gain military experience, including testing new technologies and operational capabilities. For African states, China's peacekeeping participation strengthens their security capacity, contributes to regional peace and stability, supports counterterrorism and anti-piracy efforts, and enhances access to economic and diplomatic benefits, including increased international recognition and influence.

China's engagement in Africa reflects its wider foreign policy objectives shaped by its rise as a global power. These objectives include safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity, ensuring economic security, advancing technological development, and expanding geopolitical influence. The Chinese Communist Party emphasizes territorial integrity as a central component of state legitimacy, particularly regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea (Zhao, 2022). Control over the South China Sea is strategically important due to its shipping routes and natural resources, which are critical to China's trade and regional influence (Wang & Zhang, 2023). Taiwan remains especially sensitive, with China viewing any move toward independence as a direct threat to its sovereignty, prompting strong diplomatic and military responses (Chen, 2023).

Economic development remains a central pillar of China's foreign policy. Since the reform era initiated by Deng Xiaoping, China has prioritized sustained economic growth through securing access to raw materials, energy resources, and global markets. The "dual circulation" strategy reflects China's effort to balance domestic economic resilience with continued

global economic engagement (Li & Zhou, 2022). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, exemplifies this strategy by expanding infrastructure investment and connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe, thereby strengthening China's global trade networks and securing supply chains essential for its development (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2021).

Overall, China's foreign policy in Africa is driven by a combination of security, economic, and geopolitical objectives. Military cooperation and peacekeeping enhance China's strategic influence and protect its overseas interests, while economic initiatives such as infrastructure investment deepen interdependence and reinforce its global economic position. At the same time, African states benefit from enhanced security capacity, economic assistance, and diplomatic partnerships. This mutually reinforcing relationship reflects China's broader ambition to shape global governance and expand its role as a major power within an increasingly multipolar international system.

#### Geopolitical and Military Influence

China aspires to reshape regional and global power structures. Its military modernization, exemplified by the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) technological enhancements, aims to project power beyond traditional waters, notably in the Indo-Pacific region, where Beijing seeks to challenge U.S. dominance (Carlson, 2023). The establishment of military bases, assertive patrols in the South China Sea, and the development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems reflect China's focus on securing its periphery and asserting regional primacy (Friedberg, 2022). Moreover, China's engagement with multilateral organizations furthers its ambition to influence global governance structures such as the United Nations echoing its desire to craft a multipolar order aligning with its interests.

Beyond material objectives, China seeks to project soft power to influence global perceptions and create a favorable international environment for its rise. Under Xi Jinping, this has been pursued through Confucius Institutes, media expansion, and diplomacy emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and development-focused models, contrasting Western liberal values (Nye, 2004). Such influence operations serve to bolster China's image as a responsible global actor, counteracting Western narratives that portray China as a threat.

Recent years have witnessed a more assertive Chinese foreign policy, characterized by strategic assertiveness in disputed regions and pragmatic diplomacy elsewhere. For instance, China's decisive actions in the South China Sea, including land reclamation and militarization, demonstrate a willingness to challenge international norms and U.S. influence (Shambaugh, 2021). Concurrently, China engages multilaterally through platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and the China-Africa cooperation paradigm, emphasizing "win-win" cooperation and South-South solidarity (Li & Huang, 2022).

Also, the US-China rivalry remains the defining feature of Beijing's foreign policy in this period. The Biden administration's emphasis on Indo-Pacific alliances and competitiveness has led China to recalibrate its strategies, combining economic initiatives with military preparedness and diplomatic outreach (Zhu, 2022). China's "dual track" approach seeks to explore cooperation with the US on climate change and global health, while preparing for strategic competition in technology, influence, and security domains (Wang & Zhao, 2024).

Though less overt than economic engagement, China's security interests in West Africa are growing. The region's vulnerability to terrorism, piracy, and political instability threatens Chinese nationals, investments, and trade routes. China has contributed troops to UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and Liberia. It has provided counter-terrorism training, military vehicles, and surveillance equipment to countries such as Nigeria and Burkina Faso (Tull, 2021). China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, while outside West Africa, signals a broader shift in China's military doctrine suggesting a future possibility of forward operating bases in other regions, including West Africa.

China also promotes cybersecurity cooperation, often tied to digital infrastructure projects. This raises concerns about surveillance, data control, and the export of China's authoritarian tech governance model (Polycarp & Ogunlesi, 2022).

The growing presence of China in West Africa demands a precise theoretical engagement that captures the dynamics of power, economic interests, and strategic imperatives. This study draws on Marxist imperialism theory and dependency theory to China's activities in the region.

Theoretical Review: Dependency Theory and Marxist Theory

#### Dependency Theory

Dependency theory emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s as a critique of modernization theory, which assumed that all countries follow the same linear path to development as the West. It was initially developed by Latin American economists and sociologists, particularly those associated with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Some of the key figures in the early development of dependency theory include; Raúl Prebisch, an Argentine economist and director of ECLAC, who argued that terms of trade between developed and developing countries were structurally unequal; Andre Gunder Frank, a German-American sociologist who introduced the concept of “metropolis-satellite relations,” arguing that underdevelopment in the global South is a direct result of exploitation by the global North. He is also known as the father of dependency theory; Theotonio Dos Santos and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brazilian theorists who added complexity to the theory by including internal class dynamics.

Frank (1969) sees the exploitative relationship between the metropolises and the satellites as the cause of the development of Western European societies and the underdevelopment of developing societies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Hence, poverty, inequality, unemployment, and illiteracy are viewed as outcomes of the capitalist economic system. The principle of reliance is still relevant today because according to Rodney (1972), Africa was the principal provider of underpriced raw materials to Europe and buyers of expensive finished goods from the West from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s. This limit self-sustaining growth in the periphery and creates an uneven economic structure within the periphery and creates an uneven economic structure within the peripheral societies. Dependency theorists argue that, despite short-term spurts of growth, long-term growth in the periphery will be uneven and unequal, with substantial negative current account balances (Trausch & Peter, 2003). As a result of this inequity, progress in several African countries is constrained.

Dependency refers to a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the

development and expansion of the other to which the former is subjected (Dos Santos, 2002). In global trade terms, the relationship of interdependence between two or more economies takes the form of dependence when some countries (dominant ones like the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France) can expand and be self-sustaining, while other countries (dependent ones especially in Africa) can only do so as a reflection of expansion, which can have either a negative or positive effect on their immediate development (Santos, 1970). Dependence is a conditioning circumstance in which one group of countries' economies, or between such economies are conditioned by the development and expansion of others. It is an interdependent relationship between two or more economies and the global trading system (Chuka, 2018). This becomes a dependent relationship when certain countries can expand on their own while others being reliant, can only expand as a mirror of the dominating countries' expansion, which may have positive or negative consequences on their immediate development. The dominant countries have a technological, commercial, capital, and sociopolitical advantage over the dependent countries. Dependence is then built on an international division of labour that allows for industrial development in some nations while constraining others, whose growth is conditioned by and subject to the world's power centres (Chuka, 2018).

In the case of China-West Africa relations, China assumes the role of the "new core," deepening the peripheral status of West African states through trade imbalances, resource dependency, and technological inferiority. For example, West Africa primarily exports raw materials (e.g., crude oil, minerals) to China and imports manufactured goods, reinforcing a classic dependent trade structure. In 2021, Nigeria exported over 90% of its products to China as raw commodities, while importing machinery and electronics (UNCTAD, 2022). This trade pattern undermines domestic industrialization and locks West African economies into low-value global chains.

Additionally, dependency theory explains how external financial inflows especially concessional loans and grants from China limit the policy space of African states. Countries like Ghana and Mali increasingly prioritize Chinese interests in their national development plans due to their reliance on

Chinese funding, thereby weakening their economic sovereignty (Obi, 2020).

Dependency theorists caution that such external reliance creates a new form of "technocratic dependency," where states lack autonomy in planning and implementing independent development agendas (Amin, 1976). In many cases, Chinese-funded projects are executed by Chinese companies using Chinese labour, marginalizing local expertise and undermining knowledge transfer (Brautigam, 2020).

#### Marxist Imperialism Theory

Marxist imperialism theory provides a powerful and enduring framework for understanding global inequalities, especially in relation to the economic and political domination of weaker states by more powerful capitalist nations. As developed by Lenin, and later expanded by theorists such as Amin (1976) and Harvey (2003), the theory conceptualizes imperialism as a necessary stage in the evolution of capitalism, one in which surplus capital is exported from the industrialized core to the periphery in search of new markets, raw materials, and labour. One of its primary strengths lies in its structural understanding of global power relations, linking economic exploitation, political domination, and class collaboration into a coherent system of global inequality. It also provides valuable historical materialist insights into how colonial and neo-colonial relationships persist in new forms, often facilitated by local elites or comprador classes (Bond, 2006; Frank, 1967).

Security has also become a key dimension of China's imperial reach, consistent with Lenin's observation that imperialism entails political and military penetration. In Mali, a country struggling with jihadist insurgency and state fragility, China has become increasingly active in United Nations peacekeeping operations. While this is framed as a contribution to global peace, it also serves China's strategic interest in stabilizing regions where it has investments. China's military footprint in Africa is expanding more generally through arms sales, military training, and the establishment of defense relationships. This introduces a new form of imperial militarism, wherein economic interests are protected through security alliances and the projection of force, echoing traditional Western imperial behaviour (Taylor, 2009). China's engagement in the Sahel is

motivated not purely by altruism but by the imperative to safeguard its infrastructural investments and maintain access to strategic resources.

Marxist imperialism theory offers a robust framework for analysing China's engagement in West Africa. Far from being a neutral or benign development partner, China reproduces key features of imperialist domination: capital export, resource control, debt dependence, and militarized influence. While West African states gain infrastructural improvements and short-term financing, they do so at the cost of long-term sovereignty and self-determination. The cases of Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Mali all underscore how China, as a rising capitalist power, behaves in ways that align with classical imperial strategies, albeit under a new geopolitical banner. This theoretical framing is crucial for understanding not just the economic impact of China's footprint in West Africa, but its structural, political, and class-based implications. It allows for a deeper interrogation of whether South-South cooperation is a reality or merely a rebranded form of imperialism.

One of its primary strengths lies in its structural understanding of global power relations, linking economic exploitation, political domination, and class collaboration into a coherent system of global inequality. It has been criticized for its economic determinism, often reducing complex geopolitical and social phenomena to issues of capital accumulation (Taylor, 2009).

#### IV. METHODS

This study adopted a historical design to assess the effect of China's expanding footprint in West Africa by investigating archival records, official reports and documents, media reports and scholarly analyses. This design enabled a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and peculiar dynamics of China's diplomatic engagements in the region. The historical research design is suitable for capturing the complex nature of historical patterns and interruptions that may shape the contemporary China-West Africa relationship and it is fundamental in interpreting how such engagements influence security (Kemei et al., 2025).

The method of data collection for this study relied exclusively on secondary sources of data which

involved analysing of existing data from archival documents, online databases, and previously published studies from various journals. These sources include a wide range of academic publications, government and institutional reports, policy briefs, official statements, and reputable news articles. Secondary data was sourced from updated databases such as UNCTAD, EXIM bank, AidData, FOCAC declarations, independent databases like the China Global Investment Tracker (Heritage Foundation), etc, digital archives, and verified online platforms documenting China's economic projects, investments trends, and diplomatic activities in West Africa. The media and some NGO reports which include investigative journalism, watchdog reports, and publications from think tanks such as the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) were used as well. These materials provided detailed insights into infrastructure developments, such as ports and energy projects, as well as China's role in digital transformation and industrialisation in the selected West African states (AIIAfrica, 2025).

Qualitative analysis is particularly suited to this study as it allows for the examination of complex political relationships, socio-economic dynamics, and power structures through context-rich data, discourse, and case studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach led to a comprehensive examination of complex interactions, including policy narratives, strategic interests and local responses by making use of qualitative data sources like policy documents, official statements, media reports and academic literature. The qualitative approach was useful because it facilitated an interpretation of the way and manner China's expansion in West Africa has shaped regional security challenges by also giving clearer perspective to West African states and regional organisations.

## V. DISCUSSIONS

### A. Effects of China's Engagement and Strategic Partnership on Regional Security

For decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) formally adhered to a doctrine of strict non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign nations. This policy, however, has proven increasingly flexible in the face of rapid expanding economic interests across the African continent. The foundational driver for Beijing's deeper security engagement is the urgent necessity of safeguarding its vast financial and physical exposure. China's trade relationship with Africa was estimated at US\$169 billion as of 2015, underpinned by significant annual financing commitments (IISS, 2025). This exposure includes immense infrastructure investments and access to critical natural resources such as cobalt, oil, and iron ore. These assets are profoundly vulnerable to regional instability, including political turmoil, coup d'états, and subsequent contract renegotiations that lead to business deterioration (Rinaldi, 2024).

To mitigate these risks, China has executed a strategic adaptation, moving toward active, systemic security involvement. This entails deepening security ties and expanding the functional and capability boundaries of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) operational presence on the continent, most notably through the expansion of the Djibouti base (Ditter, et al. 2024). This strategic pivot is not an ad hoc crisis response; it is a systemic effort to ensure the long-term viability of China's presence. This fundamental adjustment, shifting from passive financial investment to active military and security protection, signifies a mature global power strategy where African security is deemed critical not only to regional stability but also to China's domestic economic stability and its global strategic competition with the United States (Rinaldi, 2024).

The figure below illustrates the PRC arms exports to Africa in contrast to Russia from 2000-2023. Prior to this period, Russia was the major importer of arms to African nations for instance, in 2022, Russia provided about 44% imports of arms to Africa as against PRC 18%.

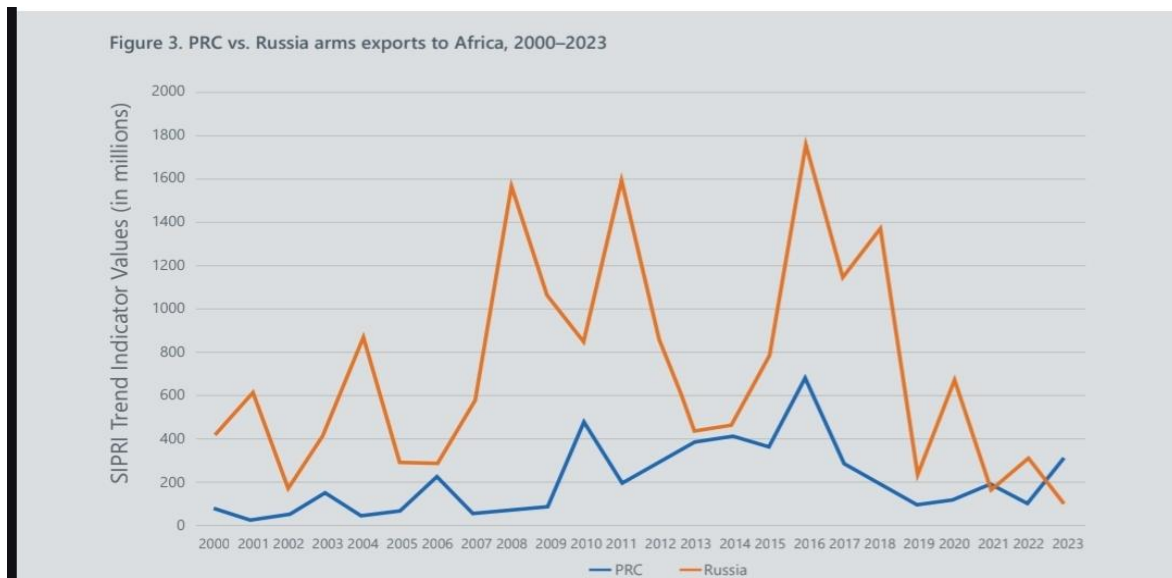


Figure 4.1: PRC vs Russia arms exports to Africa, 2000-2023; Source: CNA, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database

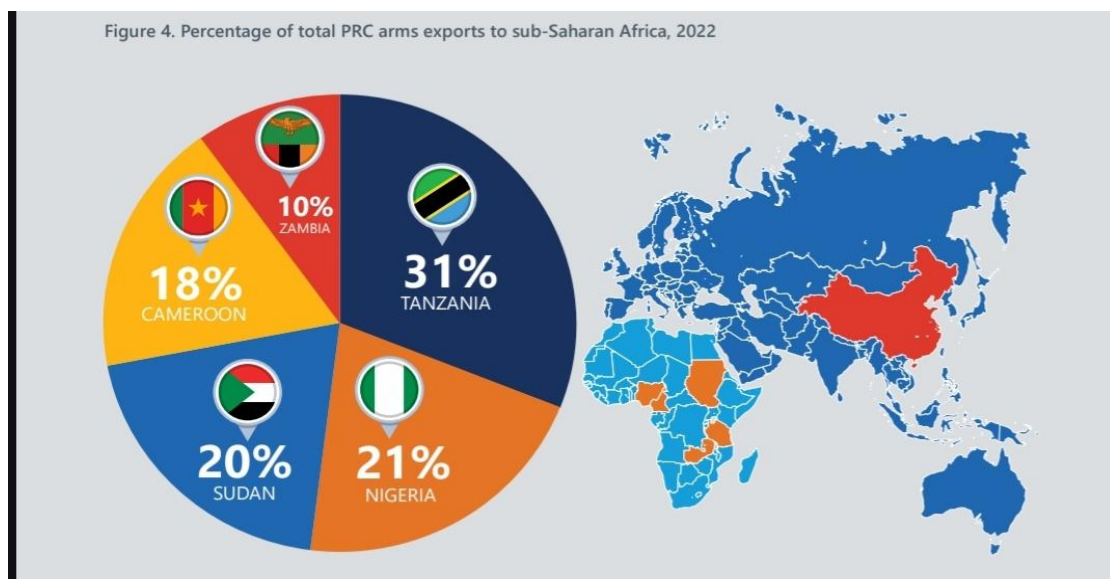


Figure 4.2: Percentage of total PRC arms exports to sub-Saharan Africa, 2022; Source: CNA, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database

The nexus of BRI, FOCAC, and the Global Security Initiative (GSI)

China's security engagement is channelled through a coherent, interconnected set of state-driven initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while primarily an economic and infrastructure endeavour, has been fundamentally securitized, serving as a direct vehicle for expanding PRC defence influence and strengthening military relationships with African states (Rinaldi, 2024). Complementing the BRI, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) provides the formal architecture for substantial security commitments. Recent FOCAC meetings have formalized significant resource

allocation, including a pledge of an RMB 1 billion military grant to assist African countries in strengthening their armed forces. Furthermore, China commits to training 6,000 military personnel for Africa, inviting 500 young African military officers for visits, and training 1,000 police enforcement officers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2024). These efforts not only enhance recipient capacity but also foster strategic relationship-building opportunities with military and political elites (Rinaldi, 2024).

The overarching doctrinal framework guiding this security expansion is the Global Security Initiative

(GSI). The GSI is positioned as a China-led security framework that emphasizes mutual trust, equality, and, critically, non-interference. This framework stands in sharp contrast to Western, military-led security approaches that typically condition aid upon adherence to specific governance and human rights standards. By offering a security model rooted in "sovereignty" and non-interference, Beijing is strategically moving to undercut Western security paradigms. This strategic positioning aligns with African elites who may prioritize regime security and stability over political reform, an outcome that directly contributes to the fragmentation of global consensus on security governance (Ditter *et al.*, 2024).

#### B. Restructuring of National Security Capacity

China's engagement systematically targets the internal control and operational capacity of national security forces, often prioritising state stability and regime survival over democratic accountability. China employs direct military diplomacy and support to enhance the operational capability of African partners. Financial and training leverage is significant, exemplified by the FOCAC commitments to train 6,000 military and 1,000 police personnel. This sustained engagement cultivates deep relationship opportunities with senior political and military leaders across the continent (Rinaldi, 2024).

Analysis of arms transfers indicates that China uses defence exports as a strategic tool to boost influence. Between 2017 and 2022, China's arms sales to Sub-Saharan Africa surpassed those of the United States by a factor of three, affording Beijing substantial leverage in regional conflicts and influence over its partner military operations (Rinaldi, 2024). While Algeria remains the largest single recipient of Chinese arms and equipment in the region, African nations such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal have demonstrated a rapid increase in imports, highlighting China's growing role in fuelling internal and sub-regional security dynamics. Furthermore, China builds interoperability through commitments to joint patrols, training, and exercises, including support for demining efforts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2024).

A key observation arising from this support is the shift in military doctrine focus. Western military aid often emphasizes external defence and

counterinsurgency with explicit human rights compliance components. In contrast, the substantial investment in training police enforcement personnel and cultivating relationships with military elites suggests that China's primary emphasis is on achieving internal stability and regime protection. This military diplomacy is essential for securing vast BRI investments, making the geopolitical calculation of protecting the recipient regime's survival a core Chinese strategic priority (Rinaldi, 2024)

One of the most profound effects on national security framework is the transfer of advanced technological capabilities, creating a model of Digital Policing Authoritarianism (DPA). China has strategically incorporated the transfer of "smart city" technology, which utilizes artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and the Internet of Things (IoT) as a core dimension of its security diplomacy under the GSI (CSIS, 2024).

This technology is implemented through the Digital Silk Road (DSR), an offshoot of the BRI focused on digital sector investments. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and tech giants, specifically Huawei and ZTE Corporation, dominate the supply of public space surveillance systems. These sophisticated systems include high-definition CCTV, facial recognition, AI-driven data analysis, and enhanced urban monitoring tools. Currently, nine African countries, including Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Zambia, utilize these systems. In Nigeria, Huawei and ZTE provide extensive CCTV camera surveillance with both facial and car number plate recognition in major urban centres like Lagos and Abuja (IDS, 2023).

The transfer of sophisticated surveillance systems under the guise of modernization carries severe implications for domestic governance. These technologies enable authoritarian African governments to monitor citizens with unprecedented precision. Evidence confirms that African governments, including those in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zambia, are actively using Chinese technology to survey political opponents, track dissenters, and suppress public protests. China is effectively exporting its digital authoritarian blueprint, which risks yielding greater repression rather than liberalization in countries already burdened by weak

democratic institutions and poor human rights records (Gravett, 2022).

The wholesale adoption of Chinese technology also raises profound sovereignty concerns, particularly related to "data colonialism." Many African countries lack adequate legal frameworks and institutional capacity for robust data protection, rendering citizens vulnerable to the domestic misuse of personal information. Moreover, the reliance on Chinese technology significantly increases the possibility of Chinese espionage, as data collected from these security projects can often be accessed by Chinese firms. A specific example involves the Zimbabwean government, which sends biometric data to China to aid in facial recognition algorithm development (CSIS, 2024).

The prevalence of the DPA model is financially driven. Chinese firms, enabled by government subsidies and state financial aid from institutions like the China Development Bank, often underbid Western competitors by 30 to 40 percent. This affordability, coupled with financing that lacks the political conditions typically attached to Western aid, makes discouraging the adoption of this low-cost, modern technology a "tough rhetorical sell" for Western powers promoting democratic standards. The resulting centralization of internal security constructed through this technology and police training gives Beijing significant leverage and potential control over local security environments, fundamentally weakening African governance structures and human rights protections (Ditter, et al. 2024).

#### C. The transformation of regional security dynamics and stability

China's deepening security footprint strategically challenges the regional power balance, institutional norms, and the operational freedom of competing external actors. China has evolved significantly from a cautious participant to a major global security actor, utilising its commitment to peacekeeping as a demonstration of global public goods provision commensurate with its status. As of recent data, China is the largest contributor of personnel (including 1,860 troops, police, and experts) among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (Chan, 2025).

This growing involvement includes critical operational shifts. China is steadily deepening its participation in peace operations. Its contribution to

MINUSMA, the UN stabilization operation in Mali, was particularly notable because it marked the first instance in which the Chinese military dispatched armed troops abroad specifically to provide protection for UN peacekeepers from other nations. This definitive shift, coupled with the establishment of the new naval base in Djibouti, represents the normalization of PLA forward deployment capabilities. This presence provides the PLA with essential operational experience in complex conflict zones and establishes crucial logistical reach, transitioning China from a passive financial contributor to a highly capable, active security actor in the region (IISS, 2025).

There exist a strategic competition and realignment of regional blocs. For instance, the GSI serves as more than just a security blueprint; it is a counter-hegemonic framework designed to bolster China's influence and explicitly question Western dominance. This policy is part of a broader, long-term strategy articulated by PRC scholars to deepen military relations, which they suggest allows China to "strike outward" and potentially "hinder Indo-Pacific strategy" by forcing the U.S. to divert resources and attention away from critical Asian theatres (Rinaldi, 2024). China's military expansion occurs within a context of clear authoritarian strategic alignment. This was evidenced by the Mosi-2 maritime drill conducted in February 2023, which saw joint exercises with Russia in the region. China has also engaged in bilateral joint exercises, such as Peace Unity-2024 with Tanzania and Mozambique, further enhancing its regional foothold and demonstrating military interoperability (Rinaldi, 2024).

China's long-term ambitions extend beyond asset protection to include strategic containment against Western naval power. This is evidenced by internal planning documents (Project 141) seeking to establish overseas garrisons in key locations such as Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Mozambique, and Tanzania. These targeted locations span critical maritime chokepoints and energy corridors in the Gulf of Guinea and the Western Indian Ocean. Should these ambitions materialize, the establishment of such a comprehensive footprint would enable maritime denial and strategic containment against Western naval access. In a future conflict scenario, this development could force U.S. allies to "divert naval forces from critical

areas," thereby fundamentally undermining U.S. strategic objectives (Rinaldi, 2024).

It is essential to recognize the dynamics of African agency in this great power competition. African officials are not merely passive recipients of influence; they actively "seek to balance and leverage relationships with both powers" (China and the U.S.). African leaders strategically negotiate financing, manage partnerships, and interpret Chinese security proposals with their own strategic objectives for autonomy and development in mind. The strategic challenge for external powers is that this hedging behaviour complicates any strategy premised on forcing exclusive alignment (Yuliantoro, 2024).

The proliferation of bilateral security ties and the GSI model promotes a security standard that often bypasses traditional African regional bodies like ECOWAS or the African Union (AU), which frequently struggle with unified security policy. By dealing bilaterally, China maximizes its influence and avoids collective regional scrutiny, a process that risks structurally undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of existing African security organizations.

#### V. FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

1. China's increasing role in West Africa's security from arms sales and peacekeeping to digital surveillance networks has strengthened state capacity to tackle insecurity. Such engagements reveal an extension of imperial control into the security domain where technology becomes a tool of soft domination while the export of these surveillance infrastructures reproduce a technological dependency.

2. The bilateral approach of China to West African states undermines collective regional agency, particularly within ECOWAS. Multipolarity has produced a competitive dependency where states oscillate between Chinese, Western, and multilateral financiers without achieving autonomy. West African sovereignty is being redefined, nominally independent but materially constrained as the region becomes a site of accumulation within the global capitalist order dominated by emerging powers like China.

#### Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following policy recommendations are essential for West Africa and regional bodies to mitigate dependency risks and enhance political sovereignty:

1. West African nations must urgently develop and enforce robust legal and institutional frameworks for data protection and privacy to counter the risks of "data colonialism" and the misuse of Chinese surveillance technology for political repression.

2. International partners and regional bodies should establish and enforce stringent transparency requirements for all companies regardless of origin operating in conflict-prone extractive sectors. This is necessary to break the corrosive feedback loop where resource wealth funds regimes that rely on Chinese technology for repression (e.g., Guinea).

In conclusion, the overall implication is that African leaders must navigate a multi-polar security landscape by actively asserting their agency. Failure to collectively address the compositional trap and the risks inherent in the DPA model will entrench a form of modernized dependency, where economic development is achieved at the cost of long-term policy autonomy and democratic accountability. The geopolitical dividend for Beijing lies not only in securing access to critical resources but also in successfully exporting its digital authoritarian blueprint, profoundly shifting the future trajectory of governance in West Africa.

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