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**Research Report**

## China's Development-Security in Practice: The Case of Mali

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## POLICY POINTS

**Enhance understanding**

**of Mali's context** including knowledge of local languages, and focus on areas outside of Bamako.

**Reduce response times** by

the Chinese-run UN hospital in MINUSMA's Gao camp.

**Expand China's leadership**

**role in MINUSMA** especially in civilian protection mechanisms.

## China's Development-Security in Practice: The Case of Mali

Lina Benabdallah and Daniel Large

THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT IS SET ON INCREASING ITS FOOTPRINT in African peace and security. Whether through military summit platforms, joint military exercises, arms sales, or participating in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs), China's strategic engagement has been increasing and Mali is one notable example. The tendency to approach China's security engagement in Africa in general, and Mali more specifically, from a narrow, traditional military perspective, however, means that other important platforms and approaches to peace and security are overlooked. China's emphasis on a development-security nexus at the core of its approach to global peace and security has, in this way, been overshadowed by attention to its military expansion.

The development-security nexus framework captures the synergies between economic development and security. In terms of China's domestic experience, political stability in its one-party state is intimately intertwined with the economic and development successes that the Chinese Communist Party achieved. In China's foreign policy, and as proclaimed by Chinese President Xi Jinping and other officials, Beijing's approach to global peace and security is informed by a strong belief in the interconnections between economic development and security. "Development," as President Xi Jinping told the 2015 Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Johannesburg, "holds the key to solving all problems." On this basis, Beijing's security involvement in Africa (and elsewhere) should not be analyzed exclusively through a material military power lens but also through the prism of its economic development contributions, poverty alleviation measures, and job creation.<sup>1</sup>

The development-security nexus is undoubtedly a necessary and helpful framework for analyzing various elements of China's engagement in Africa, including Beijing's investments in human capital development and training programs for African elites, military officials, or journalists, as well as its record to date in conflict affected countries, from DRC to South Sudan.<sup>2</sup> However, while China's formal approach to security through development is often noted, less examined are questions concerning the actual effectiveness and efficacy of the development-security nexus as an applied project (in yielding peace/security through development projects) in the context not of peace, or fragile political systems, but in contexts of protracted armed conflict. This policy brief

considers, practically speaking, the extent to which approaching peace and security from the angle of development is successful in China-Mali relations.

### CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN MALI

RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND MALI have developed into a broad and diverse spectrum of areas, spanning socio-cultural relations, political and economic links, as well as an expanding security relationship. China is not Mali's top trade partner, ranking as the country's fourth most important import partner (after Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and France), and third as the destination of Mali's exports (after the UAE and Switzerland).<sup>3</sup> Yet Chinese enterprises are involved in several vital infrastructure projects across the country, and Chinese-made finished products such as motorbikes and cellphones are very popular among Malians. From a human capital development aspect, Mali ranked 184 out of 189 countries and territories in the 2019 Human Development Index presenting a lot of room for cooperation on poverty reduction initiatives, job creation, and overall improving living conditions.<sup>4</sup> Human capital development, via scholarships and professionalization trainings, is central to China-Mali relations. The Confucius Institute at the *Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako* organizes several cultural exchange programs and scholarship competitions for Malian students to study in China. Additionally, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese medical aid has provided both material support (masks, test kits, and PPE) and expertise sharing through videoconference exchanges between Chinese medical experts and their Malian counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2012, Mali-China relations have been deeply impacted by Mali's multifaceted political crisis which has resulted in a host of dynamics of domestic and international dimensions. Domestically, these involved a separatist rebellion, jihadist insurgency, a military coup in 2013, and more recently anti-IBK protests followed by a mutiny that escalated into a military coup in August 18, 2020. Internationally, Mali has been the site of multiple interventions including French military intervention, Operation Serval, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Mandated to broker and implement a peace agreement, protect civilians, and stabilize population centers, MINUSMA counts well over 13,000 military personnel in Mali among whom is a contingent of Chinese soldiers. Despite a peace accord signed in 2015 between Tuareg rebels and the central government, Mali has seen a worsening security situation and escalation in violence especially since 2018.

### BEIJING'S MOTIVATIONS IN MALI

CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT IN MALI is motivated by a number of factors, in which three stand out. First, China's role in MINUSMA, whose mandate was renewed for another year in June 2020, has been at the forefront of its evolving role in UN peacekeeping, which China cites as evidence of its role as a responsible international stakeholder contributing to peace and security in Africa. Mali saw a remarkable turnaround in China's approach to armed intervention in Africa, from blanket condemnation of France's Operation Serval as neo-colonial, to active support for, and participation in, MINUSMA. Subsequently, China deployed its first, however symbolic, contingent of "combat troops" to Mali thus, with South Sudan, inaugurating a new phase in the evolution of China's UN peacekeeping. Second, Mali is one part of a complex regional conflict in the Sahel, where conditions are undergoing a fast and fluid deterioration. Although Mali has also been somewhat overshadowed by interest in China's more high-profile engagement with South Sudan, and its naval base in Djibouti, the Sahel region represents an increasingly challenging and strategic engagement for Beijing, including as it affects the geography of Belt and Road Initiative related expansion. Finally, in addition to these security drivers, market access is another factor. Post-conflict reconstruction is very lucrative for Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that have been involved in infrastructure construction in Mali for decades. However, until the conflict is resolved, reconstruction aspirations can be costly for Chinese SOEs and their officials who are based in Mali.

### APPRAISING SECURITY THROUGH DEVELOPMENT IN MALI

CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT-FOR-SECURITY APPROACH has a significant potential for driving much-needed economic growth and job opportunities in Mali, but it also has pronounced limitations in the context of the wider, deeper constraints facing international efforts in Mali and the nature of its central role in the context of conflict that is not confined within Mali's borders. As such, China is one part of a multi-stranded, international intervention while also pursuing its own engagement that is connected to but falls outside its formal MINUSMA role. When China's own approach as applied in Mali is more closely evaluated, however, three main challenges stand out in terms of Chinese engagement.

First, China's development-security nexus lacks a focus on governance. Development projects without government control risk being destroyed or getting subversively used by non-state

actors and armed groups. In effect, during armed conflict, development work is not only interrupted but also actively targeted by armed groups, rendering a focus on development-for-security fragile without a focus on the return of control by the central government.

Second, even though the Chinese ambassador in Mali has been actively reaching out to Malian religious leaders and other parties to the country's national dialogue, China's approach in Mali remains largely government-focused and Bamako-centered, presenting limitations to Beijing's grasp of the multitude of political actors involved in the crisis in Mali. The dissonance that is often found to be characteristic of the Malian government's partnership with international actors (namely European states and the UN), can also be problematic for the case of security partnership with China.<sup>6</sup> Given the recent widespread protests against and opposition to Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, this renders China vulnerable to political transition.

Third, although China's peacekeeping contribution to the mission in Mali is very efficient with regards to development work by Chinese engineers and medical assistance through the Chinese-run hospital which provides essential trauma treatments and emergency services, Chinese peacekeepers are often perceived to be risk averse. Lack of deeper engagement with Mali's diverse cultural and linguistic background further hinders the potential for social capital and trust building that are necessary for China's development-for-security approach to be successful in a crisis situation.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT-SECURITY NEXUS is in principle well positioned to offer a much-needed developmental approach to the conflict in Mali. Focusing on non-military aspects such as development infrastructure has the potential to create opportunities to add value to the military-focused approach that characterizes foreign intervention in Mali so far. The Chinese-sponsored Vocational Training Center located in Senou, for instance, was inaugurated in July 2018 but remains unused until the present day. Despite the potential that a development-centered approach promises, during a time of evolving and multilayered conflict in Mali and the region, the development-security nexus faces enormous challenges. Fundamental to these, the efficacy and viability of any developmentally premised strategy is governance and the role of the central state. The following recommendations, begin to address areas which could be enhanced or addressed:

1. Practical measures can be undertaken to enhance understanding of Mali's context, including knowledge of local languages, cultures, and histories in the region. This also means branching out of Bamako as the center of Chinese-sponsored development projects.
2. China's diplomatic channels could be widened and opened to include a larger scope of stakeholders to reflect the multitude of actors involved and the political challenges facing any negotiated political process in Mali.
3. Reducing response times by the Chinese-run UN hospital in MINUSMA's Gao camp, and smoothing collaboration with other contingents, would enhance its role in the Mission.
4. Expanding China's leadership role in MINUSMA, especially in civilian protection mechanisms.
5. Ensuring any infrastructure projects are undertaken following proper evaluation of conflict impact.
6. How China coordinates with initiatives involving but going outside of MINUSMA, most recently the French-orchestrated Coalition for the Sahel in June 2020, is important in ensuring a coherent international approach.

Engaging with the crisis in Mali necessitates a holistic engagement with all three interrelated elements: development, security, and governance. So far, it appears that China has invested greatly in development projects intended to contribute to employment opportunities, economic growth, and by extension security and stability in Mali but has not done nearly enough with governance.

China's evolving presence in Mali's security is being "watched" by several states across the Sahel. It will have implications for China's relationships with other Sahel states, as well as France and potentially in US strategy in the region and is likely to be prominent when Senegal hosts the next FOCAC in 2021 (pending the COVID-19 pandemic). This underscores the need for a regional approach to Mali's conflict, reflecting wider conflict dynamics. Any focus on Mali, as formidably challenging as that is already, is necessary but not sufficient. ★

## ENDNOTES

1. For more on this see Lina Benabdallah and Daniel Large, "China and African Security" in *New Directions in Africa-China Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018): 312-325.
2. Lina Benabdallah, "China's Peace and Security Strategies in Africa: Building Capacity Is Building Peace?" *African Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2016):17-34.
3. The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mli>.
4. "Inequalities in Human Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Human Development Report 2019, UNDP, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/MLI.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/MLI.pdf).
5. "La Chine aide le Mali à lutter contre le nouveau Covid-19," *Taghrib News*, April 4, 2020, <http://www.taghribnews.com/fr/news/457370/la-chine-aide-le-mali-a-lutter-contre-nouveau-covid-19>.
6. For more on this see Denis M. Tull, "Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 405-422.

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