As China’s economic interests in Africa have expanded, its security interests have kept pace, to protect Chinese nationals and assets across the continent. To that end, China has invested heavily in multinational organizations such as the African Union and the United Nations and has shown commitment to regional stability. The Cipher Brief spoke with David Shinn, adjunct professor at George Washington University and former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, about China’s array of security interests throughout Africa.

TCB: How does China’s military presence in Africa contribute to China’s national goals and what is its long-term vision?

DS: China has increasing economic and political interests in Africa and a constantly growing number of nationals who live and work on the continent. At any given time, there are more than one million Chinese nationals in Africa’s 54 countries.

These interests and nationals are increasingly in harm’s way in unstable and conflict-prone regions. In 2011, after the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, China had to evacuate almost 36,000 Chinese, primarily contract workers engaged in projects valued at $19 billion. Some subsequently returned to Libya. China evacuated about 1,000 of them in 2014. Civil war in South Sudan forced China to evacuate more than 400 oil workers in 2015.

On occasion, Chinese projects and personnel have been targeted. Chinese working at oil production facilities in Sudan were kidnapped and some were killed by forces who opposed the government in Khartoum. In 2007, nine Chinese oil prospecting personnel died in a firefight between Ethiopian security forces and a dissident group in the Ogaden region.
In 2014, 10 Chinese construction workers were kidnapped by Boko Haram in northern Cameroon and eventually released, presumably after Boko Haram received a ransom payment. In 2015, three senior Chinese managers died during a terrorist attack by an al-Qaeda-linked group at the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali.

These and other attacks led the Chinese public to pressure their government to do more on behalf of China’s interests and citizens outside the country, including those in Africa. The result has been a reassessment in Beijing of China’s approach to security in Africa. Although China continues to operate on the principle that host country security forces have primary responsibility for protecting Chinese nationals, China is now willing to respond more robustly in cases where the host government is unable to do so.

China’s efforts to protect its interests and nationals in Africa are linked to its long-term security policy. *China’s Military Strategy*, a white paper released in 2015, acknowledged that China’s growing international presence makes it more vulnerable and requires more attention to safeguarding the security of its overseas interests.

China’s white paper on Africa, also released in 2015, calls for the promotion of peace and security in Africa by deepening military cooperation and supporting Africa in combating non-traditional security threats such as piracy and terrorism. China will expand its overseas military power in the most benign way possible, but expand it will.

**TCB:** China is building a port in Djibouti that will accommodate People’s Liberation Army Navy vessels. Why is this location important to China and how might it affect U.S. military activity in the Horn of Africa?

**DS:** China is building a commercial port in Djibouti that will have a designated area for PLA Navy vessels. Djibouti is the
closest politically-stable country to China’s anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden. The Chinese operation, called the “naval support facility, commenced in 2008. The stated reason for it is to facilitate the operations of China’s three-ship contribution to fighting Somali piracy. China promises to continue this contribution.

Djibouti is strategically located next to the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, the southern entrance to the Red Sea and Suez Canal. China has acknowledged that the base in Djibouti will support its peacekeeping operations in Africa and wider security interests in the region.

The United States, France, and Japan have military bases in Djibouti. Saudi Arabia is reportedly joining the group. Of some concern, the Chinese facility will allow China to monitor with greater ease U.S. military activities at Camp Lemonnier [the Pentagon’s primary base in the Horn of Africa for the U.S. Africa Command, located alongside the Djibouti-Ambouli International Airport]. If China restricts its activities to supporting its troops assigned to U.N. peacekeeping operations, its anti-piracy efforts, and its interests and personnel in the region, there may be no reason for additional U.S. concern.

**TCB:** How does the Chinese military contribute to peacekeeping operations in Africa?

**DS:** China has supported U.N. peacekeeping operations in Africa since 1990. It currently has about 2,400 personnel assigned to six of the nine UN missions in Africa. This is more personnel than any other permanent member of the UN Security Council, but far fewer than the number from countries such as Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and India.

China is now the second largest contributor to the global U.N. peacekeeping budget. It provides more than 10 percent of funding, compared to almost 29 percent from the United
States. China also provides modest financial support for African Union peacekeeping activities in Africa. China gets good marks for its support of African peacekeeping operations.

TCB: What effect do Chinese arms sales have on security in Africa?

DS: China is one of the most important, if not the most important, supplier of conventional and small arms to Africa. Most of the deliveries are sales to any government that can pay; the purpose is to generate foreign exchange. Transfers include everything from ammunition to artillery pieces and surface-to-air missiles.

While China transfers weapons only to governments, the huge volume [of arms] entering Africa ensures that some find their way into conflict zones. During the ethnic cleansing in Darfur, the government of Sudan provided some Chinese weapons to the Janjaweed, which used them against rebel groups. NORINCO [the Chinese state-owned manufacturing giant] sent Chinese weapons to the government of South Sudan in the middle of a civil war. Other Chinese weapons have appeared in Somalia and the eastern Congo.

This article was written by former Adjunct Professor David H. Shinn, U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, and first published in The Cipher Brief, a digital, security-based conversation platform, on April, 2017.