

China's Role in Peace and Security Cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea Region

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Africa's largest bay and an important international shipping channel, the Gulf of Guinea has coastal countries including Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao Tome and Principe. In a broader sense, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Mali can also be considered as coastal states of the Guinea Gulf. In the 21st century, the security situation in the region has been intricate, with intertwined traditional and non-traditional security issues and the involvement of multiple external forces. At present, China is gradually deepening its peace and security cooperation with the African continent. Studying the security situation of the Gulf of Guinea countries and analyzing the existing problems will provide a useful reference for China to promote peace and security cooperation in the region.

Security Situation in the Gulf of Guinea Region

Since the turn of the century, the traditional security issues in the Gulf of Guinea region have eased, but the hidden problems, especially domestic ones caused by civil war, coups and gerontocracy, have become major factors threatening regional security. At the same time, non-traditional security issues, such as terrorism, piracy, infectious diseases and climate change, have

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become the most significant security threats in the region.

Terrorism is not unique to Africa, but a global problem.¹ However, it is also an indisputable fact that Africa has been one of the areas where terrorists have been most active. Bankie Forster Bankie, the late Director of the Pan-African Institute for the Study of African Society, pointed out that “In the 1990s, terrorist attacks in Africa were only minor events, limited to local areas; at present, however, peace and security in Africa have changed dramatically, and internal conflicts are being replaced by terrorism.”² In Africa, an “arc of instability” has been formed from Somalia in East Africa to the Maghreb region of North Africa, and, via the Sahel region, to West Africa’s Nigeria. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the most active terrorist organization in the Gulf of Guinea region. In recent years, it has launched terrorist attacks in Algeria, Tunisia, Mali and Mauritania. Boko Haram in Nigeria is another terrorist organization that threatens peace and security in the region. Besides Nigeria, several other coastal states are under the shadow of Boko Haram, including Equatorial Guinea which at the moment has not been attacked.³ The non-traditional security situation in the Gulf of Guinea region is fragmented, especially when it comes to the influence of terrorist attacks. Compared with traditional violence, this kind of violent behavior initiated by social organizations and even individuals is more diversified. Its source is more difficult to identify, its purposes variable, its coverage more extensive, and its impact is more profound and far-reaching. A scholar in the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) pointed out that terrorist attacks have led to widespread panic and weak governance has made people question the governments’ ability to protect lives and property. Such negative emotions

1 This is an opinion emphasized by the African scholars when the research group went to Senegal and exchanged ideas with experts from the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

2 Unless otherwise specified, the views of foreign scholars quoted in this article are from the International Conference on China’s Constructive Participation in Peace and Security in Africa, organized by the Social Sciences in China Press on October 17-18, 2016.

3 Notes taken by the research group during their visit to the Equatorial Guinea National University.

have led to further deterioration of regional security situation.⁴

In recent years, the international community has launched a joint operation against piracy. As a result, the piracy threat off the coast of Somalia, in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea has gradually waned, with few new cases. But the Gulf of Guinea has witnessed a growing number of piracy incidents. Statistics from the International Maritime Bureau show that in 2010, the Gulf of Guinea and neighboring West Africa saw a total of 45 pirate attacks.⁵ The number increased to 65 in 2011, and then soared to 150 in 2012.⁶ In 2014-2016, more than 40 pirate attacks took place annually in these waters.⁷ In addition, due to the expansion of the coverage of activities, the Gulf of Guinea piracy activities have also seen some new changes. In the past, the pirates would release ships and crew after they had emptied the ships, and generally would not detain the vessels. But in recent years, the pirates have not only been hijacking vessels, they also demand ransoms for the ships and the crew, even wounding people. To solve the piracy problem, the coastal countries need to establish a joint force, which is still quite a daunting task at present. Therefore, a comprehensive treatment will not quickly yield in the short term, and the coexistence of land and sea threats in the Gulf of Guinea region will persist.

The Gulf of Guinea has been one of the regions hardest hit by infectious diseases. The outbreak of the Ebola epidemic in the region in 2013 caused international panic. With the efforts of the countries along the Gulf and the international community, on January 14, 2016, the World Health Organization declared the end of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. The epidemic resulted in more than 11,310 deaths,⁸ and the number of

4 Notes taken from the research group's exchange of ideas with scholars from CODESRIA in Liberia.

5 Australian Association for Maritime Affairs, "Piracy Attacks in East and West Africa Dominate World Report," *Australian Maritime Digest*, Issue 210, March 2012, p.13.

6 "Piracy Falls in 2012, but Seas off East and West Africa Remain Dangerous, Says IMB," *Maritime Connector*, January 16, 2013, <http://maritime-connector.com/news/security-and-piracy/piracy-falls-in-2012-but-seas-off-east-and-west-africa-remain-dangerous-says-imb>.

7 Data provided by an official of the Cote d'Ivoire Defense Ministry during the research group's visit to the country.

8 Xu Junqiang and Liu Honghui, "Ebola Epidemic in West Africa: Reflection and Revelation," *Journal of Public Health and Preventive Medicine*, No.1, 2015, pp.1-4.

confirmed and potentially infected people reached 28,500,⁹ more than the total people impacted in all previous Ebola epidemics. The threat of infectious diseases in the Gulf of Guinea region is not limited to Ebola. AIDS, malaria, Lassa fever, tuberculosis, typhoid, cholera, etc. can occur in different seasons and different areas. For example, Nigeria witnessed 192,300 deaths due to malaria in 2015, 143,700 due to diarrheal diseases, and 131,900 due to AIDS. In November 2016, Nigeria's Sokoto state once again saw a large-scale outbreak of malaria, which also broke out in varying degrees in countries such as Liberia. The proliferation of infectious diseases is a serious threat to the security and social stability of the countries along the Gulf of Guinea, forming a vicious circle of poverty-disease-poverty.

As in other parts of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea region is also exposed to the dangers of climate change, including reduced rainfall and partial desertification, and reduced agricultural production. In addition, climate change has led to rising sea levels. The coastlines of a number of countries along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea are threatened, with fish species reduced, yields declining, and coral bleaching.

Peace and Security Cooperation with the Guinea Gulf Region

Peace and security cooperation is an important part of China-Africa cooperation. Entering the 21st century, China-Africa cooperation in this regard has further deepened. The main areas of China-Africa security cooperation listed in China's 2006 Africa Policy Paper include military cooperation, conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations, and judicial and police cooperation.¹⁰ In 2002, then Chinese President Hu Jintao announced at the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that China would launch the Initiative on

9 "Summary: China Plays a Role in West African Defeat of Ebola," *Xinhua*, January 14, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/14/c_1117780942.htm.

10 "Africa Policy Paper of China," Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, January 12, 2006, <http://www.focac.org/chn/zfgx/zfgxdfzc/t481253.htm>.

China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security (ICACPPS) to deepen cooperation with African countries in this area.¹¹ In December 2015, President Xi Jinping proposed at the Johannesburg summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation that the new strategic partnership between China and Africa be upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership, one of the five pillars of which would be “to help each other on security issues.”¹² The security cooperation that has been carried out between China and the Gulf of Guinea countries is in the following aspects.

First, China has supported the military capacity building of the Gulf of Guinea countries. China has provided military assistance in the form of capital and equipment for Guinea, Nigeria and Liberia, among other countries. China’s financial institutions have provided loans for military equipment and facilities in the region, such as the special loans extended to Ghana in 2007 by the Export-Import Bank of China. China has also provided a wide range of military training methods for coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea, involving military education and management of military academies, military training, equipment technology, communications and logistics. At present, there are a number of military officers from Gulf of Guinea countries coming to China for military education and training every year. Arms sales, to Nigeria for example, are also part of military cooperation between China and the region. In addition, China’s military exchanges with countries along the Gulf of Guinea are increasingly diversified. For example, in 2009, the medical team composed of staff from the Bethune International Peace Hospital of the Beijing Military Command and the PLA Military Medical Academy held the “Peace Angel-2009” humanitarian medical rescue joint mission with the Gabonese army. In 2015, China and Sierra Leone co-founded the West African Tropical

11 “Speech by Hu Jintao at the Opening Ceremony of the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation,” Chinese Central Government, July 19, 2012, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-07/19/content_2187072.htm.

12 “Speech by Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Johannesburg Summit of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, December 4, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/04/c_1117363197.htm.

Pathogen and Prevention Research Center, which integrates medical practice, teaching and research.

Second, China participates in UN peacekeeping operations in the Gulf of Guinea region. Since the 43rd Session of the General Assembly agreed China's accession to the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations in 1988, China has begun to actively participate in international peacekeeping operations. In the Gulf of Guinea region, China has been involved in the UN Observer Mission in Liberia, the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, the UN Mission in Liberia and the UN Operation in Cote d'Ivoire, in which China is primarily responsible for logistical support. In 2013, China sent security forces to the UN Mali Multilateral Integrated Stability Mission, which marked a transformation in the way China participates in UN peacekeeping operations. At present, more than 2,400 Chinese peacekeepers are participating in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. In addition, China has contributed substantial funds to the UN peacekeeping operations, second only to the United States.

Third, China has actively participated in the post-war reconstruction of the Gulf of Guinea region. China has always stressed the importance of promoting peace through development, and has actively participated in the post-war reconstruction of African countries. In the Gulf of Guinea region, China has made a positive contribution to the reconstruction and social recovery of countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, which includes providing assistance and loans to carry out business contracting projects and project investments.

Fourth, China has supported and assisted African regional organizations and the coastal countries in building their security capacity. In September 2015, President Xi Jinping declared at the UN peacekeeping summit that China will provide free military aid worthy of \$100 million in total to the African Union (AU) in the following five years to support the establishment of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis. Subsequently, at the Johannesburg summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in December that year, President Xi

announced that China would provide Africa with \$60 million of assistance to support the forces' establishment and operation, and support African countries' capacity-building in terms of defense, anti-terrorism, anti-violence, customs supervision, immigration control and so on. China has launched a number of cooperation initiatives to enhance security capacity building with countries in the Gulf of Guinea region. For example, the IT-driven joint service in Liberia has been highly recognized by the United Nations, and the internet video surveillance system in the Sikkaso region of Mali built by Huawei Company has greatly improved the law enforcement capabilities of local security departments.

Fifth, China actively supports the Gulf of Guinea countries in their efforts to deal with non-traditional security challenges. In this regard, a typical example was the assistance China provided in the fight against Ebola. China was one of the first countries to offer assistance to the Gulf of Guinea countries in response to the epidemic. In August 2014, the first batch of material assistance valued 50 million yuan was sent to the region, which was China's first attempt to help Africa by charter flights. By the end of the epidemic, China had provided a total of 750 million yuan in supplies, sent nearly 1,000 medical personnel and experts, and built diagnosis and treatment centers in Liberia and Sierra Leone. China has also actively supported the anti-terrorism operations in the region. In May 2014, Premier Li Keqiang insisted on visiting Africa at the most dangerous moment when Boko Haram was rampant, and said that China would work with African countries to expand cooperation in personnel training, intelligence sharing and joint military exercises and training, so as to help African countries in their capacity-building concerning peacekeeping, anti-terrorism, and the fight against piracy. Chinese enterprises have set up security companies in the region to provide local institutions with security advice, guards, VIP protection, security technology and other professional services. The most well-known is the Dewe Security Service Company established in Guinea in 2012. Also, China supports and helps regional countries in fighting against transnational crimes. For example, China participated in the "Kimberley

Process” in 2002, monitoring and managing the rough diamond exports and imports to curb the trade of blood diamonds in Africa, including countries in the Gulf of Guinea region. In addition, China has consistently supported the UN resolution on preventing the proliferation of small arms, which of course also applies to the Gulf of Guinea region.

In its security cooperation with countries in the region, China has always adhered to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, emphasizing the major status and autonomy of African countries in their security affairs. China has insisted on resolving conflicts in Africa within the framework of the United Nations and African regional organizations, advocated political dialogue and peaceful consultation, opposed coercive means and direct external military intervention, and emphasized promoting peace and stability through development. On the whole, China has become a constructive force that has played an active role in the region through multi-level, multi-faceted and multi-field cooperation.

Challenges in Cooperation with the Guinea Gulf Region

While China’s participation in the peace and security cooperation with the Gulf of Guinea countries boasts sound foundations and has yielded good results, there are still some challenges ahead.

First, the interference of Western countries has put some public opinion and moral pressures on China’s adherence to the principle of non-interference. In the first decade of the 21st century, Western powers did not implement direct military intervention in the security affairs of the Gulf of Guinea countries. In the second decade, however, they have carried out direct military intervention in Cote d’Ivoire and Mali, guided by the theoretical change of Western countries’ interference in international peace and security. At present, the concept of “responsibility to protect” proposed by major international organizations and Western powers has been supported by many countries and has been practiced globally, including in the Gulf of Guinea region. In 2002, the African Union proposed the “principle of non-

indifference,” which means that the AU and its Peace and Security Council have the power to carry out interventions, including military ones, when serious security situations occur in member states. The AU is also given the power to impose sanctions on unconstitutional changes to the governments of member states to restore normal order and governance. Many African countries have accepted the “responsibility to protect” concept. While the direct military intervention of Western countries in Mali and Cote d’Ivoire has set a bad international example, it has challenged China’s way of participating in security cooperation with the Gulf of Guinea countries. For example, some say that China is “unreliable” in a sudden and emergency situation, as it will not get directly involved in a domestic conflict to support any party like France did in Cote d’Ivoire.¹³

Second, China’s channel of participation is not diversified. At present, the Gulf of Guinea countries have developed a multi-level peace and security affairs system involving the world, the African continent, the West African sub-region, the Gulf of Guinea region, the coastal countries, local communities, and individuals. In this system, all kinds of actors play a unique role, forming a relatively stable division of labor and collaboration pattern. China’s current cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea region is mainly with sub-regional organizations and relevant countries under the UN and AU frameworks, which is limited and has restricted cooperation from taking effect and going deeper.

Third, the shortcomings in China’s soft power are obvious. China is a relative newcomer in international peace and security affairs, and it obviously lags behind Western powers in terms of idea, capability and experience. China lacks in-depth research on whether and how to carry out such cooperation to a greater extent and in a deeper way, and some of its policies have not been well communicated. There are also some shortcomings on the part of the Chinese academic community in the studies of many areas of the world. For example, Chinese scholars have little understanding of the

13 Notes taken from the interview between the research group and local Chinese enterprises in Cote d’Ivoire.

Gulf of Guinea region. Therefore, relevant research and thus the knowledge about local situation are rather limited. China is clearly weaker than Western countries in its guidance of and response to international public opinion and it is often disadvantaged in the participation of international peace and security affairs. Moreover, China's talent pool regarding international peace and security cooperation is also limited.

Proposals for Deepening Peace and Security Cooperation

Security in the Gulf of Guinea region is increasingly important for China. War, terrorist attacks, pirates, and infectious diseases not only threaten the lives of Chinese people working and living there, but also affect the normal operation of Chinese enterprises. For example, during the Ebola epidemic, the Simandou Iron Ore Wharf project in Guinea, undertaken by China Harbor Engineering Company, was forced to halt, and all the workers had to withdraw. In addition, due to rampant piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, ocean-going vessels need to pay a war insurance surcharge when they transit through Nigeria and Benin waters, which has greatly increased the cost. With the expansion of China's interests in the Gulf of Guinea region, the peace and security cooperation between the two sides needs to be strengthened. In the future, China may consider making efforts in the following aspects.

Making breakthroughs in the concept of peace and security cooperation. With the expansion of China's overseas interests and the growing international voice for China to assume more responsibilities and obligations, China will definitely be more deeply involved in global peace and security affairs in the future. In order to better keep in line with the international community, it is necessary for China to go beyond the non-interference principle to a certain extent at the appropriate time. In Chinese academia, the constructive involvement of China in African peace and security matters has been widely recognized. It could be promoted in due course as the concept for China's engagement in African security affairs in the future. A systematic definition by the authorities is thus necessary, to

clarify its concept, implications and implementation at theoretical and policy levels. This may help provide theoretical support for China in carrying out international peace and security cooperation, and change China's inferior position in the rules-making of such cooperation as well as global security governance.

Giving priority to conflict prevention in cooperation. Major international organizations and Western countries have clearly placed conflict prevention high on their cooperation agenda in the Gulf of Guinea region, and this principle has also been maintained in practice. In fact, China is also interested in conflict prevention, but it has not explicitly prioritized it in its strategy concerning the Gulf. In the future, China should unambiguously make conflict prevention a priority, be committed to pre-conflict management, and carry out joint actions as soon as crises emerge. As suggested by Charles Onunaiju, Director of the Center for China Studies in Nigeria, "China's best way to help achieve peace and security is to resolve problems before they arise. Only in so doing can China play a more important role in the process of peace and security in Africa." Of course, the concept and practice of conflict prevention requires a mature early warning system for crises and conflicts, and the establishment of an overall mechanism for crisis response and resolution. The formation of these systems and mechanisms are inseparable from a strong intelligence gathering and analysis system. At present, China's ability in this regard is yet to improve.

Deepening and innovating concept and approaches of promoting peace through development. China insists on promoting peace and security in Africa from the perspective of development and this approach has been universally recognized by Africa. In future cooperation, China should continue to adhere to the concept of promoting peace through development, and seek improvements in the following areas. First, China should seek common ground in the development strategies of the two sides, giving priority to areas serving mutual strategic interests. To be specific, China should effectively synergize its Belt and Road Initiative and project

of “three networks and infrastructure industrialization” (i.e. building Africa’s high-speed rail, express-way and regional aviation networks and achieving its industrialization, proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in his visit to Africa in 2014) with Africa’s Agenda 2063 and its implementation plan for the first decade, as well as development strategies of various sub-regional organizations and individual African countries. Second, development in Africa needs to be inclusive and fair, bringing benefits to all people. Gregory F. Houston, Chief Expert of the South African Human Sciences Research Council, pointed out, “An important factor in Africa’s security issue is who can benefit from development; Chinese assistance indeed makes the continent develop better, but if such development fails to benefit the majority of African people, it will be meaningless. China should play a role in spreading the benefits of development to the African society as a whole.” Therefore, China’s peace and security cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea region should be devoted to such areas as promoting youth employment, responding to climate change, disease prevention and control, and improving environmental and food security, so as to help Africa achieve inclusive growth. Third, the Belt and Road Initiative should be leveraged. China should work for the synergy between the Belt and Road and African development strategies, strengthen bilateral capacity cooperation, and promote the realization of the “five major goals of connectivity” (policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds). China may consider upgrading the Belt and Road Initiative into a new perspective and framework for its “constructive intervention” in the peace and security affairs of Africa. Finally, development assistance should be combined with peace and security cooperation. Africa has always been a key area for China’s foreign aid, but China’s aid is less seen in the field of peace and security. In the future, China can use aid as a useful tool to help African countries solve crises and achieve peace. In practice, China can use part of the development assistance to establish a peace and security fund, which can be used to elevate peace and security capacity of the Gulf of Guinea countries. Such efforts could shape China’s “constructive

intervention” in African affairs.

Strengthening China’s capacity in peace and security cooperation. China needs to focus on its capacity building in the following three aspects. First, understanding and research of the region and relevant countries. Professor at Syracuse University Horace Campell once said, “It is very important to carry out social scientific research on Africa. Although the US Africa Command is a military institution, it has devoted a lot of energy on African studies.” At present, China’s understanding of the Gulf of Guinea region is poor, particularly regarding the real life, ideological trends and actual demands of people at the grassroots level. Scholars from Equatorial Guinea and Cape Verde have also made it clear that China’s research of the region lags far behind Western countries, and may not be better than other emerging economies. Second, the comprehensive qualities of personnel involved in peace and security affairs, which include language skills, knowledge about international law and international politics, and ability to handle peace and security affairs in real settings. Third, intelligence collection and analysis capabilities. These hold the key to China’s more in-depth international peace and security cooperation, and are a major shortcoming of China’s current practice.

Appropriately increasing participation in regional peace and security affairs. China should build a systematic long-term mechanism for responding to peace and security problems in the Gulf of Guinea region, to ensure that different plans can be implemented immediately according to nature and level of situations. China should carry out security-related military-civilian cooperation in as many areas as possible, such as training security personnel, settling veterans, dispatching police to security management and assisting in stability maintenance in regional countries, among others of low-sensitivity. This would help upgrade the level of bilateral security cooperation. In addition, as piracy is on the rise in the Gulf of Guinea region, China may consider participating in efforts to combat piracy. It can establish bilateral cooperation mechanisms with regional countries or participate in the existing multilateral mechanisms; it

can even consider joint escort missions in the Gulf with other countries at the right time.

Participating in peace and security affairs through multiple channels. The limited channels between China and the Gulf of Guinea countries have restricted the effects of their peace and security cooperation. Therefore, cooperation should be deepened on more fronts. First, communication and collaboration with Western countries should be strengthened. At present, international third-party cooperation in the economic field between China and Western countries has yielded remarkable result. It should be gradually extended to the field of peace and security. Second, cooperation with other emerging countries should be enhanced. As Marcos Cordeiro Pires, Associate Professor at Sao Paulo State University, pointed out, “Brazil has a lot of interactions with Africa, and so does China. Tripartite interactions will give fuller play to their respective advantages and strengths in the field of peace and security.”

Conclusion

Since the Gulf of Guinea countries have relatively weak governments, challenges from terrorism/piracy, public health and natural disasters are severely jeopardizing the security of individual lives and the national stability in these countries. These are also potential areas with which China is able to and is expected to help. Although China has made considerable progress in these areas, it faces pressures from the international community due to its limited soft power and physical capability. Given this, China should further develop its soft power, including participating in defining the agenda and discourse of “constructive intervention.” On the other hand, China should lift its capability of effective military presence in the region within multilateral frameworks in multiple and diverse areas. 