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## **Africa: A Laboratory for Security Cooperation with China?**

NATO Defense College Foundation - Food for Thought

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In May 2018, the US accused China of pointing lasers at US military aircraft multiple times near Djibouti in East Africa, in what an analyst describes as “an act just short of war.” [See Daniel Brown, “These are China’s laser weapons that have reportedly been targeting US planes in ‘an act just short of war’,” *Business Insider*, May 4, 2018]. Beijing denied these allegations which come at a time of contentious Sino-US relations and looming trade war. According to some sources, Chinese officials in the past have complained about foreign military reconnaissance planes flying over China’s new Djibouti outposts, suggesting that the laser incidents might have been Chinese reactions to display its displeasure.

However, rather than pointing fingers and playing the blaming game, this incident underscores the more pressing need to find a way to build confidence in Sino-US relations generally and reduce tension in the Horn of Africa more specifically. As Sofia Mastrostefano argued in her article “Djibouti’s stability may be at risk”, the Horn of Africa is getting crowded with the proliferation of various military bases and risks becoming a destabilizing theater for great-power competition. As David Lampton at Johns Hopkins’ School of Advanced International Studies noted, the expansion of China’s global interests including in Africa will invariably “lead to a more interventionist China.”

Indeed, China has over one million citizens living in Africa, has surpassed the US as the world’s largest trading state, and with over 90% of trade still being seaborne, the Middle Kingdom will only increase its security posture around the Red Sea and Horn of Africa to protect its maritime interests, citizens and assets. The emergent military presence may heighten regional competition with the US, EU and NATO as evidenced by the recent laser incident, thus it is important to establish confidence building measures and tension-reduction mechanisms between China and transatlantic partners. In this regard, US AFRICOM’s General Waldhauser sees room for cooperation.

Waldhauser pointed to examples of shared interests in African stability, support for UN Peacekeeping missions and training with African defense forces, and as such US and Europe could leverage China’s increasing military capabilities for security cooperation.

Over the years, China has signaled its increasing willingness for burden sharing as a regional security provider in Africa: it actively participated in anti-piracy efforts off the Somali coast since 2008; deployed combat troops for the first time abroad to the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan in 2014; provided \$100 million in military aid to the African Union (AU) to enhance the AU's combat readiness in 2015; offered 8,000 standby troops for rapid deployment to UN peacekeeping operations; and in 2017 built a naval base in Djibouti to augment these operations.

According to Lyle Morris of RAND Corporation, such initiatives suggest a rethinking of Chinese priorities on the continent and “marks a recognition that China’s participation in conflict resolution will be an unavoidable byproduct of increased Chinese engagement.” Moreover, Bruce Jones in his book *The Risk Pivot*, noted that due to a fundamental asymmetry between China’s reliance on Middle East and Africa’s oil supply and its military capability to mitigate risks in the region, it will continue to rely on and cooperate with more advanced navies from NATO and EU countries for maritime and energy security. As a corollary, this presents a window of opportunity for confidence-building between China, EU and NATO in Africa.

To that end, a recent European Council on Foreign Relations report recommended EU member states with naval forces should respond to China’s naval pro-activism by setting a perimeter for engagement in the maritime domain [See Mathieu Duchatel and Alexandre Sheldon Duplaix, “Blue China: Navigating the Maritime Silk Road to Europe” European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, April 23, 2018.] The authors note China is a potential partner for three types of naval operation, with two having already formed part of Sino-European cooperation—civilian evacuations and humanitarian escorts. The third – mine countermeasures – would likely come about as a response to terrorism or a war in the Persian Gulf. In the meantime, Djibouti offers an opportunity to engage with China, given the presence of several European militaries and of an EU task force in the Gulf of Aden.

As such, potential security cooperation could include upgrading the annual limited-scale joint exercise conducted by the PLAN task force and the EU's Operation Atalanta to practice in the areas of evacuations and mine countermeasures. Dual-hatted in both EU and NATO—France, the UK, Germany, Italy, and Spain, could also exchange liaison officers with the PLAN command in the new base through their own military presence in Djibouti. As a trust-building exercise, they could offer an upgrade in military engagement with China through Djibouti on the PLA's three priorities (peacekeeping, escorts, and humanitarian assistance), starting with the exchange of threat assessments. On anti-piracy and human trafficking in the Gulf of Aden, SHADE (Shared Awareness and De-Confliction) has already been the primary interface for PLAN engagement with navies from EUNAVFOR, US-led CMF and NATO.

By marrying China's comparative advantage in economic assistance via the Belt and Road Initiatives and rising security posture with EU/NATO's comparative advantage in military assistance for regional security, Africa may be a good venue for the honeymoon to reduce Sino-US tension, and transition from an exclusive traditional collective security concept to one of inclusive cooperative security to jointly address non-traditional security challenges in the new Trumpean era.

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