

Africa rises as strategic priority for intelligence collection

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Often neglected as a security priority by outside powers, intelligence activity in Africa is set to rise markedly by the early 2020s. *Julian Fisher* examines the trends and issues that could become flashpoints, and *Nicholas Blanford* exclusively reveals a case study of external involvement

Key Points

- The 10 July conclusion of the first-ever China-Africa Defense and Security Forum highlighted the increased military and security priority that outside countries are according to the continent.
- Such interest will lead to an increased deployment of intelligence resources to Africa, with collection targets including counter-terrorism, economic opportunities, regional conflict, and natural resources.
- *Jane's* exclusively reveals details about Iranian-backed Hizbullah training of Nigerian Islamist militants, further demonstrating the broadening interest of third parties in the continent.

The first-ever China-Africa Defense and Security Forum ended on 10 July 2018, symbolising a rapidly changing security dispensation in Africa that will have profound implications for diplomatic and intelligence activity on the continent. Speaking at the end of the two-week forum in Beijing, in which 49 African countries participated, Chinese Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe declared, “It’s truly fair to say that we are for a community [with a] shared future.” Separately, also in early July, Russian National Security Council head Nikolai Patrushev concluded a visit to Angola and South Africa, where he warned of the dangers of “colour revolutions” and the malicious West.

After the end of the Cold War competing international interests in Africa settled into a largely stable pattern. Western powers – with the EU and the US at the forefront – adopted an approach of broadly benign intervention. Diplomatic, intelligence, and military activities were largely aligned in support of improving governance, opening democratic spaces, and strengthening civil society, as demonstrated by the UK’s successful humanitarian intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000 to restore democratic governance and defeat Liberian-sponsored rebels.

The 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States altered this picture, but not fundamentally. Western powers significantly expanded their military and intelligence footprint in regions associated with Islamist terrorism, such as the Horn of Africa, East Africa, and the Sahel. The most important manifestation of this was Washington’s establishment of the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa, which began operations at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti in May 2003. Western countries also increased their counter-terrorism training of local military and intelligence services, and missions at critical hubs such as Nairobi were expanded significantly.

In some cases, such as with the US, the emphasis shifted from development assistance towards security co-operation, but security has not yet eclipsed development: in 2016, for example, Africa still accounted for 51% of UK bilateral overseas development assistance, at GBP2.85 billion (USD3.8 billion), a rise of 3.6% over 2015. Laurence Cockcroft, a development economist and anti-

corruption expert with significant experience in Africa, told *Jane's* on 18 June, “Western governments and donors have made it their business to improve governance, civil rights, and democracy.”

Major world powers are once again focusing on the strategic importance of Africa. The continent has a young and rapidly increasing population, with growing purchasing power. The 2017 United Nations study *World Population Prospects* projected that Africa’s population would grow from approximately 1.2 billion in 2017 (with 60% of the population aged under 25) to 1.7 billion by 2030, and more than 2.5 billion by 2050, accounting for half of the global increase in population during that period. Many young Africans are enthusiastic adopters of technology, especially in the telecoms sector, and this could revolutionise economic growth.



Smoke and flames rise from an Operation Barkhane armoured vehicle in Gao, northwestern Mali, targeted by militants on 1 July 2018. French soldiers operating in northern Mali were ambushed in the attack as the country prepared to go to the polls on 29 July. (AFP/Getty Images)

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Such population growth and its concomitant economic opportunities, alongside a host of other security factors – including enduring challenges such as terrorism and regional conflict, migration, a relatively permissive intelligence operating environment, and growing foreign competition over natural resources – all indicate that intelligence activity in Africa is set to rebound by the early 2020s.

Outside powers

The China-Africa Defense and Security Forum highlighted how China has rapidly risen in importance as an external influence on Africa. On 3 July, *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported that the Chinese State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (SASTIND) had

established ties with 45 African states in the defence industry and was planning further collaboration, with its largest defence customers including Algeria, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zambia.

Beijing has pursued a different path from Western countries, with the Communist Party of China (CPC) adopting a non-judgemental attitude towards governments across Africa and forging close links with many. Large infrastructure projects are at the heart of its strategy, often constructed by imported Chinese workers and funded through loans and grants underwritten by the Chinese government.

Examples include the Modderfontein New City project in South Africa, being built by Shanghai Zendai; a rail network to link the port of Mombasa in Kenya to Nairobi and onwards to Rwanda, Uganda, and South Sudan, funded by China Eximbank; and the expansion of Nigeria's Dangote Cement Plc across West Africa and beyond, in partnership with Sinoma International Engineering Co Ltd.

However, Chinese largesse has a cost, with the quid pro quo for Chinese investment often being control over a country's mineral resources. Chinese President Xi Jinping has placed access to Africa's mineral wealth at the heart of his foreign policy, with the Democratic Republic of Congo being a vital element.

The policy has proved reasonably successful, with China agreeing a number of infrastructure projects in DRC in return for extensive mining concessions. This tactic has been replicated in countries across the continent, using opaque deals that are of arguable benefit to the host country. In neighbouring Republic of Congo, China is seeking to increase its stake in an oil and gas sector still dominated by France.

The continuance in power of despotic governments has also worked in China's favour, making it one of the dominant trading partners for many African countries. However, increasing democratisation will likely lead China to re-evaluate its engagement, as will greater political instability exemplified by countries such as Libya, Niger, and South Sudan. This is likely to be why China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, and is seeking closer security co-operation. In future, as UN peacekeeping cuts also enable an expanded Chinese military role, Beijing will need to offer more substantial alliances with a military angle, including the deployment of troops to protect Chinese personnel in remote, conflictive parts of the continent.

France has traditionally stood outside EU policy regarding its diplomatic and intelligence activities in Africa. President Emmanuel Macron has emulated his predecessors François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, including through military engagements to support French national and commercial interests, and through visits to numerous African countries. According to an IRIN news report of February 2017, France has more than 6,000 troops stationed permanently in Africa, with the most strategically important located in Chad. This is the headquarters for the counter-terrorism operation Barkhane, which also covers Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

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