

# From Non-Interference to Adaptative Pragmatism: China's Security Policy in Africa

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**Abstract:** China's growing focus on African peace and security has generated discussions on its longstanding foreign policy principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of African countries and most of that growing body of research have argued that China is doing away with its foreign policy principle. Drawing its conclusions from a careful analysis of China's security engagement with African countries, this paper argues that, forced to deal with various African crises, China has been pragmatically adaptive. This adaptive pragmatism has allowed Beijing to get involved in Africa's peace and security landscape without overtly compromising its traditional posture on non-interference.

**Keywords:** Africa; China, non-interference; African peace and security; adaptive pragmatism

## Introduction

While China's involvement in peacekeeping missions in several African countries has received considerable attention in academic research, its broader security engagement in the continent drew little attention until recently.<sup>1</sup> This is quite understandable, however, not least because China had put little emphasis on African security issues in its relationship with the continent before the early 2010s.<sup>2</sup> Since then, however, there has emerged a shifting paradigm in that regard, with China zeroing in more on African peace and security. The renewed security engagement with Africa is perhaps best exemplified by President Xi Jinping's observation in 2015 that "China stands ready to take an active part in Africa's efforts in capacity-building for maintaining and strengthening peace and security and support Africa in its endeavors to speed up development, eradicate poverty and realize durable peace."<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, this engagement has also heightened discussions on China's longstanding foreign policy principle of non-interference (不干涉原则, *Bù gānshè yuánzé*) in the internal affairs of other countries. Indeed, there is a growing body of research on China's non-interference policy in Africa; and while the research is not necessarily conclusive, most have declared the end of China's guiding foreign policy principle.<sup>4</sup> Hodzi, for instance, finds China to no longer be "defined by its historical non-interference policy that most African countries are still obsessed with."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Ren believes that "the policy is unfavorable to China's national interest."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Verhoeven expects the new found Chinese security engagement in the

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African continent to effectively mark the death throes of one of China's leading foreign policy principles:

The old model of Chinese foreign policy is losing its usefulness: Beijing's interests have changed. While, as a discursive tool, the language of sovereignty remains helpful, China's deepening material interests in Africa—and the messy, flexible tactics required to defend them—are forcing it to in practice abandon the principle of non-interference. As the PRC penetrates deeper into the continent, the price it pays for safeguarding the supply chains and markets it dominates is parting with its traditional stance on [non-interference].<sup>7</sup>

The general argument leading to these conclusions can fairly be summed up in this way: with China's growing (military) capabilities and confidence, coupled with the need to protect its expanding interests in the continent, its traditional foreign policy guideline towards African partners is destined to be abandoned.<sup>8</sup> Stated otherwise, non-interference in African countries neither helps advance Chinese interests nor befits China's status as a global power.

By contrast, this article challenges the narrative that China's growing engagement in African peace and security landscape marks the end of its foreign policy principle of non-interference. Instead, it argues that China has been pragmatically adaptive when dealing with the challenging security (as well as political) environment in the continent. This adaptive pragmatism, we argue, has allowed Beijing to get involved in Africa's peace and security landscape without overtly compromising its traditional posture on non-interference. The paper draws some of its empirical evidence from a careful analysis of China's response to a series of crises across the continent.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first analyses the theoretical discussions and conceptualization (or otherwise) offered by the existing literature on China's non-interference foreign policy principle. We find that most of the literature simply takes the concept of non-interference as given and does not offer a framework that aligns with China's actual policy principle. We therefore propose a more heuristic conceptualization of the concept of non-interference. The second part presents our empirical argument on China's 'adaptive pragmatism' to illustrate the ways in which China has been dealing with the challenging security environment in Africa.

### **Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarification**

Although it is not explicitly stated in most of the literature, the idea that a state would readily interfere in the domestic affairs of another country to protect its interests is strongly entrenched in the realist understanding of international politics. From this perspective, defending national interest is the *raison d'être* of any state. This includes the willingness of powerful states to use overt force to achieve that goal.<sup>9</sup> Thus, as elaborated in the preceding paragraphs, the belief that Beijing has turned a page on its longstanding non-interference policy is an adaption of this perspective to the Chinese presence in Africa, especially considering China's growing (military) capabilities and confidence, coupled with the need to protect its expanding interests in the continent.

This is so because non-interference neither helps advance Chinese interests nor befits China's status as a global power.<sup>10</sup> This idea is well summarized by Holslag, who reminds us

how “Throughout history, most external powers for whom Africa’s mineral wealth became indispensable to their industrial growth backed up their economic forays with a projection of military might to [either] suppress local resistance in their dominions or defend their realms from imperialist competitors.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, China has now achieved a stage of economic development which requires endless supplies of African raw materials, guaranteed market access, and the protection of its nationals in Africa, while at the same time trying to keep its (mostly Western) competitors at bay. Moreover, China, the argument continues, has started to develop the (military) capacity to exert influence in most corners of the globe. China’s decision to establish of a military base in Djibouti since 2017 seems to provide further credence to this narrative. In application of the realist self-help paradigm, China would be expected to confront security challenges in Africa to protect its interests even if that means violating the longstanding non-interference policy.<sup>12</sup> In this article, we caution against this perspective and instead argue that to better understand the distinctive nature of China-Africa relationship, which is generally characterized by mutual learning and co-socialization, we need to go beyond the realist-inspired explanation and adopt a more interpretivist analysis.<sup>13</sup>

The principle of non-interference has been a defining characteristic, a cornerstone of Chinese relations with other countries for many decades. Indeed, “since its inception by former Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, in 1953 as part of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the notion of non-interference has been closely associated with China’s self-image in world politics.”<sup>14</sup> It serves as a strategy to both protect China from external interference in its domestic affairs and extend its relations to other countries. Yet despite the wealth of literature analyzing China’s international relations with regards to this foreign policy principle, there is hardly any systematic attempt at setting out what exactly the principle entails and how it should be construed. Moreover, as Aidoo and Hess put it, the principle of non-interference remains “nebulous” in academic research.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, this has given rise to questionable conclusions on the state of China’s non-interference policy principle in Africa. Non-interference is taken for granted, notwithstanding the centrality of the principle in both China’s relations with other countries and the analyses of those relations. Such shortcoming has given rise to some quite confusing views of China’s non-interference foreign policy.

Some authors tend to see China’s changing attitude toward security issues in Africa as unquestionable proof of the country’s abandonment of its foreign policy principle. For instance, following Beijing’s recent initiative to sponsor a peace conference in the Horn of Africa, the first-of-its-kind, “... to enhance stability, development and good governance in this important region,” some observers were quick to conclude that “Beijing’s decision to no longer remain a passive onlooker in the conflicts that have killed thousands and displaced millions marked a shift in its long-standing policy.”<sup>16</sup> In our view, however, such conclusions are deeply problematic as they fail to distinguish ‘normal’ diplomatic interactions among states and the idea of interfering in the internal affairs of others. The clear distinction we see between the two is that the former takes place based on mutual consent while the latter is resisted against.

As we argue later, despite China’s recent willingness to engage security issues in Africa, it is very careful not to overstep in its moves. A case in point, the conference on the Horn of Africa was aimed at exploring how China could act as a mediator to resolve disputes in the region. But that was only to happen on one condition: “Parties concerned have to agree to that.”<sup>17</sup> The

conference ended up not touching upon mediation efforts at all, apparently because not all the concerned parties agreed to it.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, many analysts and scholars alike seem to equate 'non-interference' with 'non-intervention,' using them interchangeably and therefore attributing them the same unspecified meaning.<sup>19</sup> Ren (2013), for example, confidently asserts that "The term 'non-intervention' used in this article is interchangeable with 'non-interference'," without providing any conceptual clarification to justify such interchangeability.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Chinese official statements and policy documents utilize 'non-interference' in setting out its foreign policy guidelines; and, as will be seen shortly, nearly nowhere do we find the two concepts used to imply the same thing.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the way out of such "perplexing vagueness of meaning" in the extant literature is to examine the concept of non-interference in accordance with China's foreign policy framework, as presented in the following section.<sup>22</sup>

China's non-interference foreign policy principle (不干涉原则, *bù gānshè yuánzé*) puts a particular emphasis on "干涉, *gānshè*" (interference), which "has clearer imperialist and hegemonic connotations and has a stronger focus on interference in domestic affairs" while "干预, *gānyù*" (intervention) can, depending on the circumstances, be neutral, positive, or negative.<sup>23</sup> It is negative, for instance, in cases where intervention is forcible, dictatorial, or coercive against a state government, which is deprived of its ability to have control over the matters of its affairs. In this case, intervention might be said to be a specific form of interference. Moreover, "*gānyù* [intervention] can in certain cases also pertain to diplomatic involvement in regional conflicts."<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, while interference is semantically stronger and broader with an inherently negative connotation, intervention seems much narrower in scope and more disinterested in practice. As such, it seems more reasonable to say that non-interference is "non-intervention PLUS" in so far as non-interference prohibits a wider range of infringements.<sup>25</sup> The reverse, however, cannot be true. So, it makes little sense to use non-interference and non-intervention interchangeably, especially with regard to China's foreign policy principle.

More specifically, while it is true that China has no systematic official definition of non-interference, a closer look at its foreign policy documents reveals that "specific violations of non-interference might include: armed interventions, threats of force, support for domestic insurgencies and rebellions, hostile propaganda, and using one's economic and political power to destabilize a foreign country or limit its ability to determine its own development and internal affairs."<sup>26</sup> In other words, the policy seems to guard against the attempts by external powers to dictate or impose their development strategies on other (developing) countries either through economic policies or by (in)directly participating in regime change, coups d'état and deployment of mercenaries to achieve that aim. In that regard, China sought solidarity with other developing countries as well as to distance itself from these "hegemonic" policies (of the western powers).<sup>27</sup>

This position is not limited to China only. Major international declarations by other developing countries carry a similar message. According to Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of African Union (AU), for instance, while "interference by any Member State in the internal affairs of another" is strictly prohibited, the Union is granted "the right...to intervene in a Member State" in case "of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes

against humanity.”<sup>28</sup> An analysis of the joint documents and official declarations in the context of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) reveals the centrality of the policy for the two sides. In 2000, when FOCAC was established, the two parties proposed to establish a new long-term stable partnership of equality, acknowledged the imperatives for a dynamic partnership on the basis of equality, and called for mutual respect. More specifically, “no country or group of countries, has the right to impose its will on others, to interfere, under whatever pretext, in other countries' internal affairs, or to impose unilateral coercive economic measures on others.”<sup>29</sup> When the 2003 Forum convened, the two sides reiterated the need for “a new type of partnership featuring long-term stability, equality and mutual benefit and all-round cooperation.” In 2006, they were committed to “a new type of strategic partnership featuring political equality and mutual trust.”<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, to better understand China's foreign policy principle of non-interference, one needs to consider the historical context in which the country set out its “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” —namely, mutual respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs of each other, equality and cooperation, and peaceful co-existence.<sup>31</sup> China has put a particular emphasis on territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference.<sup>32</sup> A closer look at this tendency could help us better understand China's non-interference, given its history of victimhood with foreign interference in its own internal affairs.<sup>33</sup> In fact, this shared history of colonial exploitation has a deep impact on China-Africa relations more broadly, as reflected in various FOCAC documents mentioned above.

There is little doubt therefore that the principle of non-interference (不干涉原则, bù gānshè yuánzé) was set against imperialistic and paternalistic moves for regime change and against the toppling of unfriendly governments.<sup>34</sup> By putting the emphasis on the “mutuality” of non-interference, moreover, China appears to project a willingness to refrain from becoming an imperialist power itself in its relations with other countries, especially African countries, thus differentiating itself from the colonial powers, which have a long history with toppling unfriendly governments in their former colonies both in Africa and elsewhere. That said, even understood in these terms, non-interference does not mean total indifference. Because states—especially great powers—are constantly competing in the international arena, they usually do not hesitate to use military, economic or technologic tools to promote their national interests. China is especially said to use “might, money and minds” to secure its power.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, some authors consider Chinese behavior and policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as aggressive moves that threaten many countries' political and economic independence.<sup>36</sup> The bans imposed on China's Huawei Technologies Co. by many Western countries (including the U.S. and Canada) under allegations of espionage, as well as the alleged hacking of the African Union Headquarters, remind us—as we have argued elsewhere—that China's friendship rhetoric must be questioned because countries are ready to do whatever they can to gain or maintain influence.<sup>37</sup>

### **China's Non-Interference Policy and Security Challenges in Africa: Some Empirical Evidence**

China used to hold a rigid understanding of state sovereignty and its corollary of non-interference. But such rigidity has gained some flexibility in recent years and there is no doubt

that China's understanding of state sovereignty and its role in world politics has evolved.<sup>38</sup> This is perhaps best epitomized by its attitude towards the UN peacekeeping missions, whereby it shifted from fervent opposition to a reluctant engagement to now becoming fully engaged with an unwavering leadership.<sup>39</sup> Similar to its history with the UN peacekeeping operations, Sino-African security relations went from complete indifference to now an increasingly growing engagement.<sup>40</sup> However, that the principle of non-interference has by and large remained a key guideline for China's growing security engagement in Africa is clear and "changes to China's security posture in Africa are speculative and not likely [to see the day] in the next decade."<sup>41</sup> This lays the foundation for the argument on China's adaptive pragmatism we advance in this article, with a particular focus on the African context, where we identify three distinctive "phases" of China's non-interference policy.<sup>42</sup> As such, rather than threatening the longstanding foreign policy guideline, China's growing security engagement in Africa reflects how the country learns to embrace a new global role within the set foreign policy guidelines.<sup>43</sup>

### *Phase 1 (2000-2007): Rigid Sovereignty and Non-Interference*

China's African policy became institutionalized in 2000, following the first ministerial forum on China-Africa relations. The rapid surge of these relations and Beijing's willingness to cooperate with African countries no matter the nature of their political regime was soon faced with harsh and repeated criticisms, mainly from Western countries. From a Chinese perspective, these criticisms were nothing less than a western attempt to contain its emergence as a world power.

State sovereignty and its corollary of non-interference have always been a cornerstone in Chinese politics, as illustrated by nearly all its main leaders. For example, President Hu Jintao's remarks that: "We maintain that all countries, big and small, strong and weak, rich and poor, are equal. We respect the right of the people of all countries to independently choose their own development path; we will never interfere in the internal affairs of other countries or impose our own will on them."<sup>44</sup> This approach to Sino-African relations is summarized by Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, during a speech at the 18th summit of the African Union in January 2012: "Throughout the development of China-Africa relations, we have always respected the sovereignty and development path of African countries and refrained from interfering in their internal affairs."<sup>45</sup> The non-interference policy is still echoed by current (2022) Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is commonly seen as an increasingly assertive leader both at home and abroad; but who still maintains that "China strongly believes that Africa belongs to the African people and that African affairs should be decided by the African people...China stands ready to take an active part in Africa's efforts in capacity-building for maintaining and strengthening peace and security and support Africa in its endeavors to speed up development, eradicate poverty and realize durable peace."<sup>46</sup>

Given what precedes, it is easy to understand why during the early years of the phenomenal acceleration of Sino-African relations, Chinese officials held to this rigid understanding of sovereignty and non-interference. In the same vein, China has adopted a hands-off attitude towards African security challenges (seen as domestic matters) under the guise of "business is business" as opposed to politics, thus creating a false line between its deepening economic relations with many African countries and the security challenges confronting them.<sup>47</sup> Oftentimes, however, China would also present its foreign policy principle

of non-interference as an excuse for refraining from contributing to the general efforts to improve Africa's security environment. As mentioned above, a similar pattern is reflected in its attitude towards the UN-sanctioned peace operations. This attitude is perhaps best illustrated by China's response to crises in Sudan and Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, as a result of the disastrous land reform and a growing authoritarian turn, Robert Mugabe's regime was under immense pressures—especially from the West—and China was then identified as an alternative for both trade and diplomatic relations. Indeed, from 2000 onward, Chinese party-state and companies were granted access to resources and large projects financing in Zimbabwe.<sup>48</sup> In return, China offered a kind of umbrella against western sanctions and marginalization. Robert Mugabe took advantage of this non-interference policy to initiate a “look East policy.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, China “remained an ally of the Mugabe regime since 2000 following the imposition of Western countries' sanctions against ZANU-PF ruling elites and associated companies on account of deficiency in human rights, and multilateral governance and democratic credentials.”<sup>50</sup>

A similar pattern played out in Sudan, another pariah state during the long reign of General al-Bashir, where China's nonchalance faced its real test. That came about during the Darfur crisis.<sup>51</sup> As the Sudanese government faced protracted external adversity from the West, it turned to China as its key international backer, especially in the UN Security Council. During this “containment bias” period, China even blocked UN resolutions condemning what the United States called a genocide in Darfur, arguing that what was going on in that region was a Sudanese internal affair. In addition to providing a buffer for the al-Bashir regime, China was also instrumental in helping keep the Sudanese economy afloat through oil exports and supplying the Sudanese Army with the weapons. Indeed, due to the international sanctions against Khartoum, China became not just an important external ally but also Sudan's single most important economic partner.<sup>52</sup> As a result of such nonchalance, Beijing started to face some pushbacks even from some of its African partners, including the neighboring Chadian government. This helped put China in the spotlight with immense pressure, which began to seriously hurt the Asian giant's reputation in the continent. As will be shown in the follow section, the malaise created by this situation helped force Beijing to adapt its attitude towards non-interference, from total rigidity to some flexibility.

### ***Phase 2 (2007-2011): From Indifference to Friendly Engagements***

As Chris Alden rightly argues, China had to confront an enormous reputational risk derived from its association with certain governments, including Sudan and Zimbabwe.<sup>53</sup> The uproar around Chinese support for Khartoum underscores such a reputational risk and the negative impact it has on Beijing. Faced with immense pressure and especially threats to boycott the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China gradually had to soften its stand on non-interference, which some equated to a complete indifference. Instead, as Chun Zhang argues, China became somewhat more flexible in its interpretation of non-interference and showed a willingness to take a more active diplomatic role in finding a resolution to the conflict.<sup>54</sup>

But rather than giving up on non-interference, the Chinese response could best be described as using its influence to help deal with the raging crisis in Darfur. As Wang Suolao correctly points out, China used a strategy of “influence without interference,” characterized by

behind-the-scenes persuasion, pressure politics, and close consultations to convince the Sudanese government, which ended up consenting the deployment of a hybrid peacekeeping mission.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, China's adaptive pragmatism was illustrated by the greater willingness of Chinese representatives and senior leaders to express more public dissatisfaction on the Darfur conflict, as shown by President Hu Jintao's four principles for resolving the Darfur crisis announced in Khartoum during his February 2007 state visit to Sudan.<sup>56</sup> Not only did President Hu publicly denounce the dramatic situation in Darfur, but he also pushed for Khartoum to allow the AU/UN hybrid peacekeeping force in Darfur with 26,000 personnel. China also appointed Ambassador Liu Guijin as special envoy for Africa, with a focus on the Darfur Crisis. Subsequently, vice foreign minister Zhai Jun was appointed as special envoy for Africa with wide and active diplomatic initiatives across the continent. For the first time during President Hu's 2007 Africa tour, China began to distance itself from overt and unconditional support to some of its longstanding autocratic allies, as seen in Zimbabwe, where President Mugabe desperately needed to show that he was not isolated. Yet Hu avoided a Harare stop.<sup>57</sup>

### *Phase 3 (since 2011): Normalization and Adaptive Pragmatism*

China's hands-off attitude towards African security challenges faced its toughest test in 2011. As such, it was not just the outcries and general criticisms of China's 'free-riding' and 'irresponsible' behavior—especially from the West—that made the Asian giant to change course. Rather, it was also the sweeping Arab Spring, which shook off decades of authoritarianism in North Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, the crisis “shook any remaining complacency that the Chinese government had about operating in a benign African environment.”<sup>58</sup> More specifically, after losing a total contract value of about \$18.8 billion to the Libyan crisis in 2011, coupled with its inability to protect its companies and nationals who found themselves caught between raging fires, China finally came to the realization that the economic is also the political, especially when it comes to African peace and security. Though the Libyan crisis was a wakeup call, it was not the only crisis that helped disillusion China about African security challenges and its own approaches to those challenges. Less than a year after the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, Mali descended into a chaos that threatened to completely destabilize the Sahel region and far beyond.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, following the Malian crisis it did not take long for the civil war in South Sudan to break out. That this series of crises pushed China to rethink its approaches to African security is undeniable, but they also helped firmly consolidate China's adaptive pragmatism.

Chinese pragmatism—coupled with a push from the African side—brought about the institutionalization of China-Africa security relations.<sup>60</sup> For instance, with security issues gaining prominence, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) established the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security in 2012 to mark a turning point in China-Africa relationships.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the Partnership for Peace and Security, designed to provide financial assistance, capacity building, and other forms of institutionalized support to Africa's security regime, also led to the establishment of a regular and consultative China-Africa Peace and Security Forum (in addition to FOCAC), the first of which took place in Beijing in July 2019.<sup>62</sup> Such frameworks aim to increase contact and foster dialogues to “create synergy in



thinking and action between the two sides” and strengthen policy alignment in China-Africa security relations.<sup>63</sup>

In more concrete terms, China’s engagement with the civil war in South Sudan, for instance, constituted a “testing ground for Beijing’s peace and security engagement” and its overall engagement with African peace and security landscape.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, one “important reason...South Sudan [matters as a case] in China’s evolving engagement with peace and security in Africa concerns the notable comparative longevity and evolution of engagement over time of China’s relations [with Sudan and the constant unrest in the South long before independence].”<sup>65</sup> Here, China’s engagement in the conflict was unmatched as it sought to protect its deeply rooted interests (both economic and human presence) in the country.<sup>66</sup>

None of these goals could easily be achieved, however. In fact, as the civil war raged with neighboring countries getting involved to support one party or the other, Chinese nationals had to be evacuated to ensure their safety, although this was not as dramatic as the evacuation from Libya some two years earlier. From bilateral to multilateral efforts, China kept pushing for restraint in both camps and for a peaceful settlement of their differences, arguing that “China is willing to continuously enhance communication and coordination with all the relevant parties and jointly push for restoration of stability in South Sudan.”<sup>67</sup> To that end, the Chinese government designated Zhong Jianhua as its special envoy to South Sudan, thus showing both its adaptive pragmatism and the determination to help address the crisis. China also supported the establishment and mediation efforts of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

Indeed, China “argues that it is mediating the conflict in South Sudan at the invitation of the parties involved, and therefore, its actions [do] not [amount to interference in South Sudan’s intrastate conflict].”<sup>68</sup> In fact, highlighting and commanding China’s positive contributions to the international efforts to settle the conflict, South Sudan’s foreign minister observed that “we welcome the Chinese role which we believe is constructive and seeks to resolve the conflict in South Sudan. We hope these consultations, under China’s patronage, would put the IGAD-led negotiations on the right track.”<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the appreciation of China’s efforts to settle the conflict was equally echoed by Ethiopia’s former foreign minister, Seyoum Mesfin, who noted that “we have no objection toward what China is doing and we believe the Chinese role is in the interest of the initiative of the IGAD which is patronizing the negotiations between the two conflicting parties in South Sudan.”<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the recent “China-Horn of Africa Conference on Security, Governance and Development” organized in Addis Ababa to explore how China could act as mediator to resolve disputes in the region is also an interesting example of Beijing adaptive pragmatism to balance its growing willingness to engage security issues in Africa with the foreign policy principle.<sup>71</sup> In a nutshell, as the case of South Sudan and the conference on the Horn of Africa show, notwithstanding the growing Chinese security engagement in Africa, there is little evidence to suggest that its actions regarding various crises amount to interference in the brutal colonial sense. China tends to support political dialogue without imposing outcomes and prefers soft diplomacy to sanctions. If anything, therefore, the Chinese activism and efforts in ending the conflicts are strategically devised to offer the image of a more engaged, a more responsible presence in the African continent. In this perspective, China’s Belt and Road

Initiative can be seen as a new step towards this adaptive pragmatism, especially if one considers that the maritime aspect of the BRI includes a military component. The fact that the Chinese Navy has been deployed in strategic locations such as Djibouti and Walvis Bay is perhaps the sign that a new chapter is on its way regarding China's involvement in Africa's security issues.

## Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the narrative that China's growing engagement in African peace and security landscape marks the end of its foreign policy principle of non-interference. We show that China has been pragmatically adaptive when dealing with the challenging security environment in Africa. This adaptive pragmatism, we argue, has allowed Beijing to get involved in Africa's peace and security landscape without overtly compromising its established posture on non-interference. It is certainly true that China's security engagement with Africa is evolving from a rigid disengagement to a growing activism. But as confirmed by the recent Addis Ababa conference on African security, one defining characteristic seems to remain the same: China still refrains from imposing conditions and forcing outcomes upon its African counterparts. As Aning rightly argues, China's security presence in Africa can be "characterized as a policy of continuity and change: a policy that seeks to apply influence without interference."<sup>72</sup>

Of course, as China rises to the status of a global power, it faces the "tragedy of great power politics" and is likely to be less benevolent than its official policy commands.<sup>73</sup> The burgeoning literature including our own research on China's nationalist and increasingly coercive behavior in its Asian periphery and against many other states tends to confirm such a trend.<sup>74</sup> However, "Since non-interference remains crucial for Chinese 'core interests' —and especially for regime survival and territorial integrity—China will not easily relax its vigilance and drop this principle in the foreseeable future."<sup>75</sup> Unlike former colonial powers, for instance, that have no issue to "unilaterally intervene militarily or impose sanctions against African countries," China tends to opt for multilateral institutions and seek the consent from the concerned countries to resolve security issues in Africa.<sup>76</sup>

More generally, therefore, the question should not be *when* China will give up on its non-interference foreign policy principle toward African countries. Rather, especially regarding African peace and security, the question should be *how* China's security engagement will be better articulated to African agency. Particular attention should therefore be paid to whether African countries and organizations (regional and sub-regional) can improve on their own role in engaging China, since the bulk of responsibility lies on them to determine what kind of security relations they establish with the Asian giant. Are they to opt for the old imperialistic, intrusive, and paternalistic interference with a new face, or are they to choose a different form of security relations that takes into account African ownership and 'indigenous' leadership?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Amongst many others, see Taylor 2009; Zhengyu & Taylor 2011; Huang 2013; Gill et al. 2007; Zürcher 2019; Hanauer & Morris 2014; and Ayenagbo et al. 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Amongst others, Benadallah (2016) argues that "The focus on peace and security cooperation in China-Africa relations is indeed a much more recent development" (pp. 17-18). To corroborate, Benadallah (2016) analyzes the content of China's two Africa white papers; the first was published in 2006, and the second in 2015. The analysis reveals a sharp contrast between the two papers with regard to African peace and security. For example, the author

observes that “A quick content analysis of both papers reveals that the word “security” (in the sense of stability) was mentioned five times and the word “terrorism” was mentioned only one time in the 2006 paper. Approximately a decade later, “security” was mentioned fifteen times (in the context of peace and stability) and “terrorism” five times in the second white paper” (p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> See the full text of President Xi speech at FOCAC 2015. Viewed 25 May 2019

<http://tradebridgeconsultants.com/news/government/full-text-of-president-xi-speech-at-focac-2015/>

<sup>4</sup> See Alden et al. 2017; Etyang and Oswan Panyako 2016; Dorman 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Hodzi 2017, p. 07.

<sup>6</sup> Ren 2013, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Verhoeven 2014, pp. 65-66.

<sup>8</sup> These “interests” include protecting Chinese nationals and Chinese investments in African, guaranteeing access to Africa’s growing market, as well as China’s desire to project an image of a responsible rising power. Amongst many others, see Alden 2014 and Lema 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See Krasner 1978. In Africa and other developing regions, this includes direct or indirect attempts at regime change, coups d’état, deployment of mercenaries, etc.; see Kambudzi 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See Hodzi 2017; Ren 2013; Verhoeven 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Holslag 2009, p. 23

<sup>12</sup> Holslag 2009, p. 24

<sup>13</sup> See Gazibo 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2014, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Aidoo and Hess 2015, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Nyabiage 2022

<sup>17</sup> Agence France-Press 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Agence France-Press 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Amongst the long list of cases, see Hodzi 2018 and Aidoo & Hess 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Ren 2013, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> State Council Information Office 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Winfield 1932; cited in Hodzi 2018, p. 57. Just to give one example of such conceptual vagueness, consider Hodzi’s (2018) conception of intervention and interference (which he uses interchangeably): “intervention shall be in reference to political, military, economic or diplomatic actions undertaken by a governmental or intergovernmental actor of the international system [with or without consent of the target state], the purpose of which is to affect the direction, duration or outcome of an intrastate armed conflict...Specifically, this study is concerned with unilateral actions such as mediation, diplomatic, political, economic or military taken by the government of China or its appointed agents, or multilaterally taken through the UNSC with or without the consent of the appropriate authorities in [the targeted country]. Actions or inactions taken through the UNSC include abstaining, vetoing or voting for resolutions that lead to multilateral actions such as imposition of no-fly zones, sanctions and deployment of peacekeepers or other forces under the United Nations” (p. 24).

- <sup>23</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2014, p. 1.
- <sup>24</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2014, p. 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Princeton University n.d.
- <sup>26</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2014; Hess and Aidoo 2010, p. 359.
- <sup>27</sup> Osei-Hwedie 2012b; Kambudzi 2013, pp. 32, 40; Li 2022. A FOCAC document (produced in 2000) explicitly stated that "each country has the right to choose, in its course of development, its own social system, development model and way of life."
- <sup>28</sup> African Union 2000, p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> FOCAC 2000.
- <sup>30</sup> Chun 2012, p. 51-52; Osei-Hwedie 2012b; Odhiambo 2012; Li 2022.
- <sup>31</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China. n.d.
- <sup>32</sup> Stahl 2016; Finamore 2017.
- <sup>33</sup> Hanauer and Morris 2014; Cooper & Flemes 2013.
- <sup>34</sup> Amongst others, see Iyasu 2013; UN 1958; Pang 2013; Finamore 2017.
- <sup>35</sup> See Lampton 2008.
- <sup>36</sup> See Patey 2021.
- <sup>37</sup> See Gazibo 2009; Gazibo & Mbabia 2012.
- <sup>38</sup> Iyasu 2013.
- <sup>39</sup> See van der Putten 2015.
- <sup>40</sup> Manrique 2015; Mariani and Wheeler 2011 ; Large 2016.
- <sup>41</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2014; Thrall 2015, p. 72.
- <sup>42</sup> This is in line with Tang's (2021) argument that China's approach in Africa is governed by flexible pragmatism.
- <sup>43</sup> State Council Information Office 2021.
- <sup>44</sup> Ren 2013, p. 26. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also insists that "Like many African countries, China once suffered foreign invasion and fell under colonial and semi-colonial rule. 'Do not do to others what you do not want done to you' is a millennia-old idea important in Chinese civilization." *Global Times* 2014.
- <sup>45</sup> Hanauer and Morris 2014, p. 22.
- <sup>46</sup> CGTN 2015.
- <sup>47</sup> For detailed discussions on China's attitude toward Africa's peace and security, see Hodzi 2018; Alden et al. 2017.
- <sup>48</sup> Kärkkäinen 2016.
- <sup>49</sup> Taylor 2020.
- <sup>50</sup> Ojajorotu and Kamidza 2018, p. 18.
- <sup>51</sup> Large 2009.
- <sup>52</sup> Sudan was China's sixth-largest oil supplier in 2007, accounting for 6 per cent of China's total crude imports. Large 2009.
- <sup>53</sup> Alden 2014, p. 4.
- <sup>54</sup> Chun 2012.
- <sup>55</sup> Large 2009, p. 619. Li 2022 also makes a similar argument.

- <sup>56</sup> See <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/198792.htm>
- <sup>57</sup> President Hu Jintao visited eight countries: Cameroon, Liberia, Sudan, Zambia, Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique, and the Seychelles.
- <sup>58</sup> Alden et al. 2017, p. 44.
- <sup>59</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2016.
- <sup>60</sup> *Xinhua* 2019b.
- <sup>61</sup> Chun 2017.
- <sup>62</sup> *Xinhua* 2019a.
- <sup>63</sup> *Xinhua* 2019b.
- <sup>64</sup> Large 2009.
- <sup>65</sup> Alden et al. 2017, p. 165.
- <sup>66</sup> Hanauer and Morris 2014; Duchâtel et al. 2016.
- <sup>67</sup> Hodzi, 2018, p. 188.
- <sup>68</sup> Hodzi, 2018, p. 56.
- <sup>69</sup> Hodzi 2018, p. 190.
- <sup>70</sup> Hodzi 2018, p. 190.
- <sup>71</sup> Agence France-Press 2022.
- <sup>72</sup> Aning 2010, p. 145.
- <sup>73</sup> See Mearsheimer 2001 and Prestowitz 2021.
- <sup>74</sup> See Gazibo 2009; Gazibo and Chantal 2011. Also, Friend and Bradley 2018; Jacques 2012.
- <sup>75</sup> Duchâtel et al. 2014, p. 57.
- <sup>76</sup> Hodzi 2018, p. 59.