

## China, the EU and Africa: Prospects for Trilateral Security Cooperation

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Over the last two decades, China has become one of the most important external powers in Africa. With booming economic investments and a growing number of Chinese citizens living in Africa, China's presence in Africa has deepened beyond economic objectives and has extended to the field of security. It has shown increasing willingness to collaborate with the international community and participate in multilateral frameworks for the promotion of security in Africa such as UN peacekeeping operations. The rapid ascendance of China in a continent that has long been under the European sphere of influence has challenged existing power relations. The EU's answer to the changing geopolitical dynamics was to initiate a framework of trilateral dialogue and cooperation between itself, China and Africa, which has made slow but gradual progress. While a normative gap still exists between China and the EU, China has been engaging with the normative principles that have emerged in the post-Cold War that have sought to re-define the concept of sovereignty, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Both powers have increased shared interests and a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy making is emerging on both sides that can facilitate trilateral cooperation in specific areas such as the fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden and tackling the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons (SALW).

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*This paper expresses the view of the author and not the European Institute for Asian Studies*

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## Introduction

Africa occupies an increasingly important place in China's foreign policy. China has cemented the relationship through frequent high level visits by Chinese leaders to Africa. For example, on the second leg of his maiden trip overseas as China's President in March 2013, Xi Jinping visited Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of the Congo.<sup>2</sup>

China's strong presence in Africa has obliged the European Union to re-evaluate its own relationship with both China and Africa.<sup>3</sup> In April 2008 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on 'China's policy and its effects on Africa', urging the EU to develop a coherent strategy to respond to the challenges raised by China and other emerging donors.<sup>4</sup> The European Commission responded in October 2008 by elaborating a proposal for a trilateral dialogue and cooperation mechanism between the EU, China and Africa by the EU in 2008, entitled 'The EU, Africa and China: towards trilateral dialogue and cooperation on peace, stability and sustainable development'. The Commission's communication suggests four areas for dialogue and co-operation: peace and security, support for African infrastructure, sustainable management of the environment and natural resources, and agriculture and food security.<sup>5</sup> Out of all four focus areas identified by the European Commission, security is the category that offers most room for cooperation.

Yet, a number of factors have prevented the trilateral cooperation framework from making significant progress since it was first envisioned. The trilateral cooperation framework has been perceived as an attempt by the EU to socialise China into the international community in order to converge with European norms, interests and values, rather than seeing it as a mutual learning and adjustment process for both the EU and China.<sup>6</sup> On the current needs of Africa, China sees infrastructure as a pre-condition to economic development, while the EU puts an emphasis on good governance and the development of civil society. In the field of security, China's non-interference policy stands in contrast with the EU concept of human security. Another factor complicating progress in trilateral cooperation is China's and Africa's preference for bilateral rather than trilateral or multilateral interactions. Lastly, the EU failed to gain the observer status it was seeking at the 2012 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000 and held every three years to further consolidate and institutionalise Sino-African relations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> China Daily (2013). *Xi's visit starts new era of China-Africa ties*, 31 March 2013. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-03/31/content\\_16361873.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-03/31/content_16361873.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Carbone, M. (2011). The European Union and China's rise in Africa: competing visions, external coherence and trilateral cooperation. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 29 (2), pp. 203-221.

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament (2008). *European Parliament resolution of 23 April 2008 on China's policy and its effect on Africa, 2007/2255(INI)*. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/dv/d-cn20080602\\_09/D-CN20080602\\_09en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/d-cn20080602_09/D-CN20080602_09en.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2008). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The EU, Africa, and China: towards trilateral dialogue and cooperation*. SEC (2008) 2641. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from [http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/COMM\\_PDF\\_COM\\_2008\\_0654\\_F\\_COMMUNICATION\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/COMM_PDF_COM_2008_0654_F_COMMUNICATION_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Liu, L. (2011). The EU and China's engagement in Africa: the dilemma of socialisation, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Occasional Paper no. 93.

<sup>7</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) (2013). *European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013*



## Divergent rhetoric, converging interests

The principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations and respect for sovereignty form the cornerstone of China's foreign policy. However, its stance on intervention and sovereignty's role in international politics is evolving, and becoming more flexible and pragmatic.<sup>8</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, new conceptual breakthroughs such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have emerged, the result of a comprehensive effort by the international community to improve the accountability of sovereign states towards the welfare and safety of their citizens. While China initially saw the R2P as an euphemism for western-led military interventions under the label of humanitarianism with the covert purpose of inducing a regime change, the Chinese policymakers have gradually adopted a more flexible stance.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there is an emerging debate within Chinese academia about the value of the non-interference principle in the conduct of its foreign relations, which in many occasions is at odds with China's national interests. As one Chinese scholar puts it: "from the diplomatic point of view, non-interference of domestic affairs will still be an important principle. We should, however, see that the stability of other countries has become more and more related to our rights and interests in those countries, including the security of our overseas organizations and civilians".<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, China's greater involvement in African security issues may be understood as a natural extension of its increasing economic presence on the continent. As a result, it has become more closely bound to the internal affairs of its African allies as it has become enmeshed in the security and insecurity dynamics of the continent. In several African countries, such as Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan, Chinese oil facilities and workers have been the deliberate targets of attacks and kidnappings. Most recently, in January 2013, four Chinese workers were abducted in Sudan's Western Darfur region and later freed.

Responding to critics that point that China has a tendency for security free riding, and answering calls to play a more active role in African security commensurate with its strong economic presence, China has, for instance, increased its participation in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. Although Chinese peacekeeping troops have so far been non-combat troops engaged mostly in engineering, medical, transportation and logistical work, China's contribution is the largest among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.<sup>11</sup>

China's greater flexibility is primarily observed in its voting behaviour at the UN Security Council (UNSC). As the security situation in Mali deteriorated in 2012 after Islamists took over the northern part of the country, China voted in favour of UNSC Resolution 2071,

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<sup>8</sup> Stahl, A.K. (2012). Contrasting rhetoric and converging security interests of the European Union and China in Africa, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 40 (4), pp. 147-173.

<sup>9</sup> Men, J. & Barton, B. (2011). *Introduction: China and the EU in Africa: changing concepts and changing policies*. In: Men, J. & Barton, B. (eds.), *China and the European Union in Africa: partners or competitors?* Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 1-22

<sup>10</sup> Wang, J. (2007). Harmonious world: the concept of China's diplomacy, *Chinese Cadres Tribune*, issue 7, p.1

<sup>11</sup> The Economist (2013). *Peacekeeping forces: over there*, 15 June 2013. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from: <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21579495-china-ponders-sending-more-combat-troops-un-peacekeeping-missions-over-there>



which declared the situation in Mali a “threat to international peace” and opened the way for military intervention. In March 2013, China offered to send approximately 500 soldiers to the UN force seeking to contain Islamist militants in Mali in what would be its biggest contribution to UN peacekeeping.<sup>12</sup> Peacekeepers will start operations in Mali on 1 July after the UNSC gave the final approval to the mission on 25 June. Whether China will, for the first time, contribute combat troops to a UN peacekeeping operation remains to be seen.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, China has also remained constructively engaged in the Sudanese conflict. As Sudan’s largest trading partner, China took a lead in managing the dispute between Sudan and South Sudan during 2012, over transit fees that led to a halt in oil production until May 2013. China again voted in favour of UNSC Resolution 2046 in May, which demanded an end to the fighting between the two sides and urged both sides to resume negotiations under threat of further sanctions.<sup>14</sup>

In Libya, China supported UNSC Resolution 1970, which imposed an arms embargo, a travel ban and an asset freeze on President Muammar Gaddafi and his closest collaborators. Beijing abstained from voting on UNSC Resolution 1973, which authorised the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya and on humanitarian grounds, paved the way for an international military intervention by allowing the use of “all necessary measures” to protect civilians under direct threat of attack from Gaddafi forces. Regional organisations, in particular the African Union, play a key role in shaping China’s decision making processes. Views emerging from these organizations have become an important factor for China.<sup>15</sup> For example, when China’s permanent representative to the UN, Li Baodong, explained the rationale behind China’s decision to abstain on UNSC Resolution 1973 by saying that China had “serious difficulty with parts of the resolution”. However, it chose not to use its veto because “China attaches great importance to the relevant position by the 22-member Arab League on the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya. We also attach great importance to the position of African countries and the African Union”.<sup>16</sup> The African Union is increasingly seen as an organisation that can bring the EU and China closer together. According to a recent briefing by the European Parliament, “China’s interest in cooperating with the African Union in fields which form an integral part of the EU strategy for Africa could give new momentum to the idea of trilateral cooperation between Africa, China and the EU”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> South China Morning Post (2013). *China to send more than 500 troops to Mali to contain Islamist militants, 24 May 2013*. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1244515/china-send-more-500-troops-mali-contain-islamist-militants>.

<sup>13</sup> The Economist, Peacekeeping forces: over there.

<sup>14</sup> ECFR, European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Van Hoeymissen, S. (2012). Regional organizations in China’s security strategy for Africa: the sense of supporting ‘African solutions to African problems’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 40 (4), pp. 91-118.

<sup>16</sup> Statement by H.E. Ambassador Li Baodong, Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations, at the Security Council Meeting on the Situation in Libya’, March 17, 2011. Available online at: <http://www.china-un.org/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/regionalhotspots/africa/t824183.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> European Parliament (2013). China’s role in development in Africa: challenging the EU approach. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130521/LDM\\_BRI%282013%29130521\\_R EV1\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130521/LDM_BRI%282013%29130521_R EV1_EN.pdf).



In short, judging from China's response to conflicts in Mali, Libya and Sudan, EU and Chinese security interests are increasingly converging and this could create space for EU-China cooperation in crisis management and conflict resolution efforts.

### **Specific areas for EU-China-Africa cooperation**

Jointly participating in the international community's efforts to fight piracy off the coast of East Africa and safeguard strategically important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and tackling the proliferation and illicit trade of small arms and light weapons (SALW) present two potential areas for China-EU cooperation in Africa.

### **Combating piracy**

The Chinese naval deployment to the Gulf of Aden is a major opportunity for China's participation in multilateral security arrangements.<sup>18</sup> Both the navies of the EU and China have been deployed in the Gulf of Aden as part of international anti-piracy mission since 2008. China initially provided its consent to UNSC Resolution 1851 which authorized counter-piracy measures off the Somali coast and the use of member state naval and military aircraft to interdict pirate vessels.<sup>19</sup> The Gulf of Aden is a strategic transit area for goods to and from Asia. Approximately 30 percent of Europe's crude oil passes through the Gulf of Aden. China, heavily dependent on oil and gas imports from the Middle East and East Africa, also has a strategic interest in capacity-enhancing measures to guarantee the safe passage of its growing oil and gas imports.<sup>20</sup>

For China, this is its first regularized overseas naval deployment by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). For the EU, it is the first time it conducts a naval operation in the framework of its Common Security and Defence Policy. Since the beginning of the operation, the PLA Navy has dispatched 13 escort taskforces (the 14th Chinese naval escort taskforce took over the independent escort mission on 18 March 2013) to the Gulf of Aden, providing 34 warships and approximately 10,000 personnel, and conducting 500 escort missions.<sup>21</sup>

China has also been an active participant in the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) group, the operational forum which co-ordinates the anti-piracy activities of the coalition members, acting as its rotating leader in 2010. Through SHADE, there is significant scope for strengthened EU-China cooperation in the field of intelligence sharing, information and data exchange.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Christoffersen, G. (2010). *China and maritime cooperation: piracy in the Gulf of Aden*. In: Singh, H. & Durkop, C. (eds.), *Comprehensive Security in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Seoul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, pp.149-186.

<sup>19</sup> UN Security Council S/RES/1851.

<sup>20</sup> Larik, J. & Weiler, Q. (2011). *Going naval in troubled waters: the EU, China and the fight against piracy off the coast of Somalia*. In: Men, J. & Barton, B. (eds.), *China and the European Union in Africa: partners or competitors?* Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 81-103.

<sup>21</sup> People's Daily (2013). *Review of Chinese Navy's escort missions in Gulf of Aden in past 4 years*, 27 December 2012. Retrieved 20 June 2013 from <http://english.people.com.cn/90786/8072251.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Kamerling, S. & van der Putten, F.P. (2011). An overseas naval presence without overseas bases: china's counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 40 (4), pp. 119-146.



## Small arms and light weapons

Given that approximately 95 percent of Africa's conflict weapons are imported from outside the continent, cooperation to effectively control the supply and trade of SALW is a central issue on the agenda of trilateral dialogue. The Beijing Action Plan approved at the 2012 FOCAC highlights that "the Chinese side will continue to support African countries' effort to combat illegal trade and circulation of small arms and light weapons."<sup>23</sup>

The Africa-China-EU Expert Working Group (EWG) on Conventional Arms was created in February 2012 to support activities to promote EU-China-Africa dialogue and cooperation, and agree on a set of guidelines and recommendations on small arms control. It is made up of nine non-proliferation experts from China, Africa and Europe.<sup>24</sup> Although the working group is still in its early stages, progress has already been made. The group has held two meetings so far to discuss ways to tackle the illicit trade of SALW: its initial meeting in Brussels on 12 November 2012 and a follow-up meeting on 9 April 2013 in Kampala, Uganda. In order to increase awareness of the problems associated with SALW proliferation by the policy communities in Africa, China and the EU, and to better understand the main issues and challenges related to illicit weapons and ammunition in Uganda, the EWG held meetings with officials and representatives from the National Focal Point on SALW, the Ugandan Police Force, the Uganda People's Defence Force and civil society organisations. Further policy dialogue rounds are planned, as well as consultations with officials, industry representatives and civil society. The EWG plans to undertake a field research visit in South Sudan in June and organise a regional conference on SALW in Nairobi in July.<sup>25</sup>

The aim of the EWG is to become a long term dialogue process, and to undertake advocacy, consultation and field research activities aimed at identifying further opportunities for EU-China cooperation to support African states in preventing the illegal trade in SALW. However, several obstacles remain to achieve closer EU-China cooperation. The ongoing EU arms embargo on China, for example, makes discussing arms transfers difficult.<sup>26</sup>

## Concluding thoughts

There is an increasingly solid foundation for future security cooperation between EU, China and Africa. Although for the time being, "the context within which Africa-China-EU relations operate in, is not yet conducive to high-level engagement",<sup>27</sup> progress on EU-

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<sup>23</sup> Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) (2012). *The Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015)*. Available online at: <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t954620.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> European Council (2012). *Council Decision 2012/121/CFSP of 27 February 2012 in support of activities to promote EU-China-Africa dialogue and cooperation on conventional arms controls*. Available online at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2012:054:0008:0013:EN:PDF>.

<sup>25</sup> Saferworld (2013). *Expert Working Group on conventional arms welcomes Arms Trade Treaty*. Available online at: <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/news-and-views/news-article/618>.

<sup>26</sup> Wheeler, T. (2011). *Tackling the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons: an opportunity for EU-China cooperation*. In: Men, J. & Barton, B (eds.), *China and the European Union in Africa: partners or competitors?* Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 105-124.

<sup>27</sup> Wheeler, *Tackling the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons: an opportunity for China-EU cooperation*, p. 119.



China-Africa trilateral cooperation is gradually increasing. Even if China remains sceptical about the purpose behind the trilateral cooperation framework and the normative principles that are shaping the post-Cold War security architecture, the normative gap between China and the EU is narrowing and there is an increasing convergence of interests especially in the field of security. China will continue its gradual shift from an ideologically-motivated towards a pragmatic, interests-based foreign policy, making *ad hoc* adjustments to its security policy. The African Union will increasingly play an important role in binding the EU and China closer together.



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