

China's Expanding Security Role in Africa: African Agency, Accountability and Strategic Consequences

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Note on Origins and Sources

This occasional paper is based on the lecture “Military and Security Issues Concerning Africa’s Relationship with China”, presented at a Media Foundation for West Africa workshop in early September 2026. Substantially revised and expanded for publication, it develops the lecture’s arguments with additional evidence and analysis and adds the comparative framework, governance tests and policy recommendations presented here. Unless otherwise indicated, the paper reflects information available up to 10 October 2026; subsequent developments, including the *Auspicious Ark*’s anticipated visit to Ghana later that month and the progress of Ghana’s BRICS application. Claims that could not be independently verified have been qualified or omitted.

Abstract

China has become a major security actor in Africa within a single generation, while the oversight systems surrounding that relationship have not kept pace. This paper traces the development of the security dimension of China–Africa relations, examines the bundled model through which it operates, and reviews evidence on arms transfers, training, military exercises and policy commitments, with particular attention to West Africa and the Sahel. It weighs the opportunities for African states against seven categories of risk, from procurement lock-in and digital surveillance to strategic entanglement. It argues that the central vulnerability is not military domination but an accountability deficit that can deepen over time. The paper proposes assessing external security partnerships comparatively, by their terms, transparency, and outcomes rather than by the flag attached to them. It defines strategic agency as the capacity not only to choose among partners but also to scrutinise, alter or exit those relationships. Where external conditionality is limited, the burden of oversight falls more heavily on domestic institutions, including parliaments, audit bodies, courts, civil society and the media. Investigative journalism is therefore treated as part of security governance rather than simply as commentary on it. The paper concludes with recommendations for governments, parliaments, regional organisations, civil society and the media aimed at strengthening accountability while preserving the benefits of diversified security partnerships.

Keywords: China–Africa relations; security cooperation; defence diplomacy; FOCAC; Global Security Initiative; arms transfers; surveillance; strategic dependency; African agency; West Africa; Sahel; security governance.

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The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own.

1. Introduction

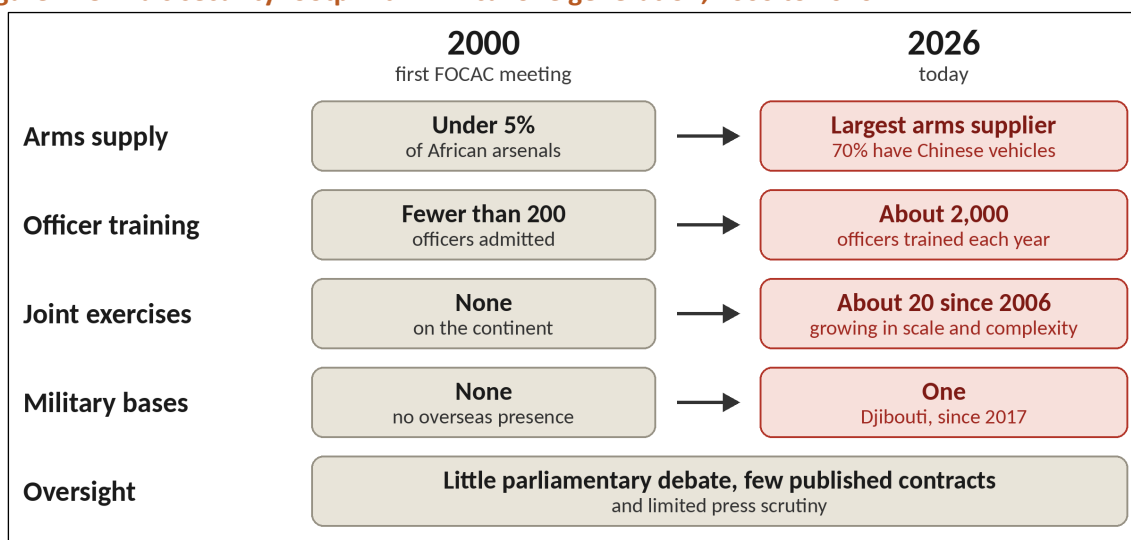
Public discussion of China in Africa is dominated by roads, railways, ports, trade and loans. A decade of reporting in most major West African newspapers has produced extensive coverage of debt, infrastructure, market access, and investment. Sustained coverage of soldiers, intelligence cooperation, surveillance systems and defence partnerships is far harder to find.

That imbalance no longer matches the facts. When the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held its first ministerial meeting in 2000, China accounted for less than 5 per cent of the weapons in African arsenals. Fewer than 200 African officers were training in Chinese military

academies, and China conducted no military exercises on the continent (Nantulya, 2025).

Today, China trains roughly 2,000 African military officers each year and supplies the most major arms to sub-Saharan Africa (George et al., 2026; Nantulya, 2025). Around 70 per cent of African countries operate Chinese armoured vehicles (Nantulya, 2025). China maintains a military base in Djibouti, has conducted several exercises on the continent in recent years, and has included more security commitments in its latest FOCAC action plan than in any before it (Forum on China–Africa Cooperation [FOCAC], 2024; Nantulya, 2025).

Figure 1. China’s security footprint in Africa: one generation, 2000 to 2026



Source: Author’s construct, drawing on Nantulya (2025) and George et al. (2026).

This shift happened quietly. As the bottom row of Figure 1 indicates, oversight is the one dimension that did not keep pace: parliamentary debate remained limited, few contracts were published, and media scrutiny fell far short of what a change of this scale would normally attract. This is the paper’s central contention, and the evidence for it is weighed in Section 6.9.

The neglect matters because security relationships differ in kind from commercial ones. A road or an industrial project can be renegotiated, transferred or replaced. A defence relationship embeds equipment, ammunition, spare parts, software, training pipelines, doctrine and communications architecture in the institutions of the state. A single procurement

decision can therefore shape capability and autonomy for decades.

1.1 Argument

The paper’s central argument is that China is no longer primarily an economic actor in Africa. It has also become an important security actor whose influence extends across military training, defence diplomacy, arms transfers, peacekeeping, policing, intelligence cooperation, digital infrastructure, maritime security and strategic communications.

This reframes the question, because asking whether China is good or bad for Africa invites Africans to take sides in someone else’s geopolitical argument. The more useful question

is whether African countries have the institutions, transparency, oversight and strategic capacity to make the relationship serve African interests. Empirically, the relationship has evolved faster than the systems designed to oversee it. This paper examines the gap between security engagement and accountability.

1.2 Research questions

The paper addresses one overriding question: under what conditions does diversification of external security partnerships increase African strategic agency, and under what conditions does it produce new forms of institutional, technological or political dependence? Five subsidiary questions follow:

1. What is happening in the China–Africa security relationship?
2. What opportunities does it create for African countries?
3. What risks and vulnerabilities does it create?
4. Where should scrutiny, particularly investigative journalism, be directed?
5. What does African agency look like in a relationship of this scale?

Throughout, the paper treats African states as actors rather than as terrain on which larger powers compete, while recognising that external competition is also part of Africa’s reality.

The paper originated in a September 2026 Media Foundation for West Africa lecture for journalists and has been expanded here into a broader assessment of the governance and accountability dimensions of Africa’s security partnerships.

1.3 Literature review

Scholarship on China–Africa security relations has grown with the relationship itself. Earlier literature concentrated on arms transfers, peacekeeping, military diplomacy, and China’s involvement in African conflict management (Alden et al., 2018). Later work widened the field to security assistance, professional military education, private security, maritime engagement and digital surveillance (Carrozza & Marsh, 2022; Nantulya, 2023; Wakabi & Roberts, 2026). Lammich (2025) describes a shift from mainly economic engagement to a mix of military

presence, arms transfers, and diplomacy, while finding China’s approach still cautious and reactive. Carrozza and Marsh (2022), who collated Chinese security-force assistance to African states, find long-term relationship building and protection of economic interests, but no evidence that China is trying to displace every other external security provider. The literature is therefore not short of studies showing that China’s security role is expanding, and this paper does not claim to be the first.

The “package” argument developed in Section 3 builds on two earlier contributions. Benabdallah (2016) demonstrated that China’s African security strategy cannot be understood through arms and bases alone, because capacity building and human-resource development form part of a broader security-development nexus. Nantulya (2023) treats Chinese military education as a means of relationship building and exposure to governance concepts rather than simply skills transfer. This paper extends that analysis by asking what governance consequences arise when these different forms of cooperation accumulate within the same African security institutions.

Recent scholarship on African agency has meanwhile moved beyond state-centred accounts of the relationship. Duggan (2023) draws attention to the disproportionate emphasis placed on Chinese and systemic agency. Soulé (2025) develops typologies that distinguish the forms of agency exercised by different actors, and Nunoo (2025) examines the roles of civil society, media and local actors in Sino-Ghanaian relations. From this perspective, agency is exercised not only by presidents and defence ministries but also through parliaments, journalists, civil society, technical experts, courts and regional institutions. This provides a broader scholarly foundation for the treatment of the media as an oversight institution in Section 7.

1.4 Research gap and contribution

The review identifies five related gaps in the literature. First, a bundling gap arises because arms transfers, training, peacekeeping, military exercises, defence diplomacy, surveillance and private security are generally studied as separate instruments, leaving their cumulative effect less well understood. Second, and more central to this

paper, is an accountability gap: considerable attention is devoted to China's motives, strategies and capabilities, but much less to the institutions and actors responsible for scrutinising these relationships within African states. Third, the absence of a consistent comparative yardstick leaves much of the debate confined to a China-versus-West frame rather than examining external security partners by common criteria. Fourth, research on security technology, digital dependency and data sovereignty is only beginning to extend analysis beyond conventional forms of defence cooperation (Wakabi & Roberts, 2026). Fifth, African agency below the state level remains comparatively underdeveloped, particularly the roles of parliaments, oversight bodies, civil society, media, courts, and technical institutions.

Against these gaps, this paper examines the cumulative governance effects that arise when individual security instruments are bundled into a wider external security relationship and proposes a common African framework for comparing that relationship with alternative external partnerships. In doing so, it shifts the principal unit of analysis from Chinese intent to African institutional capacity, uses West Africa and the Sahel as its main empirical lens, and develops the criteria in Section 8.3 as a comparative governance framework for assessing external security partnerships. Within this framework, strategic agency is understood as the capacity not only to choose among partners, but also to scrutinise relationships and retain the ability to alter or exit them. The paper's central analytical claim is that the principal vulnerability lies in an accountability deficit that can accumulate as

security relationships deepen.

Four terms used in the paper are related but not synonymous, and they form a ladder: security cooperation, institutionalisation, dependency and strategic entanglement. Not every security partnership produces dependency, and not every dependency produces geopolitical alignment. The same holds for diversification: it can increase autonomy, but poorly managed diversification can create new dependencies.

1.5 Approach and limitations

This paper uses a qualitative, comparative and policy-oriented approach. It combines secondary literature, official Chinese and African documents, SIPRI arms-transfer data, policy statements and selected country-level evidence, with Ghana as the principal illustration. It does not attempt to measure Chinese influence quantitatively or to establish causal relationships between individual security partnerships and political outcomes. Its purpose is to identify recurring mechanisms of opportunity, dependency and accountability, and to develop a framework through which external security partnerships can be compared.

One limitation of language should be stated. "China" is used as shorthand for actors that are not identical: the party-state and its ministries, the People's Liberation Army, state-owned defence companies, technology firms and private security companies. Where the distinction matters, the paper names the actor, for example by referring to Chinese-supported surveillance systems or to defence-industry supply as distinct from government policy.

2. Historical Context

China is the latest participant in a long pattern of foreign military partnership in Africa, not its originator. During the Cold War, rival powers armed opposing sides of conflicts across the continent. After independence, many states signed defence agreements with former colonial powers, some almost immediately.

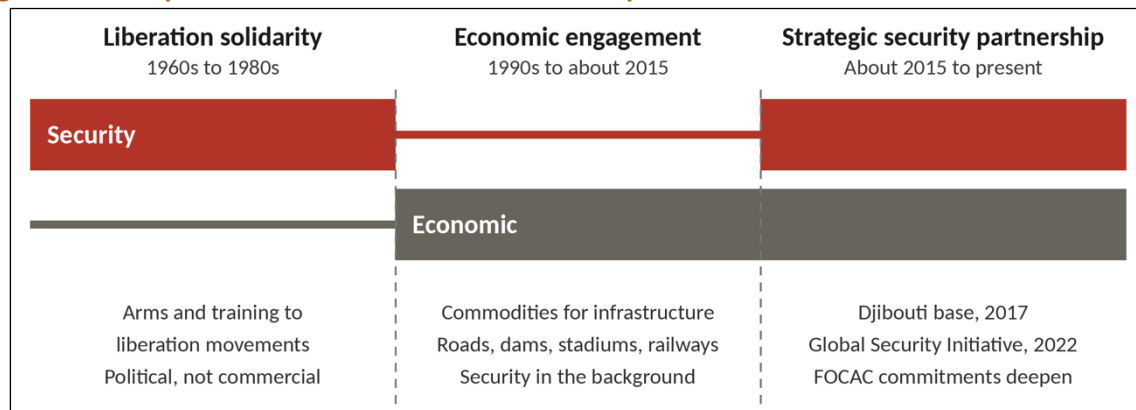
Those arrangements brought foreign bases, agreements granting foreign troops special legal status, and training programmes that shaped

military doctrine and, in some cases, national politics. Placing China within this history is not a defence of China. It is a methodological commitment: the same analytical standards should apply to every external power, including those whose influence on the continent is much older.

2.1 Three phases of the relationship

China's engagement with Africa has passed through three broad phases.

Figure 2. Three phases of the China–Africa relationship



Source: Author's construct. Note: bar thickness indicates the relative prominence of the security and economic strands in each phase.

Table 1. Three phases of the China–Africa relationship

Phase	Period	Primary driver	Place of security
Liberation solidarity	1960s to 1980s	Political solidarity with anti-colonial movements and new states	Central: arms, training and support for liberation movements
Economic engagement	1990s to about 2015	Trade, investment and commodities-for-infrastructure deals	Background
Strategic security partnership	About 2015 to present	Protection of interests, influence and strategic competition	Prominent and among the fastest-growing areas

Source: Author's construct.

Networks built with liberation movements in southern Africa and elsewhere during the first phase continue to shape how some governments and ruling parties view Beijing. That history is important to understanding certain African leaders' responses to subsequent Chinese initiatives. The transition to the third phase is marked more visibly by China's establishment of its military base in Djibouti in 2017, the launch of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022, and the growing space devoted to security cooperation in successive FOCAC action plans.

Taken together, these developments suggest that

the relationship is no longer simply an economic partnership with an occasional security component. This paper characterises it as an emerging strategic security partnership, in which security, present during the liberation era and less prominent during the period dominated by economic engagement, has returned as a significant dimension. This paper uses the term "strategic security partnership" as an analytical characterisation rather than a settled description in the literature. It should be read alongside Lammich's (2025) finding that China's security posture in Africa remains cautious and reactive in important respects.

3. The Chinese Security Model

China's security presence in Africa is a package of mutually reinforcing relationships, not a network of alliances and bases. Much commentary, particularly in Western media and policy circles, reads Chinese activity through the United States

model of formal alliances, forward operating bases and large overseas deployments. Analysts looking for that pattern will miss the more important one.

3.1 A package, not a single tool

China's security engagement can be understood as a package comprising nine interconnected components:

- defence diplomacy through military attachés, official visits and high-level exchanges;
- military education and training;
- arms exports;
- peacekeeping cooperation;
- police and public-security partnerships;
- maritime security;
- intelligence sharing;
- digital infrastructure and surveillance technology; and
- private security companies protecting Chinese investments and personnel.

The significance lies not simply in the individual components but in their potential bundling. Equipment may be accompanied by financing, training, maintenance support and longer-term institutional relationships that might otherwise be negotiated separately. For defence ministries facing tight budgets and urgent security needs, such arrangements can be attractive. They can also create dependencies over time, not necessarily through pressure or coercion, but because one supplier becomes the easiest and most familiar, and potentially the most costly to replace.

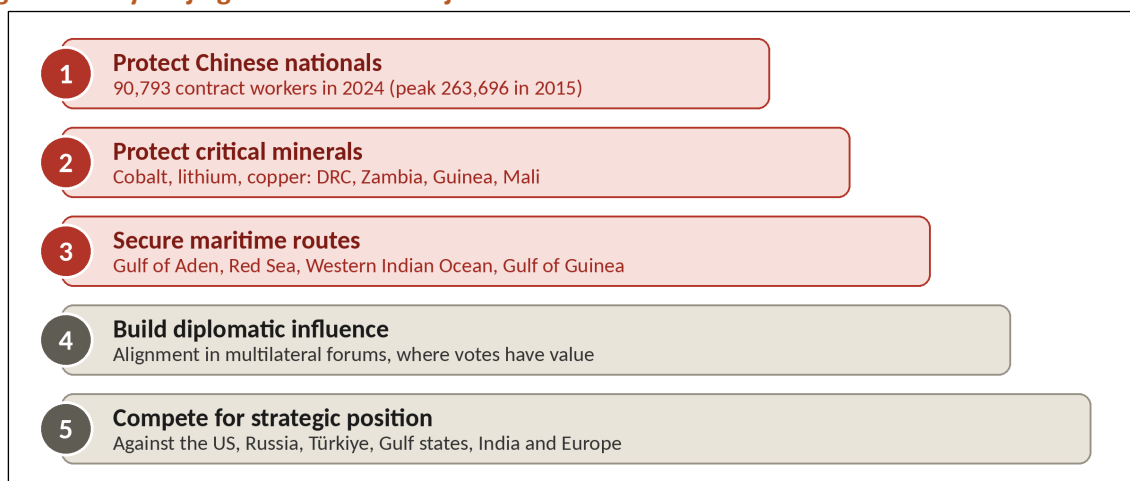
3.2 Beijing's objectives

Five objectives help explain China's investment in African security relationships, without implying

endorsement of them:

1. **Protecting Chinese nationals.** Official data recorded 90,793 Chinese workers on Chinese-contracted projects and labour services in Africa in 2024, down from a peak of 263,696 in 2015; the series excludes informal migrants such as traders and shopkeepers (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.). Estimates of the wider Chinese population are higher but uncertain, while concentrations of Chinese workers, businesses and communities create practical security interests.
2. **Critical minerals.** Chinese investment in cobalt, lithium, copper and other critical-mineral sectors gives Beijing an interest in stability where these investments and supply chains are concentrated.
3. **Maritime security.** China's dependence on seaborne trade gives it an interest in maritime security, including along the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean and, in West Africa, the Gulf of Guinea.
4. **Diplomatic influence.** Training, exercises and other forms of sustained security cooperation can deepen political and institutional relationships and potentially reinforce diplomatic influence.
5. **Strategic competition.** China operates in an increasingly crowded African security landscape alongside the United States, Russia, Türkiye, Gulf states, India and European powers, each pursuing national interests while presenting its engagement in the language of partnership.

Figure 3. Why Beijing does this: five objectives



Source: Author's construct; worker data from China Africa Research Initiative (n.d.).

As Figure 3 illustrates, the five objectives fall into two broad groups. The first three have identifiable coordinates and can be located by following the people, the minerals and the sea lanes. The last two are less geographically anchored and help explain why engagement extends to places where China has fewer tangible interests to protect.

Influence should not be equated with control. The effects of Chinese military training should be assessed through the curriculum, selection process, duration, doctrine and follow-on relationships involved. African officers retain their national loyalties and professional identities, and may be exposed to more than one training system.

The fifth objective carries a warning drawn from the Cold War, when African countries were treated as contested territory rather than as nations with their own interests. The costs were high, and some persist. Africa should not become a proxy battlefield again.

Competition among external powers is not the danger itself, since it widens African bargaining options. The danger is that external priorities come to determine African choices. The aim should be strategic diversification without strategic dependence.

3.3 The Global Security Initiative and non-interference

The GSI, announced in 2022, is neither a treaty nor an alliance. It is a set of principles: common and indivisible security; respect for sovereignty and

territorial integrity; adherence to the United Nations Charter; and attention to the legitimate security concerns of all countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

China's description of the GSI should be kept distinct from interpretation of what it means for African security. It is nonetheless more than rhetorical background: the FOCAC action plan ties military training, joint exercises, and patrols to its implementation (FOCAC, 2024), making it part of the institutional policy architecture.

Non-interference is the principle that appeals most to African governments. It promises security cooperation without lectures on domestic politics and without conditions on how a government manages its internal affairs.

Nevertheless, a tension arises between non-interference in the classical sense and the effects of contemporary security cooperation. A partner may train a country's police, supply its surveillance systems, host government data and field private security companies on its territory without deploying troops to change a government. It still shapes how the state exercises power over its own citizens.

Where such cooperation carries limited external conditionality, the burden of accountability falls more heavily on domestic institutions. Parliament, the courts, audit and data-protection authorities, civil society and the media become essential safeguards for scrutinising how security relationships are negotiated, implemented and used.

4. The Empirical Picture

The verifiable data show China as the leading arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa, with demand concentrated in West Africa and the Sahel. This section sets out the figures that can be defended and what they do and do not show.

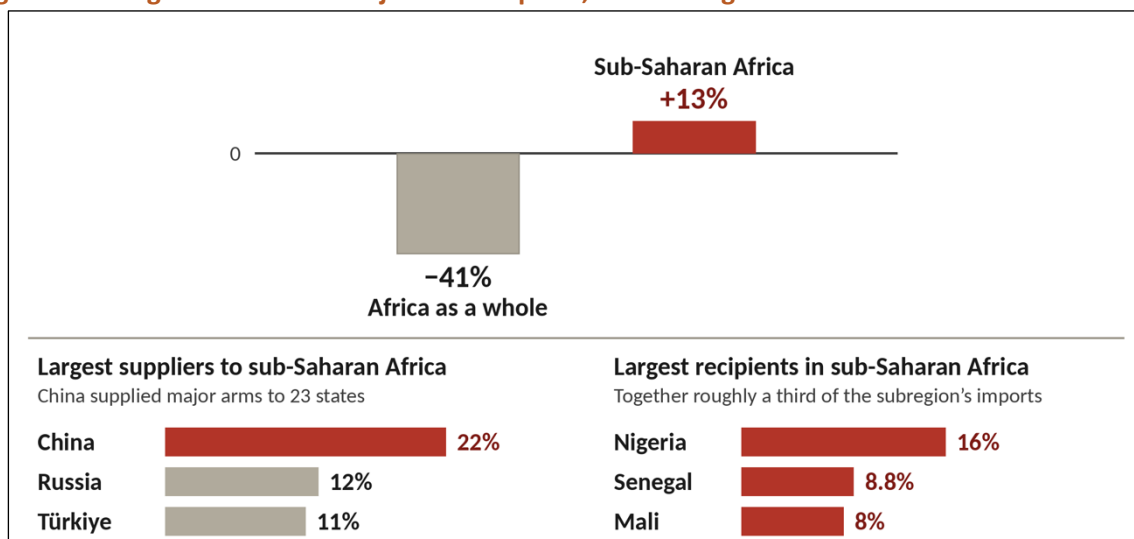
4.1 Arms transfers

According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data released in March 2026, China supplied major arms to 23 sub-Saharan African countries between 2021 and 2025. It accounted for 22 per cent of the region's major arms imports, ahead of Russia at 12 per cent and

Türkiye at 11 per cent (George et al., 2026).

The continental pattern reveals a marked divergence. Arms imports across Africa fell by 41 per cent between 2016–20 and 2021–25, while imports into sub-Saharan Africa rose by 13 per cent (George et al., 2026). This implies contraction in the larger North African market alongside growth south of the Sahara. That growth was itself concentrated: Nigeria accounted for 16 per cent of sub-Saharan arms imports, Senegal for 8.8 per cent and Mali for 8 per cent, together roughly a third of the total (George et al., 2026).

Figure 4. Change in volume of major arms imports, 2021–25 against 2016–20



Source: Author's construction from George et al. (2026), based on the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). Supplier and recipient figures are shares of sub-Saharan African imports.

These purchases should be understood in relation to demand as well as supply. SIPRI records several large-scale armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa during the period (George et al., 2026), and insurgency, terrorism, violent extremism and internal instability all create pressure to buy. Governments' reasons for individual procurement decisions cannot, however, be established from transfer data alone. Such data show what was delivered, by whom and roughly when, but not why a government chose to buy.

4.2 Unmanned systems and the supplier landscape

The military drone market illustrates why foreign suppliers should not be treated as a single

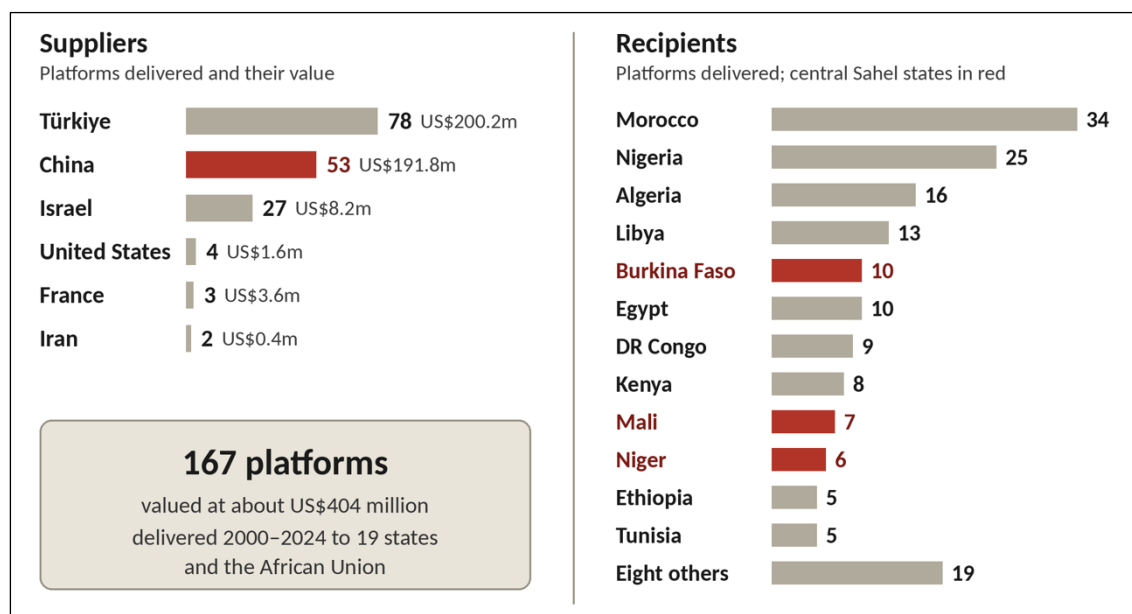
category. Figure 5 draws on the dataset compiled by Oyewole et al. (2025), which records 167 unmanned platforms with autonomous features, valued at about US\$404 million, delivered between 2000 and 2024 by six supplier states to 19 African states and the African Union. Türkiye supplied 78 platforms (46.7 per cent) and China 53 (31.7 per cent), together nearly four-fifths of the recorded platforms. Their values were relatively close, at US\$200.2 million and US\$191.8 million respectively. Israel supplied 27 platforms at substantially lower value, while the United States, France and Iran accounted for nine between them.

Morocco, Nigeria and Algeria were the largest recipients, with 34, 25 and 16 platforms

respectively. The three central Sahel states received smaller numbers, all from Türkiye: Burkina Faso 10, Mali 7 and Niger 6. Because the authors compiled the dataset from SIPRI alongside manufacturer and defence-industry

sources, these figures should be understood as a research dataset rather than a direct SIPRI series. Other databases using different definitions and coverage may produce different totals.

Figure 5. Suppliers and recipients of military drones with autonomous features in Africa, 2000–2024



Source: Author's construct from Oyewole et al. (2025), Tables 1–2, a research dataset compiled from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database and manufacturer and defence-industry sources.

The identity of the supplier has governance consequences:

- Chinese and Turkish systems often arrive with relatively limited end-use conditionality.
- Russian security relationships frequently extend beyond arms into wider security and resource arrangements.
- Western suppliers generally impose more conditions and training requirements, and can suspend cooperation when political circumstances change.

No model is inherently superior. Each creates a different mix of opportunity, dependency, leverage and risk.

4.3 Policy commitments under FOCAC

The FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), adopted at the 2024 summit, contains more military and security commitments than any predecessor (Nantulya, 2025). It links cooperation to the GSI and provides for joint exercises, training and patrols. China undertook to train 6,000

African military personnel and 1,000 police and law enforcement officers, and to invite 500 young African military officers to China (FOCAC, 2024).

At the 2024 summit, China pledged RMB 360 billion, roughly US\$50 billion, in support and financing. RMB 1 billion of that, about US\$140 million or 0.28 per cent, was earmarked as grants for military assistance (FOCAC, 2024).

The RMB 1 billion allocation admits two reasonable readings: security remains a small part of the overall relationship, yet US\$140 million can still generate long-term influence through the training of officers who may later lead African security institutions.

The policy track also follows a regular diplomatic calendar. The 10th FOCAC Ministerial Conference is due in the Republic of the Congo in 2027, and Chinese foreign ministers maintain the tradition, begun in 1991, of making Africa their first overseas destination of the year (FOCAC, 2024). The significance of these visits should be judged by their agendas and substance rather than by tradition alone.

4.4 Other indicators

Four further indicators point in the same direction:

- **Exercises.** Chinese military exercises with African partners have grown in scale and complexity, including land and maritime activity with Tanzania and Mozambique in 2024 and an air-force exercise with Egypt in 2025 (Nantulya, 2025). Exercise Will for Peace 2026, hosted by South Africa in January 2026, extended this activity into a multinational maritime setting under the BRICS Plus framework (South African Government, 2025).
- **Private security.** Chinese private security companies have been reported in at least 14 African countries, although differing assessments make this a documented minimum at a particular point rather than a definitive current total (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023).
- **Commercial presence.** NORINCO's opening of a regional office in Dakar in 2023, its fourth in Africa, illustrates the expanding institutional presence of Chinese defence suppliers (Nantulya, 2025).
- **Basing.** Djibouti remains China's only established military base in Africa, despite recurring external assessments of possible additional locations.

4.5 Ghana: two hospital ships

Ghana's defence relationship with China extends beyond equipment purchases to personnel training, maritime cooperation, infrastructure support and peacekeeping collaboration. One visible expression of that relationship is the anticipated visit of the People's Liberation Army Navy hospital ship *Auspicious Ark* (Hull 868). At the time of writing in early October 2026, the ship was expected to arrive in Ghana toward the end of that month as part of Mission Harmony-2026 (Ghana Peace Journal, 2026; Xinhua, 2026a). The mission is the ship's first overseas deployment, a voyage of more than 200 days linked, in Chinese reporting, to implementing the Global Security Initiative (Marine Insight, 2026; Xinhua, 2026a). It included a seven-day visit to Conakry beginning on 3 October (Xinhua, 2026b). Because the Ghana

visit had not yet occurred, its actual dates, programme, medical activities, military engagements and any follow-on cooperation remained to be verified.

Such visits should not be treated simply as protocol events. They provide visible and verifiable entry points into the wider relationship, inviting scrutiny of who issued the invitation, under what agreement, alongside what other cooperation and with what follow-up.

A visit of this kind also combines several functions: humanitarian medical assistance, naval presence and logistical reach, military-to-military contact, professional medical exchange, maritime and public diplomacy, and the prospect of follow-on cooperation. None of this means that a humanitarian mission should be treated as covert security activity. The task is to establish what each function involves, what evidence exists for it, and what institutional relationships remain after the vessel leaves.

The Chinese naval vessel should not be confused with the hospital ship already in port, and the timing invites a comparison. The *Global Mercy*, the world's largest civilian hospital ship, operated by the charity Mercy Ships, has been at Tema since 18 August 2026 on a 10-month field service in partnership with the Government of Ghana. President John Dramani Mahama toured the ship on 1 October 2026 and welcomed the charity's fifth mission to Ghana since 1991 (Ghana News Agency [GNA], 2026a). By his account, the four earlier missions delivered more than 2,600 surgeries and 16,700 dental procedures and supported the training of 139 Ghanaian health professionals (GhanaWeb, 2026). He urged that the visit strengthen the surgical services Ghana's hospitals can provide after the ship departs.

Two hospital ships in Ghanaian waters within weeks of each other offer a practical test of the comparative method this paper proposes. One is a civilian charity on a 10-month mission under a government partnership. The other is a naval vessel on a short port call within a defence relationship. Both provide free care, and both warrant the same questions: who invited the ship, under what agreement, who funds it, what data and access accompany it, and what capacity remains once it leaves. The difference between

humanitarian service and defence diplomacy lies in the answers, not in the flag.

After the visit, the account should be updated against the documentary record. That means establishing the *Auspicious Ark*'s actual arrival and departure dates from Tema, identifying the Ghanaian authority that formally invited or hosted the vessel, and reconstructing the official programme. The assessment should also record the scale and types of medical services delivered, including any shore-based activities. It should determine whether the visit involved professional exchanges between the Ghana Armed Forces and the PLA Navy, visits to the ship or military facilities, official meetings, or military exercises or demonstrations. Particular attention should then be paid to what followed, including any agreements, announcements, commitments or other forms of continuing cooperation. This would allow us to distinguish the visit's humanitarian and medical functions from its defence-diplomacy dimensions, while avoiding assumptions about activities for which there is no evidence. Table 7 in Section 8.3 sets out what was documented, and what remained to be established, at the time of writing.

For Ghana, the central question is whether cooperation with China can deliver security benefits while preserving strategic autonomy, procurement integrity, data sovereignty and effective parliamentary oversight. Answering it requires defence agreements, training, maritime cooperation, procurement, infrastructure and digital systems to be assessed together, by the same standards applied to every external partner.

4.6 Ghana's BRICS application

Ghana's strategic position took on a new dimension on 6 October 2026, when Foreign Affairs Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa announced that President John Dramani Mahama's Cabinet had approved a decision to formally apply for BRICS membership. The

government presented the move as a way to diversify international partnerships, expand economic options, and deepen South-South cooperation without abandoning traditional partners, and it sought India's support. India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar welcomed Ghana's interest but noted that BRICS membership required collective consideration. At the time of writing, the decision to apply had been announced, but the available evidence did not establish that the formal application had been submitted or considered, and Ghana was not a member (GNA, 2026b; Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 2026).

BRICS has expanded from Brazil, Russia, India and China, whose first leaders' summit was held in 2009, to 11 members. South Africa joined the grouping in 2010 and attended its first summit in 2011. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates became full members in January 2024, and Indonesia followed in January 2025 (BRICS India, n.d.). Official BRICS material therefore lists three African members, South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia, although Saudi Arabia's membership status has been reported inconsistently in some sources.

A second tier of partner countries was created in 2025 with 10 members, two of them African: Nigeria (January 2025) and Uganda (January 2025). The others are Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (BRICS India, n.d.). Partners take part in BRICS cooperation, but decisions are made by consensus among full members. It remains unclear whether Ghana's application leads to partner status or full membership, and when.

The decision gives the paper a live Ghanaian case of the strategic diversification it advocates. Its implications are taken up under strategic entanglement in Section 6.8 and under African agency in Section 8.3.

5. Opportunities

China's security relationship with Africa offers tangible opportunities that should be considered alongside its risks, with seven standing out.

Choice. A wider range of credible defence suppliers can strengthen African governments' bargaining position on price, delivery and conditions, reducing reliance on a single

traditional supplier.

Cost and access. Competitive pricing, flexible financing and lighter political conditions can give governments access to capabilities that might otherwise be delayed, restricted or unaffordable, although supplier decisions across all markets may reflect commercial as well as governance considerations.

Peacekeeping. China is a major contributor to UN peacekeeping, both financially and in uniformed personnel. It is the second-largest contributor to the assessed UN peacekeeping budget and, among the five permanent members of the Security Council, the largest contributor of uniformed personnel. Its role is therefore substantial among major powers without making China one of the largest uniformed contributors globally; changing figures should always be dated to the period measured (Lammich, 2025; United Nations Peacekeeping, 2026a, 2026b).

Maritime security. Patrol vessels, training, exercises and anti-piracy cooperation can help address West African capacity gaps in responding to piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking and other maritime

crime, while requiring scrutiny of port access, logistics and information-sharing arrangements.

Defence-industrial development. Local production and genuine technology transfer could reduce dependence on imported equipment, although whether individual arrangements produce meaningful and lasting transfer remains an empirical question.

Cyber capacity. External assistance can help strengthen the protection of government networks, critical infrastructure and other digital systems where domestic capacity remains limited.

Support for African-led frameworks. The GSI's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference could, in principle, complement African-led peace and security mechanisms, although the outcome depends on African negotiating capacity, leadership and oversight.

The value of these opportunities ultimately depends on contractual terms, transparency, effective oversight and the capacity to change course later. Table 2 sets them, together with training, against the conditions for realising them.

Table 2. Opportunities and the conditions for realising them

Opportunity	Potential benefit	Condition for realising it
Supplier choice	Bargaining leverage and alternatives to traditional suppliers	Competitive procurement and lifecycle comparison
Affordable capability	Access to systems that would otherwise be out of reach	Assessment of total lifetime cost and interoperability
Training	Wider professional education and institutional networks	Transparent selection and exposure to more than one training system
Peacekeeping	Support for African and UN peace operations	Alignment with African-led mandates and doctrine
Maritime security	Vessels, training and cooperation against maritime crime	Clear rules on access, data and operational control
Defence industry	Technology transfer and local production	Enforceable local-content and technology-transfer provisions
Cyber capacity	More resilient government and critical systems	African control of data, administration and security architecture
African-led frameworks	A complement to African peace and security mechanisms	African negotiating capacity, leadership and oversight

Source: Author's construct.

6. Risks and Vulnerabilities

Seven risks deserve serious attention, and together they amount to an accountability deficit rather than a military threat. Table 3 summarises

them; the subsections develop each. They sit at different rungs of the ladder set out in Section 1.4, from institutionalisation through dependency to strategic entanglement.

Table 3. Seven risks, their mechanisms and test questions

Risk	Mechanism	Test question
Dependency and lock-in	Hardware brings spares, maintenance, ammunition, training and doctrine for 20 to 30 years	What would it cost to change course in 10 years?
Opacity and corruption	“National security” shields procurement from scrutiny	Who checks prices, lifetime costs and integrity?
End-use and human rights	Arms are redirected, resold or captured	Who monitors use after delivery?
Digital surveillance	Safe-city and monitoring systems are turned on critics	What redress exists for misuse or error?
Intelligence cooperation without oversight	Data crosses borders under unpublished agreements	Who authorised it and who oversees it?
Resource-security nexus	Extraction and security provision converge in the same space	How are the mining and security stories connected?
Strategic entanglement	Gradual integration through training, exercises and frameworks	How hard would it be to leave?

Source: Author’s construct.

6.1 Dependency and lock-in

A government that buys military equipment also buys spare parts, maintenance systems, ammunition supply, training pipelines, and often the operational doctrine. A procurement decision can therefore shape capability for two or three decades.

Even armoured vehicles bought affordably and delivered on time can create long-term dependency on imported parts, maintenance, software and training, making a later change of supplier more costly than staying. This exposure is greatest for smaller defence establishments with limited technical capacity, where a low purchase price may conceal higher lifetime costs. Procurement should therefore assess lifecycle costs, local maintenance and technology transfer alongside the cost of switching suppliers.

6.2 Opacity and corruption

Defence procurement is particularly opaque. Effective oversight requires the authority and

access to scrutinise decisions, test prices, track long-term maintenance costs and detect corruption, and these capacities are rarely concentrated in a single institution.

6.3 End-use and human rights

Weapons supplied for counterterrorism may be redirected, transferred, resold or lost to non-state actors. Chinese-made arms have at times reached militants in conflict zones including Mali, Darfur, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Nantulya, 2025). The opacity of defence arrangements can make such movements increasingly difficult to trace once conflicts escalate.

6.4 Digital surveillance

Safe-city systems, facial recognition, integrated command centres, AI-assisted monitoring, 5G networks and government cloud services are presented as public-safety tools, and sometimes they are. Their effect depends on who controls them and what safeguards surround them.

Research published in 2026 by the Institute of Development Studies examined Chinese-supplied smart-city surveillance systems in 11 African countries, including Nigeria and Senegal, on which those governments had spent at least US\$2 billion (Wakabi & Roberts, 2026). The study found no compelling evidence that the systems had reduced terrorism or serious crime, and reported that government critics, including opposition figures and independent journalists, were at high risk of being targeted. It concluded that smart-city surveillance was expanding without adequate legal regulation or oversight, and that none of the countries studied provided adequate mechanisms for remedy or redress when systems erred or were misused (Wakabi & Roberts, 2026).

Surveillance risks are not unique to Chinese vendors. Allen and La Lime (2021), drawing on Citizen Lab and Pegasus Project reporting, identified five African countries as likely operators or licence holders of Pegasus, developed by Israel's NSO Group. The reporting also documented the targeting of journalists, activists, politicians and other public figures. The wider lesson is therefore not that surveillance risk is uniquely Chinese, but that externally supplied surveillance capabilities can create serious accountability and rights concerns regardless of the supplier.

6.5 Cybersecurity as a distinct question

Surveillance and cybersecurity should be distinguished: surveillance concerns what a system watches, while cybersecurity concerns who controls and secures it.

The relevant questions are where government data is physically hosted, who maintains the systems behind power grids, ports, telecommunications, revenue collection and national identity databases, who holds administrative access, and who supplies security patches. The issue is not whether a given vendor is trustworthy. It is whether the state can audit the system, replace the supplier, or run it independently if the relationship changes. These reduce to a single digital dependency test: can the state audit the system, administer it, patch it, move the data and replace the supplier without unacceptable loss of capability?

The 2018 *Le Monde* report alleging that data from the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa had been transferred to servers abroad remains contested, with both the African Union and China rejecting the account (Kadiri & Tilouine, 2018). It should therefore be cited as evidence that an allegation was made and supported with technical evidence, named sources and a documented timeline, not as proof that the underlying espionage claim was established.

6.6 Intelligence cooperation without oversight

Police cooperation, counterterrorism partnerships, information sharing and border management should be assessed by who authorised and oversees them, and how citizens' rights are protected when information crosses borders under arrangements that may not be public, regardless of the foreign partner involved.

6.7 The resource-security nexus

Across much of the Sahel and North Africa, foreign private military and security companies operate in weakly regulated environments. In Mali, Chinese lithium investments and NORINCO's supply of military equipment illustrate how extraction and security relationships can occupy the same space and merit examination together rather than as separate stories. Such overlap does not establish coercion or hidden intent. It does raise legitimate questions about who benefits, who provides security, how contracts are structured and whether public security institutions protect private commercial interests. Private security companies therefore deserve regulatory scrutiny as much as state-to-state arrangements.

Ghana's illegal small-scale mining, or *galamsey*, raises similar questions because an illicit economy involving foreign nationals, reported armed protection and the deployment of state security forces has dimensions that extend beyond environmental harm into security governance.

6.8 Strategic entanglement

Strategic entanglement can develop gradually through training, joint exercises and institutional frameworks rather than through formal alignment, whether through the GSI, BRICS-related security activities, AFRICOM or NATO exercises.

African governments have nevertheless approached such relationships with considerable discretion, with cooperation generally centred on training, maritime security, logistics and non-combat support rather than military alignment, leaving open whether that caution will endure as geopolitical competition intensifies.

Ghana's BRICS application, set out in Section 4.6, requires the same analytical caution. BRICS is not a military alliance, an application is not membership, and the government's stated rationale is economic diversification rather than military alignment (GNA, 2026b). The question for this section is narrower: whether membership would place Ghana in an institutional setting, spanning diplomacy, finance, technology and infrastructure, that could eventually intersect with existing security relationships. That remains an open empirical question, not a geopolitical assumption.

Exercise Will for Peace 2026 illustrates the same distinction from another angle: South African authorities presented it in terms of maritime safety and economic activity, and participation in a multilateral exercise does not, by itself, establish geopolitical alignment (South African Government, 2025).

Africa's growing BRICS presence adds a collective dimension. African states are joining individually rather than through a common continental position, which reproduces the coordination problem identified in Section 8.2.

6.9 Regional stability and governance

These risks converge most sharply in West Africa and the Sahel, where Nigeria, Senegal and Mali account for roughly a third of sub-Saharan arms

imports. The departure of three states from ECOWAS has meanwhile reduced the organisation's reach where stronger regional coordination on arms transfers, end-use monitoring and procurement transparency may be most needed.

Although continental frameworks such as the African Peace and Security Architecture and Silencing the Guns provide a regional architecture, many external security arrangements remain bilateral, while equipment, surveillance systems and training programmes can develop faster than parliamentary, audit and judicial oversight.

The evidence for this deficit is uneven and should be stated with care. It is best documented for digital surveillance, where the 11-country study cited in Section 6.4 found systems expanding without adequate regulation, oversight or redress (Wakabi & Roberts, 2026). It is also reported for arms and surveillance equipment more generally, which Nantulya (2025) describes as supplied with few oversight regulations, while African debate is constrained by the difficulty of obtaining data on security matters. For defence procurement and parliamentary scrutiny across the continent, the deficit is a well-grounded concern rather than a measured finding. Confidentiality is not in itself evidence of impropriety, and establishing how far oversight falls short in particular countries is a task for the document-led inquiry described in Section 7.

The resulting risk is less one of invasion than of a cumulative accountability deficit that becomes progressively harder and more costly to reverse.

7. The Media as an Oversight Institution

Where safeguards depend primarily on domestic institutions, the African media's capacity to scrutinise security partnerships becomes part of the security question itself, shaped by the information environment, investigative methods and the constraints under which journalists work.

7.1 Information operations and the consistency standard

As target audiences for information operations,

journalists encounter disinformation, strategic narratives, digital influence, state-media partnerships, sponsored exchanges, training programmes, content-sharing arrangements and coordinated social media activity, including through study tours. These practices are not unique to China, with Russia, Western governments, Gulf states, Türkiye and others using different methods to shape perceptions and advance national interests.

Consistency therefore requires the same evidentiary threshold, scepticism and questions to be applied to every actor, since a newsroom that scrutinises one country's influence while accepting another's framing risks becoming an instrument of the very competition it seeks to examine.

7.2 Framing rather than falsehood

Effective influence operations often work by framing real events or concerns to serve strategic interests rather than relying on outright falsehoods, so claims from Beijing, Washington or Moscow about supporting African security, defending sovereignty or assisting local partners should be approached with the same scepticism.

Identifying that framing requires asking who selected the facts, supplied the experts, funded the analysis and benefits from a particular interpretation, while applying the same basic test to claims of Chinese military expansion and narratives of uniformly "win-win" cooperation: what evidence supports the claim?

7.3 Two failure modes

Two recurring failures arise from reliance on others' conclusions: "embassy stenography" reproduces official formulations such as "mutually beneficial cooperation" as reporting, while "imported threat framing" adopts another actor's security analysis without independently testing its evidence. Stories about a possible second Chinese base in Africa illustrate the latter risk, particularly when external assessments receive greater attention than African institutions' own concerns about foreign military basing.

7.4 A document-led method

In a region where commentary often exceeds documentation, public records provide the foundation for rigorous investigation, since important stories may emerge not from leaks but from documents that have gone unread or have

never been compared.

For a military transfer to Ghana, for example, the inquiry could begin by confirming the transaction in the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, then tracing it through parliamentary and procurement records to establish how it was authorised and funded, who negotiated and supplied it, and which intermediaries were involved. Company registries can identify local partners and ownership, while public statements can be tested against documentary evidence on costs, timelines and promised benefits.

Ratification records, committee reports, Hansard, Auditor-General reports, procurement portals, customs data and records of naval visits and official delegations can extend the trail, with intermediaries sometimes proving as significant as the principal parties. Chinese primary sources, including FOCAC action plans, defence ministry statements and embassy releases, can also add detail, making Mandarin-language capacity a useful long-term investment for newsrooms.

Across all external security partnerships, the investigation should establish who benefits, who pays and for how long, who owns infrastructure and controls data, who provides training and with what doctrine, what restrictions govern equipment use, what law applies, what oversight occurred and why information is withheld.

These questions should be supplemented by tests of reversibility, mission creep and citizen protection, including what it would cost to change suppliers, whether a capability could be redirected beyond its stated purpose, what safeguards govern surveillance or intelligence systems, and what happens if maintenance, support or software updates cease.

7.5 Sequencing and collaboration

Investigative effort is best sequenced by accessibility.

Table 4. Investigative subjects by accessibility

Tier	Subjects
Accessible now	Procurement records, budget lines, parliamentary oversight documents, port-access agreements, cyber and surveillance contracts, local-content commitments in defence deals
Requires time and sources	Drone acquisitions, private security companies, security around mining projects, selection of officers for overseas training
Hardest	Unpublished annexes to defence agreements, cross-border data flows, arms-broker networks, debt-security linkages, end-use monitoring

Source: Author's construct.

Because suppliers, mining firms and private security companies operate regionally while weapons and data cross borders, investigations confined to national boundaries can miss connections that emerge only when journalists in Accra, Abuja, Dakar and Bamako compare records.

7.6 Constraints

Responsible security reporting requires balancing transparency against legitimate national-security concerns. Some information may need to be withheld where publication could endanger

personnel or operations, but “national security” should not become a blanket answer to scrutiny. Careful, document-led reporting supported by legal advice is preferable to automatic silence.

Journalists working in this field also face legal, physical and digital risks, from restrictive laws and litigation to the sensitivities surrounding military sites and the exposure created by digital surveillance. These constraints call for careful planning, editorial support, appropriate legal advice and protection of sources rather than avoidance of the subject.

8. African Agency

African agency turns attention from what China does to how African governments and institutions negotiate, scrutinise and shape external security relationships. As defined in Section 1.4, strategic agency rests on the capacity to choose, scrutinise, alter or exit, with negotiating capacity, collective coordination and consistent assessment providing its institutional foundations. Reversibility is particularly important because the ability to enter a partnership does not necessarily imply the ability to change course later.

8.1 Negotiating capacity

Effective negotiating capacity depends on who advises governments in dealings with large foreign arms suppliers, what expertise those advisers bring, to whom they are accountable, and how the advisory process is organised and funded. That capacity must extend beyond signature, since meaningful oversight requires parliaments and other authorised institutions to have sufficient access to the agreements and contracts they are expected to scrutinise.

8.2 Collective coordination

African states negotiating separately may have less bargaining leverage than they could exercise collectively. Yet many external security arrangements remain bilateral rather than being channelled through common African Union standards, while ECOWAS has less reach following the withdrawal of several Sahel states.

Common minimum standards on transparency, end-use controls, data sovereignty, parliamentary oversight, and compatibility with African-led security mechanisms could provide a shared floor without preventing bilateral partnerships. Parliaments, researchers, and civil society could complement this by cooperating to compare contracts, intermediaries, and suppliers across borders.

8.3 A comparative framework

Assessing China by the same criteria applied to Western partners, Russia, Türkiye and other external actors provides a comparative framework centred on the terms and

consequences of security partnerships rather than the identity of the partner.

Table 5. Five criteria for comparing external security partners

Criterion	Question
Conditionality	What conditions are attached?
Transparency	How much information is publicly available?
Doctrine	What ideas, practices and ways of operating are transferred?
Physical footprint	How extensive is the presence on the ground?
Exit cost	How difficult would it be to walk away later?

Source: Author's construct.

Applied consistently across partners, these criteria create a matrix to be populated from documentary evidence rather than assumptions. They generate several working hypotheses. Western partnerships may combine stronger conditionality with greater transparency and documentation. Russian arrangements may be less transparent and harder to unwind. Turkish partnerships may occupy a middle ground on several criteria. Chinese engagement may combine speed, scale and financing with more limited public disclosure. These are propositions to be tested against contracts and records, not verdicts.

Conditionality itself involves trade-offs. Stricter conditions may provide stronger safeguards while reducing flexibility, whereas lightly conditioned arrangements may meet immediate capability needs while increasing longer-term dependence. The relevant test is therefore the balance of benefit, constraint and reversibility from an African perspective.

Where cooperation involves digital infrastructure, intelligence sharing or long-term institutional ties, three additional tests extend the framework: data sovereignty, democratic oversight and regional compatibility.

Table 6. Three additional governance tests

Additional test	Question
Data sovereignty	Can the state independently audit, secure, relocate and control its data and digital systems?
Democratic oversight	Can parliament, courts, audit bodies and other authorised institutions scrutinise the relationship in practice?
Regional compatibility	Does the bilateral arrangement reinforce or bypass African regional and continental security frameworks?

Source: Author's construct.

Table 7 applies the five criteria to the anticipated *Auspicious Ark* visit as it stood at the time of writing. It separates what the sources document from provisional assessment and from what

remains to be established, and it shows how little can responsibly be concluded before the documentary record exists.

Table 7. Applying the framework: the *Auspicious Ark* visit to Ghana, as at 10 October 2026

Criterion	Documented	Provisional assessment	Still to be established
Conditionality	No conditions reported in the sources reviewed	Not yet assessable	The invitation and any agreement governing the visit
Transparency	Visit announced in advance; mission described in Chinese and Ghanaian reporting	Public at the level of announcement only	Programme, costs and who bears them, and the text of any agreement
Doctrine	Chinese reporting links the mission to implementing the Global Security Initiative	Presented by China as part of its security diplomacy; effect on Ghanaian practice unknown	Whether professional exchanges with the Ghana Armed Forces take place, and their content
Physical footprint	A port call by a naval hospital ship; seven days at the previous stop, Conakry	Temporary presence	Actual dates, shore-based activities and facilities used
Exit cost	None documented	Likely to be low for a single visit; depends on what follows	Any follow-on agreements, commitments or continuing cooperation

Source: Author's construct from *Ghana Peace Journal* (2026), *Marine Insight* (2026) and *Xinhua* (2026a, 2026b).

Ghana's emerging BRICS policy illustrates the distinction between diversification and alignment. The strategic value of additional partnerships depends not on the number of partners, but on Ghana's ability to preserve choice, assess each relationship independently, and avoid replacing one form of dependence with another. Read together, the China relationship, the hospital-ship visits and the BRICS application form a single Ghanaian case study of negotiating capacity, collective coordination and consistent assessment.

8.4 Principles

The six principles that follow from the analysis are:

1. Africa should welcome partnerships while remaining cautious about dependencies.
2. Security cooperation should strengthen African sovereignty.
3. Defence agreements should be transparent and subject to meaningful democratic oversight.
4. Cybersecurity partnerships should protect citizens' rights and freedoms as well as national security.
5. Military cooperation should strengthen African-led security institutions and should not draw African countries into external rivalries.
6. Independent scrutiny is not an obstacle to legitimate national security; it is a condition of good security policy.

9. Policy Recommendations

Addressing the accountability deficit identified in this paper requires action by governments, oversight institutions, regional organisations, civil society and the media, with responsibility distributed according to each actor's authority and capacity.

9.1 African governments

- Treat external security cooperation as a single portfolio encompassing defence, policing, maritime security, digital systems and intelligence.

- Require lifecycle-cost analysis in procurement, including maintenance, spare parts, software, training, ammunition, upgrades and switching costs.
- Diversify suppliers without fragmenting forces through incompatible systems and excessive logistics costs.
- Make technology transfer measurable through enforceable local-content and capability milestones.
- Protect data sovereignty through contractual provisions on data location, access, auditing, cybersecurity responsibilities and exit arrangements.
- Strengthen end-use monitoring and legal controls against diversion and misuse.
- Invest in technical, legal, financial and strategic negotiating expertise before entering complex agreements.
- Ensure that bilateral partnerships reinforce rather than bypass African-led peace and security frameworks.
- Strengthen regional information sharing on arms procurement, private security companies, maritime activity and cross-border security infrastructure.
- Build collective negotiating capacity where regional interests are affected.

9.4 Civil society and research institutions

- Strengthen independent capacity to analyse defence procurement, security finance and surveillance technology.
- Build accessible repositories of security agreements, procurement records, parliamentary debates and corporate ownership information.
- Assess external security partners comparatively and by common criteria.

9.2 Parliaments and oversight institutions

- Require systematic reporting on major defence and security agreements, subject to narrowly defined national-security exceptions.
- Build specialist capacity to scrutinise procurement, financing and lifecycle costs.
- Require confidentiality to be legally justified, reviewable and, where possible, time-limited.
- Use audit, procurement and parliamentary processes to scrutinise implementation as well as initial approval.

9.3 The African Union and regional organisations

- Establish common minimum standards for foreign security partnerships covering transparency, end-use controls, data sovereignty and democratic oversight.

9.5 Media organisations

- Investigate the agreements behind military visits, hospital ships, training programmes and delegations rather than treating them simply as protocol.
- Prioritise primary documents over official narratives and external threat assessments.
- Follow procurement from acquisition through maintenance to operational use.
- Build cross-border investigative partnerships and plan legal, physical and digital protection for journalists and sources.

10. Conclusion

China is now a significant security actor in Africa. The more consequential question, however, is whether African governments, institutions and media are developing the knowledge, oversight and strategic capacity needed to shape that relationship in African interests. The evidence reviewed here suggests that security engagement

has expanded faster than the mechanisms for holding it accountable, particularly in West Africa and the Sahel. This creates opportunities in supplier choice, affordable capability, peacekeeping and maritime cooperation, alongside risks of dependency, opacity and misuse of surveillance technology. Where

external conditionality is limited, domestic institutions bear more responsibility for managing those risks.

External security partnerships should therefore be judged less by the flag attached to them than by their terms, transparency and outcomes. The relevant questions are whether they strengthen sovereignty, improve security, increase accountability, and contribute to stability and human security. Sovereignty in this sense depends not simply on avoiding formal alliances, but on the capacity to make informed choices, retain alternatives, control critical systems, scrutinise agreements and change direction when necessary. A formally non-interfering relationship can still create institutional or technological dependence. Disciplined engagement, assessed by consistent standards across all partners, is therefore preferable to either isolation or automatic alignment.

This understanding also reframes African agency as the capacity not only to choose among external partners, but also to scrutinise, alter and, where

necessary, exit those relationships. Further research should examine how Africans themselves shape their security partnerships. One priority is the longer-term effect of military education, where considerably more is known about who receives training than about what happens after officers return (Nantulya, 2023). Alumni career trajectories, institutional and doctrinal effects, the coexistence of Chinese and Western training within the same forces, and whether diversified training enhances professional autonomy or creates competing dependencies all warrant closer study.

Three questions raised when this analysis was first presented consequently remain relevant: How transparent are military and security cooperation agreements, and what can realistically be verified? What legal, physical and source-protection risks confront those reporting on them? And how can security cooperation be scrutinised without amplifying the narratives of competing external powers or compromising legitimate security interests?

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