

“We always regard development as our highest priority”

Interview with Professor Zhang Chun on African-Chinese security cooperation

What are the drivers of China’s growing security engagement in Africa?

I think that there are maybe three reasons or three motivations for us to strengthen cooperation in peace and security with Africa. First of all, peace and security cooperation is a symbol of bilateral relations. If peace and security relations are bad, diplomatic relations as a whole can hardly be very good. The second reason is that with our rising economic and political presence in Africa we have to pay more attention to interest protection in Africa. The third reason relates to China’s role as a permanent member of the UN Peace and Security Council that comes with the responsibility to provide more international public goods in terms of peace and security.

“We have to pay more attention to interest protection in Africa.”

Does the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) affect Chinese thinking on African security?

I think this question is very interesting. Currently, in my personal view, China is mainly focussed on economic spill-overs, the economic effects of the Belt and Road initiative. We haven’t thought so much about

Professor Zhang Chun

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the spill-over to peace and security while implementing the BRI. However, we have started some measures to link these areas together. So, for example, our president Xi Jinping has announced in last September at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation that we will start 50 security assistance projects under the framework of BRI implementation.

“The host country must invite us.”

How does China’s approach differ from Western approaches to peace and security in Africa?

I think there are two main differences between China’s engagement in peace and security and the one of Western or developed countries. The first one is our principle of non-interference. Even if we engage in African peace and security we always insist on this principle. Take UN peacekeeping operation as an example. We insist that the host country must invite us, otherwise we will not come. Another difference between China and the developed countries is that we always regard development as the highest priority. We must take into account that African and other developing countries have only very limited resources. Therefore, if you channel all these very limited resources into the security area, you end up without any additional resources for development, which is why you will then have to borrow money from external partners. The situation then constitutes a vicious circle for African countries and developing countries more general. So that’s why for us – in consideration of our own development experience in the past 40 years – development is our number one priority. Once we have achieved development goals we can put more resources into security and also in governance. Thereby, we will create a virtuous circle. This is another very important difference between China’s approach and the one pursued by developed countries.

“Development is our number one priority.”

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