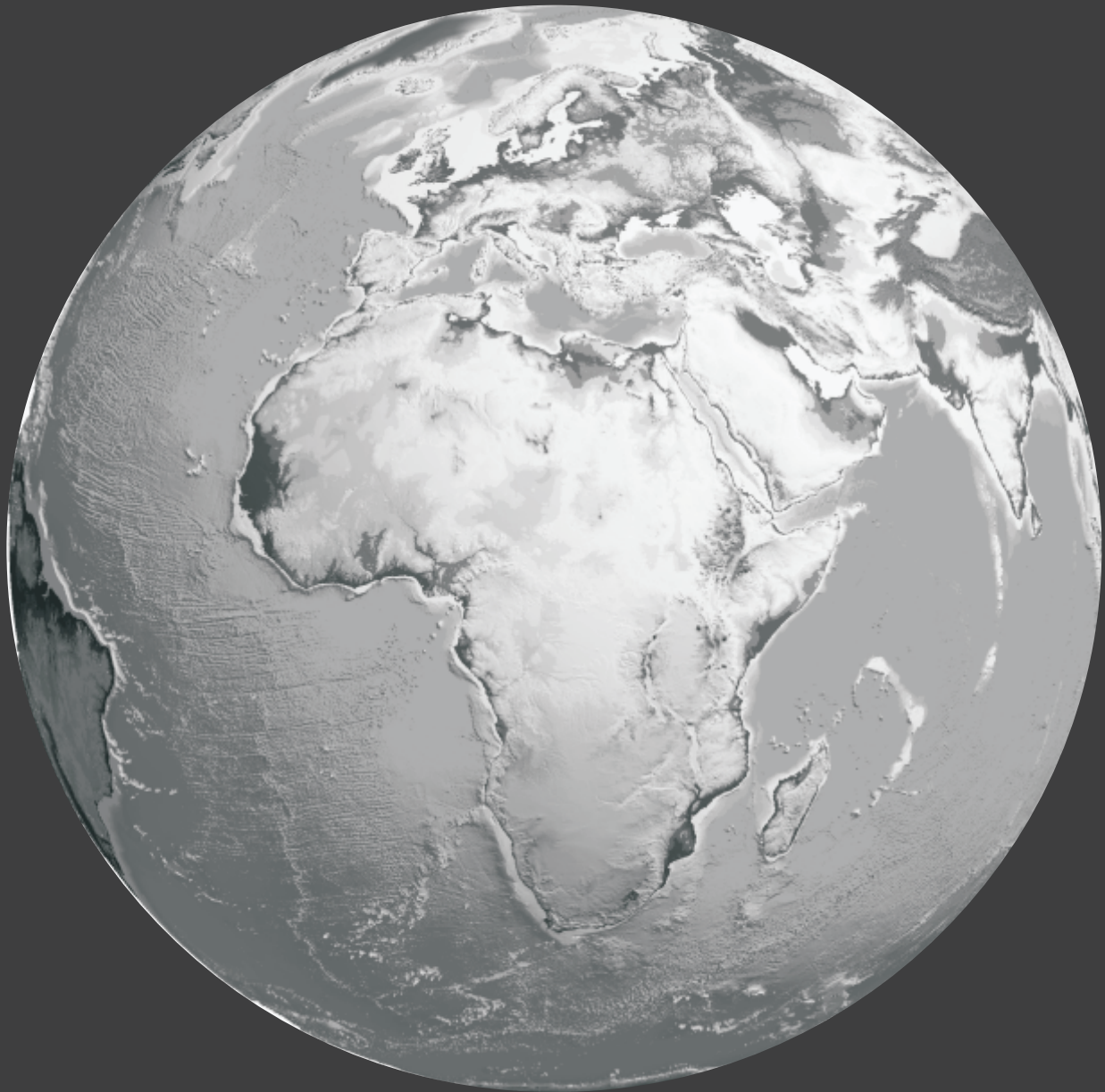


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Editor's Note

This issue of *Africa Trends* brings together diverse perspectives on Africa's evolving strategic choices amid intensifying geopolitical competition, security challenges, energy transitions and changing external partnerships. The cover story by Ms. Khyati Singh examines Africa's position in the US-China competition over critical minerals and artificial intelligence, arguing that African states are increasingly using transactional hedging, beneficiation and supply management to convert resource endowments into strategic leverage, even as technological dependence continues to constrain sovereignty. Mr. Bame Romeo Gaonyadiwe analyses the conflict in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, arguing that while military intervention has contained insurgent violence, sustainable peace requires addressing governance deficits, socioeconomic grievances and weak community participation. Dr. Abhishek Verma examines Africa's emerging nuclear energy landscape, highlighting its potential contribution to energy security and industrialisation alongside challenges relating to financing, institutional capacity, safety and technological dependence. In the View Point, Ms. Sneha M traces Pakistan's evolving defence outreach in Africa from military training towards more institutionalised defence-industrial partnerships, while assessing the financial and technological constraints on this expansion. Concluding the issue, Ms. Abyssinia Abay Mengistu reviews Tom Gardner's *The Abiy Project*, highlighting its emphasis on religion and political theology in understanding Abiy Ahmed's leadership and Ethiopia's political transition. Collectively, the contributions highlight Africa's search for greater strategic agency while underscoring the importance of strong institutions, indigenous capacity and partnerships that support sustainable African priorities.

We welcome your feedback.

Cover Story

LEVERAGE WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY: AFRICAN BARGAINING STRATEGIES IN THE US-CHINA CRITICAL MINERALS AND AI RIVALRY

Africa occupies a strategically distinct and almost contradictory position in technology rivalry between the United States and China. The continent holds nearly 30 percent of the world's critical mineral reserves and the world's largest reserves of mined cobalt, making it a chokepoint of power over the hardware layer of the artificial intelligence (AI) economy. However, African states remain almost entirely dependent on foreign-owned computing infrastructure, designed chips and cloud platforms, leaving them as rule takers within export-control regimes managed extraterritorially by Washington and Beijing. This paper contests that African states are not pursuing "non-alignment" in its traditional sense but a combination of transactional hedging strategies like beneficiation mandates, supply management, contract-terms bargaining and continental rule-making, whose objective is 'leverage' rather than 'autonomy'. By analysing the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) cobalt quota regime, and Zimbabwe's lithium export ban, along with the contested build-out of African AI data centres, the paper assesses where this approach has been able to give favourable gains, and where it has produced new dependencies. It concludes that the binding constraint is not African bargaining skill but the absence of collective action: leverage exercised nationally is often priced by markets as risk, while leverage exercised continentally could be pitched as power.

Khyati Singh*

The United States and China have decoupled their technology stacks, which has transformed supply chains into security architectures.

Introduction: The Two Asymmetries

The United States and China have decoupled their technology stacks, which has transformed supply chains into security architectures. Price alone does not determine the flow of semiconductors, high bandwidth memory, model weights, GPUs, and the minerals that are used in their development. They are now governed by licensing regimes, tariffs, strategic partnership agreements, and entity lists. For African states, this change has created two different and contradictory asymmetries.

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The first dimension of this asymmetry is that Africa supplies the physical substrate of the AI build out such as lithium, copper, cobalt, manganese, platinum-group metals, tantalum and rare earths.¹ For instance, The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) dominates mined supply with a 73% market share.² Anxiety among the great powers regarding supply security has made this endowment strategically and not just commercially valuable.³ This makes Africa's mineral endowment strategically valuable.

Africa supplies the physical substrate of the AI build out such as lithium, copper, cobalt, manganese, platinum-group metals, tantalum and rare earths.

However, the other side is deeply unfavourable. Africa does not manufacture these advanced systems, has a negligible share of global data centre capacity, and cannot access frontier computing except through the channels of the United States or Chinese vendors, or state linked firms.⁴

When the US Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) or China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) makes rules determining which chip will land in what continent and on what conditions, Africa does not get to be on the table. It does not get to decide its fate despite supplying the foundational minerals. This raises a central question: can Africa's upstream mineral leverage be converted into downstream technological standing, or will it merely reprice African exports without changing the continent's position in the value chain?

Conceptual Framework: Non-Alignment 2.0 as Transactional Hedging

The doctrine of non-alignment emerged during the Cold War and was premised on abstention from formal alignment with the major power blocs, as articulated through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) by third world countries. What African states are pursuing today, or moving towards, is not non-alignment in its traditional sense. It is different in three main aspects and is best understood as "transactional hedging".

First, it is not systemic but sectoral. Any African state may accept American cloud services, Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, Emirati data centre capital or European mineral partnership finance all at the same time, treating each of these as individual negotiations and deals rather than an act of alignment. Nigeria hosting both Nvidia⁵ powered facilities, and Huawei⁶ financed AI data centre capacity is not a case of incoherence, but of diversification.

Any African state may accept American cloud services, Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, Emirati data centre capital or European mineral partnership finance all at the same time, treating each of these as individual negotiations and deals rather than an act of alignment.

Second, it is instrumental rather than ideological. Neutrality or moral position is not the objective. It is the preservation of exit options, which is the only bargaining option available to a state which is structurally on the weaker side in an asymmetric relationship.

Third, and most importantly, it operates under the conditions of “weaponised interdependence”. The assertion by Farrell and Newman that any state that sits at the topological centre of a network can convert that position into coercive power, now applies in both directions.⁷

The United States displays this through its Foreign Direct Product Rule, which has effective global reach in advanced chips.⁸ China has also started to follow suit. The MOFCOM notices of 9 October 2025 asserted extraterritorial jurisdiction for the first time, mandating licenses for transfers of controlled rare-earth materials “between third countries”, and introducing a de minimis content threshold for foreign made goods. The strategic implications of this for African states are unfavourable. They might generate chokepoint power at the mine, but at the same time they are also subject to the chokepoint power at the chip, the model, the refinery and the tool. Hedging therefore is no longer a preference but a necessity.

The Instruments of Great Power Pressure

The American toolkit: conditionality and controls

The United States has increasingly shifted from a grants and aid-oriented approach towards transactional commercial diplomacy. Three key instruments matter.

Export Controls: The Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion, released in January 2025, instituted a global licensing scheme for advanced computing chips and certain AI model weights that puts the U.S. and eighteen of its partners in the unrestricted top tier.¹⁰ Critics of the Framework noted that it creates a scarcity of advanced chips for around 150 middle-tier countries.¹¹

In May 2025, Department of Commerce rescinded the rule just days before it was to go into effect.¹² While department has not issued the frame work, a draft of the revised Framework was scheduled for review in February 2026 and withdrawn in March.

The non-enforcement announcement continues to cite the original Framework, which has been officially published in the Code of Federal Regulations.¹³ The GAO ruled on 12 May 2026 that the non-enforcement announcement was a rule and was not submitted to Congress, therefore, remaining in effect. Draft Frameworks reportedly license the volume of computing power and would implement a significantly lighter review below 1000 of the most advanced GPUs, while upper tier licenses may include site visits.¹⁴ For most African countries, the main effect of the Framework is regulatory uncertainty; several of these countries are on the most restrictive D:5 arms embargo list.

Trade preference volatility: The African Growth and Opportunity Act lapsed on 30 September 2025 and was retroactively reauthorised through December 2026 under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026.¹⁵ Despite this, the benefits were largely overridden by reciprocal tariffs of 10 to 30 per cent imposed under emergency economic powers, and by Section 232 sectoral duties.¹⁶ The exports of AGOA covered goods marked a sharp decline, while South African vehicle exports to the United States fell to three quarters of their 2025 level.¹⁷ For

many African governments, this reinforced the perception that access to the US market is discretionary and potentially short-lived.

Minerals conditionality: The US-DRC Strategic Partnership Agreement signed alongside the Washington Accords with Rwanda creates a Strategic Asset Reserve for certain minerals and gold with provisions for preferred access for US companies¹⁸, links investment to the Sakania-Lobito corridor¹⁹, and sets targets for Congo to route the majority of its copper, zinc, and cobalt to Angola via the Atlantic instead of the east. Washington hosted Critical Minerals Ministerial in February 2026²⁰ and invited about 50 states to attend and paired it with an EXIM backed strategic reserve initiative.²¹ This is industrial policy expressed as foreign policy: access to capital and offtake to change the supply chain away from China.

The Chinese Toolkit: incumbency and materials

China's principal advantage is its incumbent position within Africa's infrastructure and technology system. More than fifty African states, as well as the African Union, have signed Belt and Road Agreements²²; in which Huawei alone has built nearly 70 per cent of Africa's 4G infrastructure, with financial backing from policy banks at prices that were impossible to match by Western vendors.²³ This incumbent position is increasingly extending into emerging AI infrastructure: a \$400 million data centre agreement with Huawei in Lagos expanding cloud and AI partnerships with national telecom operators²⁴, and Chinese built lithium processing plants in Zimbabwe.²⁵

China's principal advantage is its incumbent position within Africa's infrastructure and technology system. More than fifty African states, as well as the African Union, have signed Belt and Road Agreements...

Beijing has clubbed this with commercial inducement like zero tariffs extended in 2026 to all 53 African states, and covering approximately 9,000 tariff lines with material leverage.²⁶ China now has effective control over the processing of a number of critical materials. It can and will use this control to try to achieve some diplomatic objectives. China's significant control over the global supply of rare-earth metals (with a processed output estimated at 85-90% of the world's supply) gives it the ability to pursue specific foreign policy goals. It is using these diplomatic measures during a pause in the negotiations scheduled to end in November 2026.²⁷

The trade and commercial imbalance are increasing. During the first quarter of 2026, China-Africa trade was \$92.3 billion, a 27.1% increase from the previous year. Chinese trade deficits with Africa reached an all-time high of \$29.1 billion.²⁸ Zero tariff access has not been implemented to balance trade; instead, it is being used to restructure the market.

Case Studies in Leverage

The DRC: From Price Taker to Supply Manager

The DRC's 2025 cobalt intervention marked a significant shift from being primarily a price taker to actively managing global supply. After cobalt hydroxide prices fell to around

US\$5.60/lb in February 2025, Kinshasa imposed an export ban and later replaced it with an ARECOMS-administered quota regime extending to 2027. The effect was substantial: cobalt hydroxide prices rose by 328 per cent during 2025, while cobalt metal and sulphate prices increased by 130 per cent and 266 per cent, respectively. Importantly, this price recovery was driven less by stronger demand than by restricted access to Congolese material. Although the global market remained in nominal surplus, the effective ex-DRC market moved into deficit as cobalt accumulated inside the country and overseas inventories tightened. In this sense, the DRC demonstrated that a dominant producer could influence global prices by controlling export availability rather than reducing production itself.²⁹

There are, however, clear limits to this leverage. Administrative delays in implementing quotas and export procedures created uncertainty, while persistently high prices could accelerate substitution towards lower-cobalt battery chemistries. More fundamentally, the DRC's influence remains concentrated at the upstream stage: around 72 per cent of Congolese mined cobalt in 2025 came from Chinese-majority-owned assets, while China accounted for about 79 per cent of global refined cobalt output. The DRC is therefore becoming a higher-leverage supplier of raw and intermediate cobalt, but it still lacks comparable control over refining and downstream battery manufacturing. Its growing market power is real, but incomplete.³⁰

Zimbabwe: beneficiation as industrial strategy

Zimbabwe has opted for a complementary strategy of requiring value addition. Following its 2022 ban on exports of raw lithium ore, the government announced that exports of lithium concentrates would also be prohibited from January 2027³¹, and issued a ban on unprocessed mineral exports on 25 February 2026.³² The rationale for the ban is defensible. In 2025, Zimbabwe exported 1.128 million tonnes of spodumene concentrate (a volume increase of 11 percent) and recorded no increase in earnings from the exported volumes which were in the range of \$514 million, indicative of a raw material commodity trap.³³

The end result is paradoxical. The lithium sulphate plants built to comply with the beneficiation requirement are largely built and owned by the same Chinese companies - Sinomine, Huayou, Yahua, Chengxin - whose vertically integrated conversion plants that the policy aims to displace.³⁴

Value addition therefore occurs in Zimbabwe but remains largely within Chinese corporate structures. Beneficiation mandates relocate processing without changing ownership, and the control remains critically important for transfer of technology. An additional concern comes from the Natural Resource Governance Institute's research. It suggests that Ghana could be losing a lot of money by pursuing domestic lithium processing, as small, high-cost refineries could be value-destroying.³⁵

Compute: The Kenyan refusal and the sovereignty vocabulary problem

The downstream scenario, however, is one of dependence being negotiated rather than being escaped. The Cassava Technologies partnership with Nvidia, often regarded as one of the

flagship AI projects on the continent³⁶, involves roughly a \$700 million investment, with 3,000 GPUs to be established in South Africa in 2025, with further plans to scale it towards 12,000 GPUs across Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, and Morocco. Though the hardware, software, and reference architecture remain American³⁷, the sovereignty here means only jurisdictional control over data and workloads, not independence from the supply chain.

Moreover, a more revealing fact comes from Kenya, where the \$1 billion Microsoft-G42 project did not proceed beyond the proposal stage due to Nairobi's refusal to guarantee the annual purchase commitments that the sponsors initially sought. An African state with almost no AI infrastructure chose no deal over a bad deal. It shows that African countries now consistently see these compute agreements not as gifts but as contracts to be negotiated. Along with national policies, a parallel evolution in the continental policy landscape is also visible. The African Union's Continental AI Strategy, rolled out in 2024 and extending to 2030, initially focused on developing governance institutions, supporting national AI strategies, and building technical capacity.³⁸ Its main purpose was to outline a common framework for African nations engaging with external partners. The AI strategy also complements the Africa Green Minerals Strategy, adopted in February 2025, which presents local value addition as a continental goal.³⁹

The African Union's Continental AI Strategy, rolled out in 2024 and extending to 2030, initially focused on developing governance institutions, supporting national AI strategies, and building technical capacity.

Analysis: Four Strategies, One Missing Condition

The responses from African countries can be grouped into four different categories that differ in both ambition and impact.

First is supply chain management. By controlling the supply chain, African nations seek to influence the global market. This is reflected most clearly in the Democratic Republic of Congo's restrictions on cobalt exports. However, this approach has a downside, as these policies may encourage customers to diversify away from affected producers. Beneficiation requirements are another response coming from African countries. They require minerals to undergo domestic processing before export. While this may encourage investment in domestic capacity building and industrial development, its implementation heavily relies on the availability of energy, infrastructure, and skilled labour in the particular country.

Regional approaches to computing infrastructure are likely to prove more viable than purely national initiatives. Shared AI facilities supported by regional institutions such as the African Development Bank could achieve economies of scale that individual countries would struggle to finance on their own. On the other hand, electricity infrastructure remains a fundamental requirement for both beneficiation and AI development. Accordingly, investments in projects such as Grand Inga, geothermal generation within the Rift Valley, and electricity sector reforms in South Africa should therefore be viewed as components of digital and industrial strategy rather than solely as energy policy.

The interaction between the United States' Foreign Direct Product Rule and China's rare earth export regulations has become an increasingly important consideration for investment planning. African governments should therefore assess prospective supply chains against both United States and Chinese export-control frameworks. Policy harmonisation regarding AI investment is therefore strategically important and should be treated as an economic asset in its own right. A Pan-African framework governing AI, digital data, and mineral investment would reduce compliance costs for investors while strengthening Africa's collective negotiating position.

Conclusion

The recent developments show that African countries have acquired greater leverage in negotiating over strategic minerals. These include export restrictions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which influenced international cobalt markets, Zimbabwe altering global lithium supply chains through export controls, and Kenya demonstrating a willingness to reject investment proposals that did not meet domestic policy objectives. However, greater assertiveness in bargaining should not be equated with autonomy. Much of Africa's cobalt continues to be refined outside the continent, processing infrastructure remains largely in foreign hands, and access to AI hardware is still controlled by licensing decisions that are usually made outside the continent. Although African nations have negotiated more favourable terms in recent AI deals, the structural organisation of strategic minerals has changed relatively little. The long-term significance of these policies therefore depends on whether fragmented and disparate national initiatives will transform into coordinated continental action.

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Commentary

BEYOND THE GUN: WHY MILITARY INTERVENTION CANNOT BE A PERMANENT SOLUTION IN CABO DELGADO

The threat of Rwanda's withdrawal from Cabo Delgado pending the renewal of funding under the European Union (EU) peace fund should serve as a wake-up call to the Mozambican government. It is clear that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through military intervention. This paper focuses on the Cabo Delgado conflict that has, unsurprisingly, become a protracted war against a jihadist group referred to as the Islamic State Mozambique (ISM). Despite a reduction in large-scale attacks as experienced in early 2021, the jihadist group remains resilient, continuing to carry out attacks against civilians, government, and public infrastructure. Military interventions by SADC and Rwandan forces have weakened the group's fighting capability, helped recover territory, and facilitated the return of many internally displaced people. However, ISM has shown resilience, carrying out sporadic attacks that leave the general population vulnerable. This paper therefore argues that military intervention, while necessary for immediate security, cannot provide a sustainable as experienced elsewhere across the continent; hence, this should serve as a wake-up call to the government of Mozambique to explore other avenues for sustainable peace. The government must not be preoccupied with extending bilateral military agreements as the best solution to the problem; instead, it must leverage the security space Rwanda offers to tackle the root causes of the conflict.

Bame Romeo Gaonyadiwe*

Introduction

Prior to the emergence of the Cabo Delago insurgency, Southern Africa was generally perceived as a relatively stable and peaceful region following the end of the Cold War. The region has largely been spared the severe effects of Islamist insurgency and terrorism. However, the security crisis in Northern

Prior to the emergence of the Cabo Delago insurgency, Southern Africa was generally perceived as a relatively stable and peaceful region following the end of the Cold War.

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Mozambique has demonstrated that the region is not immune to terrorism¹. On October 5, 2017, a group named Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa carried out attacks in northern Cabo Delgado. The group continued to carry out attacks and diversified its strategies to commit heinous crimes against civilians, the government, and public infrastructure. The advent of this group in the region made Mozambique the epicentre of a violent conflict in the Southern African region, leaving many dead and thousands displaced since 2017.² The group leveraged both the extremist Islamist ideology and local socioeconomic discontent to justify its actions and attacks on towns, military installations, and infrastructure. As of 2022, the group officially declared itself a member of the Islamic State and rebranded as Islamic State – Mozambique (ISM) and strengthened its link to the transnational jihadist networks.³

The Government's Response to the Conflict

In the initial stages of the conflict, the government ignored warning signs, labelling the attacks as 'acts of banditry' rather than as acts of terrorism or violent extremism, thus doing less to address the problem and indirectly contributing to its escalation.⁴ It was only after almost two years that the government acknowledged that the country was facing a terrorist threat, having previously rejected claims that the perpetrators were linked to international Islamic movements. However, from 2017, the government's response was predominantly based on a traditional security approach utilising its defence and security forces. When this approach failed, the government assistance from foreign private military companies. The government subsequently brought in bilateral partners such as Rwanda, multilateral actors such as the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), and international partners, including the European Union Training Mission in Mozambique (EUTM-Moz) and US missions.⁵ As Arena puts it, the Cabo Delgado insurgency "triggered an unprecedented overlap of peace

The case of Cabo Delgado presents a coexistence of multiple, overlapping security regimes operating without formal integration.

support interventions by distinct African actors – Rwanda, SADC, and the African Union (AU) – that operated simultaneously but under separate mandates and command structures.⁶ The case of Cabo Delgado presents a coexistence of multiple, overlapping security regimes operating without formal integration.

The Rwandan Intervention in Cabo Delgado

As one of the active military actors in the conflict, Rwandan entered Mozambique in July 2021 under a bilateral arrangement between the two countries, comprising approximately 1,000 troops and police personnel. Rwanda intervened following the jihadists' attack that led to the suspension of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) projects. The troops were strategically deployed in Palma, where major LNG projects are located, and Mocimboa da Praia, an important LNG development hub. The intervention further strained Rwanda's relations with South Africa and Tanzania.⁷

Rwanda's deployment ahead of the regional forces, following delays by the Mozambican government, was perceived as a challenge to existing regional dynamics and geopolitical

influence, with South Africa arguing that its deployment should have been within the SADC's regional mandate. The Organ was also disappointed by Mozambique's decision to allow the deployment of Rwandan troops ahead of the regional force. The backlash surrounding Rwanda's deployment created difficulties among the actors on the battlefield, undermining SAMIM's operational effectiveness. Tensions between SAMIM troops and Mozambique forces increased over command responsibilities, competition, and limited cooperation, all of which hindered joint operations. Mozambican forces, which had limited capabilities, inadequate training, and low morale, largely relied on Rwandan and SADC troops to lead in direct engagements with insurgents. SADC troops complained about poor communication and cooperation from the Mozambique side, resulting in ineffective intelligence sharing.⁸

Mozambican forces, which had limited capabilities, inadequate training, and low morale, largely relied on Rwandan and SADC troops to lead in direct engagements with insurgents.

However, until the end of the SAMIM in July 2024, the mission had helped reclaim much of the territory previously held by jihadists, facilitated the return of thousands of displaced civilians, and assisted the government in beginning reconstruction projects under the Northern Integrated Development Agency (ADIN). Following SAMIM's withdrawal, Rwanda increased its presence to fill the security vacuum left by the SADC mission. Rwandan troops have maintained the running of the major energy projects, made possible by the experienced 4000 soldiers deployed in the region.⁹

Security analysts argue that behind this intervention, Rwanda is strongly interested in protecting its economic interests in the extractive sector, as well as the interests of its Western allies, including France, whose company TotalEnergies is one of the investors in the region¹⁰. This interpretation is consistent with the presence of Rwandan companies in the region and with frequent statements by Rwanda's foreign minister, who stated, "... *Rwandan troops are constantly questioned, vilified, criticised, blamed by the very countries that greatly benefit from our intervention in Mozambique. Indeed, we are ready to leave Mozambique if our work and achievements are not appreciated*". These arguments followed speculations that the EU might not renew its funding for the mission, and Rwanda responded by threatening to withdraw its troops from Cabo Delgado to pressure the EU to provide funding¹¹

With this, Rwanda was flexing its muscles to remind its European partners that significant interests were at stake if funding was not secured. It is a fact that the Rwandan troops are highly trained and effective, presenting a strong security partner across the continent in a period where Western interventions have lost their legitimacy, with Africans preferring 'African solutions to African problems. Therefore, Rwanda has consequently emerged as an important security partner through which Western interests can be indirectly protected especially in resource-rich regions such as Cabo Delgado.

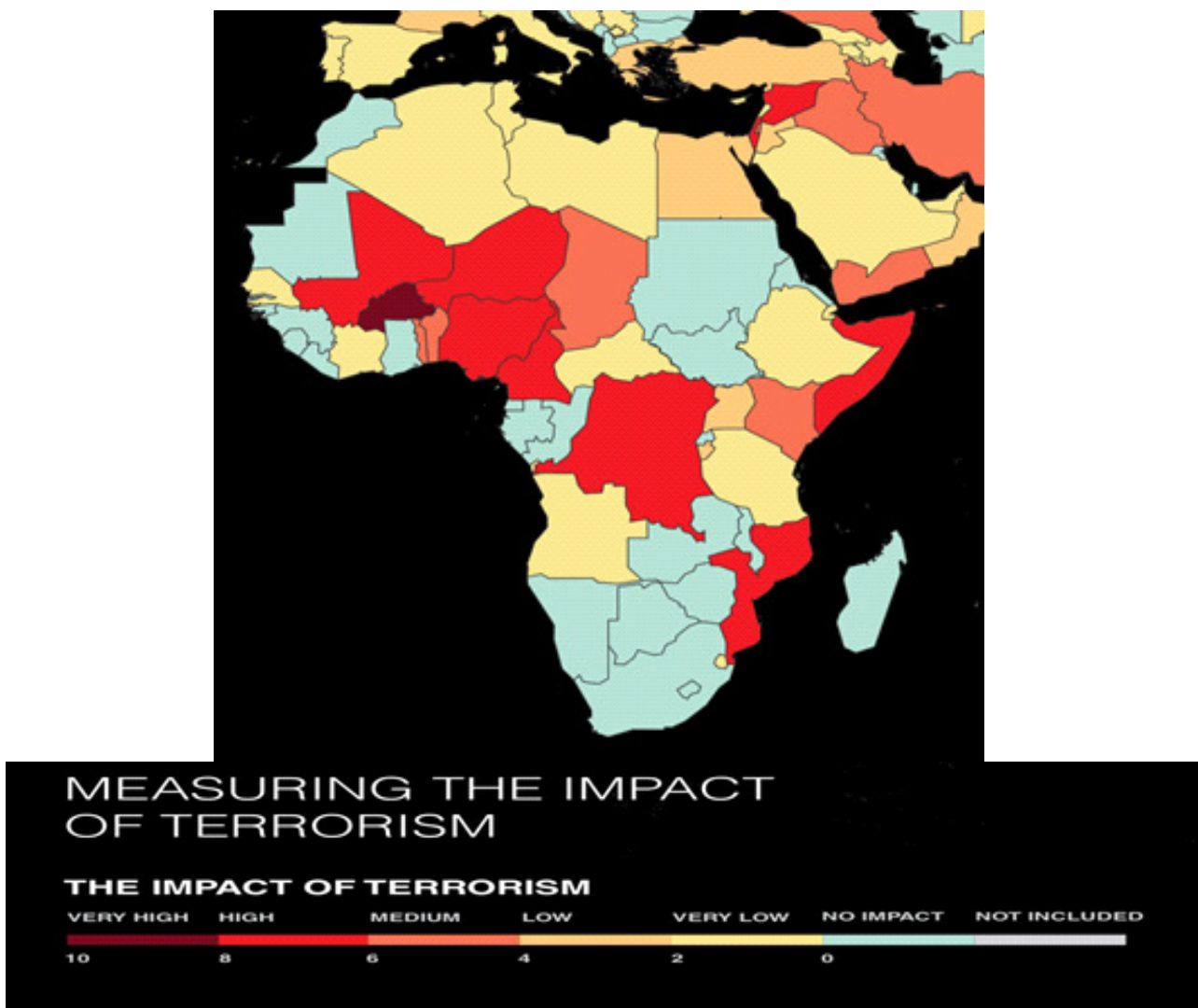
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However, the overreliance of African nations on the West for funding poses a major challenge to the concept of finding 'African solutions to African problems'. The dependence on external financing therefore raises questions about who ultimately exercise authority over ostensibly African-led interventions.

Today, Rwanda continues to provide security in the region alongside the Mozambican forces. Although large-scale attacks may have declined, sporadic attacks reveal the resilience and determination of IS-Mozambique to continue its campaign despite being weakened. The recent terrorism index shows that the impact of terrorism in Mozambique remains high, and the violence against citizens has persisted¹².

Figure 1: The Impact of Terrorism in Africa



Source: (The Institute for Economic & Peace, 2026)

Reports from EUMAM Mozambique and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicate that IS-Mozambique continues to launch attacks against civilians, contributing to insecurity, displacement, and a humanitarian crisis. With terrorism remaining a major security threat in the region, the ongoing conflict has resulted in the deaths of more than 6000 people and displaced over a million^{13, 14}. One lesson from the predominantly militaristic approach in Cabo Delgado is that the military interventions prolong instability, undermine human security, and continue the reliance on external security support. The reliance and dependence on Rwandan troops show the structural vulnerabilities of Mozambique's stabilisation strategy. This approach exposes the country to major and unpredictable risks motivated by external actors and unresolved local grievances¹⁵.

The reliance and dependence on Rwandan troops show the structural vulnerabilities of Mozambique's stabilisation strategy... unresolved local grievances...

The Way Forward

The Mozambican government must work towards taking a leadership role in the fight against terrorism in the region. The current reliance on Rwandan troops and external funding is unsustainable. As demonstrated by Rwanda's threats to withdraw if funding is not provided, such dependence creates significant uncertainty, leaving the region at risk. Political and economic interests can shift; the Mozambique government should not treat the Rwandan intervention as a permanent mission and work towards achieving sustainable peace in the region.

...the crux of the matter is for Mozambique to utilize the security space currently provided by Rwanda's intervention to tackle the root causes of the conflict.

Therefore, the crux of the matter is for Mozambique to utilize the security space currently provided by Rwanda's intervention to tackle the root causes of the conflict. The crucial question is whether the government of Mozambique has leveraged the security spaces provided by both SAMIM and the Rwandan troops. The question should not mainly be about whether the Rwandan mission will be renewed or whether the European Union will extend its funding when the agreements expire. Approaching this insecurity issue from this perspective serves as a reminder to the government that they should work towards attaining sustainable peace in the region, that peace cannot be achieved only through force.

This implies that although the military intervention is crucial to providing security in the region, it should not be perceived as a permanent solution. Military interventions have not come close to resolving the humanitarian crisis; the approach has been effective in protecting the multinational corporate assets, but it ignores the human security of vulnerable local populations. Hence, the government must use the security space offered by this approach to explore different avenues for peacebuilding.

It is commendable that the government has begun implementing strategic economic projects under the ADIN to accelerate the development of Northern Mozambique, promote social

the government has begun implementing strategic economic projects under the ADIN to accelerate the development of Northern Mozambique, promote social cohesion, and create up to 100,000 jobs by 2029.

cohesion, and create up to 100,000 jobs by 2029. The programme has progressed by 30% at the end of 2025, and the leadership has vowed to accelerate the various initiatives under the programme¹⁶. There are also other stakeholders, including international organisations and local NGOs, who are also implementing various projects aimed at improving the socioeconomic conditions of people in the region¹⁷.

Although these initiatives demonstrates the government's efforts to adopt a multisectoral approach to addressing the problem, the structure of these projects and the limited participation of civil society have attracted criticism. Tavares argues that the Cabo Delgado reconstruction plan ignores the structuring role of civil society in the response to the crisis in the province¹⁸, and one key programme, the Mozambique Resilience and Integrated Development Programme (PREDIN), was criticised for a heavy, centralised structure with weak participation of communities and civil society¹⁹. This limited inclusion may also restrict access to information and the ability of stakeholders to hold decision-makers accountable. Each program designed for Cabo Delgado must include all the stakeholders and ensure that they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

A lack of dialogue to address such issues will always be a barrier to peace in the region, and no number of economic packages or military interventions will ever resolve such issues.

Most importantly, the government must invest in building trust with local communities. This can be achieved by first addressing the injustices that contributed to the emergence of the insurgency to ensure that the root causes, triggers, and the local grievances that the jihadist group claims to represent are addressed. The government should create a platform for free dialogue with the local leadership and their communities to address issues such as the violent and

unlawful land expropriation carried out without adequate consultation with local communities. A lack of dialogue to address such issues will always be a barrier to peace in the region, and no number of economic packages or military interventions will ever resolve such issues. In the future, the government must extend the dialogue to the youth who are active in jihad through the creation of deradicalisation and re-education facilities, political amnesty, and disarmament. Given the group's weakened condition, such measures could further disrupt its organisational capacity and reduce its ability to recruit new members.

Moreover, considering the ethnic diversity in the region, with major groups such as the Makonde, Makua, and Mwani found across the region, it is important to address discrimination and the marginalisation of minority groups. There must be an end to systemic marginalisation in political and socio-economic life, and government representatives must ensure that they treat people equally regardless of their ethnic background. Such measures would contribute to rebuilding trust with marginalised communities and restoring the government's legitimacy.

Lastly, the government must strengthen its institutions at the local, provincial, and central levels through meaningful grassroot participation. The government must ensure that local communities are involved in decisions that affect their lives. Without strong institutions, good governance will never be achieved at the local and provincial levels, leading to the failure of any reconstruction efforts. Stronger institutions could improve equitable service delivery and the management of public resources, including the benefits from the extractive industries.

CONCLUSION

The Cabo Delgado conflict has turned out to be a protracted war against jihadists. The Rwandan troops have taken a leading role in the fight against ISM since the withdrawal of SAMIM in 2024. The current approach in Cabo Delgado remains predominantly military, with much of the security effort focused on protecting the regions billion-dollar LNG projects. Military interventions, however, cannot by itself deliver sustainable peace. Although it has helped protect multinational corporations and LNG projects, the continued vulnerability of civilian populations demonstrates the limits of a predominantly military approach.

The government must not be overly reliant on military interventions and prioritize other avenues for peacebuilding. These include working closely with the local communities, addressing governance issues by promoting dialogue and inclusive decision-making, addressing the local grievances over historical land, ending ethnic discrimination and marginalisation, and, most importantly, resource governance, ensuring that the community benefits from the extractive industries. These measures would contribute to rebuilding trust, restoring state legitimacy, and addressing the root causes of the conflict.

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Commentary

AFRICA'S EMERGING NUCLEAR ENERGY LANDSCAPE: AN APPRAISAL

Africa's growing interest in nuclear energy is closely linked to one of the continent's most pressing challenges: how to provide reliable and affordable electricity while supporting economic growth. For decades, many African countries have struggled with inadequate electricity generation, weak transmission networks and unequal access to power. At the same time, African economies are expanding, cities are growing rapidly, and governments are seeking to develop industries that require reliable electricity. Climate change has added another dimension to this challenge by increasing pressure to reduce dependence on carbon-intensive energy sources. These developments have encouraged several African countries to reconsider nuclear power as part of their long-term energy strategies.

Dr. Abhishek Verma*

Introduction: The Quest for Nuclear Energy

Interest in nuclear energy is not entirely new. South Africa has operated the Koeberg Nuclear Power Station since the 1980s and remains the only African country with an operating commercial nuclear power plan.¹ However, Africa's nuclear energy landscape is beginning to change. Egypt is constructing four reactors at El Dabaa, while countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria are developing the legal, regulatory and technical foundations for possible nuclear power programmes.² The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has reported growing interest in nuclear power across more than 20 African countries, although these programmes differ considerably in terms of political commitment, institutional preparedness and technical development.³ This emerging interest needs to be understood in the context of Africa's wider energy problem. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), over 600 million people across the

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), over 600 million people across the continent still lack access to electricity.

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continent still lack access to electricity.⁴ Sub-Saharan Africa continues to account for the largest share of the world's population without electricity access. At the same time, electricity demand is expected to increase as populations grow, urbanization accelerates and economic activity expands. Meeting this demand will require substantial investment in electricity generation and transmission infrastructure.

For a continent endowed with abundant solar and wind resources, nuclear power offers a different set of advantages. It can generate large quantities of electricity continuously while producing relatively low operational carbon emissions. For countries attempting to build energy-intensive industries, this reliability can make nuclear power attractive. The connection between nuclear energy and industrialization is particularly important. Electricity shortages are not simply a social problem; they also limit economic productivity. Manufacturing plants, mines, data centres, transport systems, hospitals and other modern economic activities depend on reliable electricity. Governments therefore increasingly view energy security as a foundation for development. Nuclear power, where economically viable, could provide a stable source of electricity for national grids and support industries that require continuous power.

Country-Level Developments in Nuclear Energy

African states are pursuing nuclear energy to varying degrees, spending on their economic circumstances, climatic vulnerabilities and socio-political priorities. Egypt provides the clearest example of this changing landscape. The country is constructing four Russian-

Egypt provides the clearest example of this changing landscape. The country is constructing four Russian-designed VVER-1200 reactors at El Dabaa on the Mediterranean coast. With a combined capacity of approximately 4,800 megawatts, the project will represent one of the largest additions to Africa's nuclear electricity capacity

designed VVER-1200 reactors at El Dabaa on the Mediterranean coast. With a combined capacity of approximately 4,800 megawatts, the project will represent one of the largest additions to Africa's nuclear electricity capacity.⁵ More importantly, it represents the first new commercial nuclear power programme on the continent since South Africa's Koeberg nuclear power station was developed. Egypt's programme demonstrates both the possibilities and complexities of nuclear development in Africa. The project involves long-term cooperation with Russia in reactor technology, construction, financing, training and other areas. Such partnerships can help countries

overcome the enormous technical and financial barriers associated with nuclear power.⁶ At the same time, they create relationships that may last for many decades. Nuclear cooperation can therefore have implications beyond energy policy, influencing diplomatic relations and wider strategic partnerships.

South Africa occupies a different position. Its decades of experience with Koeberg have provided it with technical expertise, regulatory knowledge and a trained nuclear workforce. The country has also shown renewed interest in nuclear power as part of its long-term power generation strategy. These discussions include additional nuclear capacity and the

deployment of newer reactor technologies. South Africa's experience, however, also highlights the financial and political difficulties involved. Previous plans for a major nuclear expansion were abandoned amid concerns over affordability, financing and governance.⁷ The lesson is important for other African countries: nuclear power cannot be treated simply as a technological project. It requires long-term financial planning, transparent decision-making, strong institutions and political commitment that can survive changes in government.

The lesson is important for other African countries: nuclear power cannot be treated simply as a technological project... commitment that can survive changes in government.

Ghana and Kenya represent another stage in Africa's nuclear development, as both countries are still building the institutional foundations for future nuclear programmes. Ghana has developed a national nuclear programme and has examined different reactor technologies and international partnerships. Kenya has established the Nuclear Power and Energy Agency and has worked with the IAEA on issues such as regulatory development, human-resources development, environmental assessment and electricity-grid requirements (Nuclear Power and Energy Agency).⁸ Nigeria has also considered nuclear power for many years. Its large population and persistent electricity shortages make reliable energy a major national priority. The country has worked with the IAEA to develop the regulatory and institutional foundations for nuclear power. Yet Nigeria's experience also demonstrates how difficult it is to move from political commitment to actual construction.⁹ Earlier targets for developing a nuclear power plant were not achieved, reflecting the financial, institutional and technical challenges involved.

These examples demonstrate that Africa is not moving towards nuclear energy along a single, common path. Countries are at different stages. Some are operating reactors, some are constructing them, some are developing regulations and others are still examining whether nuclear power is economically and technically appropriate. The decision to pursue nuclear energy will depend on the size of each country's electricity grid, projected demand, access to finance, institutional capacity and availability of skilled personnel.

Challenges to Africa's Nuclear Energy Ambitions

Conventional nuclear reactors require significant upfront capital investments and require strong, stable electricity grids capable of absorbing immense gigawatt-scale outputs – conditions that present major obstacles for many smaller African economies. Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) offer a potentially more because of their smaller generating capacity, lower initial capital requirements and suitability for smaller power grids, enabling phased deployment for both electricity and non-electric applications such as industrial heat or water desalination.¹⁰

However, SMRs cannot provide an immediate solution. Most designs are still progressing toward widespread commercial deployment, and they continue to require robust national frameworks for nuclear safety, physical security, emergency response, and radioactive waste disposal.

Africa possesses roughly 20% of global uranium reserves, led by key producing nations such as Namibia and Niger (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2024).¹¹ However, a stark structural disconnect exists between the continent's role as a major supplier of uranium and its limited domestic capabilities across the nuclear fuel cycle. Because most African countries lack domestic enrichment, fuel fabrication and other fuel-cycle facilities, their nuclear power programmes remain dependent on foreign suppliers and processing capabilities.

Nuclear energy requires massive upfront capital investment before a plant can generate revenues. To bridge this financing gap, countries often rely heavily on international vendor partnerships, notably from state-backed entities in Russia, China, France, South Korea, and

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the United States. The multi-decade contracts with these external partners can create long-term geopolitical and technological dependencies on foreign entities, reinforcing the need for African governments to balance external assistance with national human capital development.

Finally, institutional capacity and governance issues are among the most pressing challenges facing Africa. Building a competent, independent nuclear regulator takes years of sustained investment. Beyond granting permits, regulatory

bodies must enforce standards relating to radiation safety, environmental protection and radioactive waste management. Addressing spent-fuel management from the outset is essential; postponing this issue can undermine both regulatory credibility and public trust. To ease this burden, regional bodies like the African Union and the African Commission on Nuclear Energy (AFCONE) help align safety standards across borders, share technical expertise, and pool capacity-building costs (AFCONE, 2022).¹²

Conclusion

Africa's nuclear future stands at a critical juncture, shaped by financial, institutional and strategic considerations. The continent's ability to harness nuclear power will ultimately depend on three interlinked conditions. First, sustainable financing will be essential. Nuclear energy projects are capital-intensive, requiring billions of dollars in upfront investment for construction, regulatory compliance, and safety infrastructure. African nations will need to secure long-term funding through a combination of government budgets, private investment, and international financial mechanisms. Without reliable financing sources, even well-formulated nuclear plans may never progress beyond the drawing board. Second, strong and accountable institutions will be essential. Nuclear programmes demand highly specialised regulatory bodies, robust safety protocols, and transparent governance to ensure that both domestic and international standards are met. Countries must train skilled personnel, establish independent oversight agencies, and create legal frameworks that prevent corruption or political influence from compromising safety and efficiency. Without such institutional capacity, the risks of accidents, misuse, or project delays increase

significantly. Third, managing international partnerships effectively will be critical. Many African nations will rely on collaboration with experienced global nuclear powers to access technology, expertise, and equipment. However, such cooperation must be structured to minimize long-term technological dependence. Strategic partnerships that incorporate technology transfer, local workforce training and the development of domestic supply chains will be essential if nuclear energy is to contribute to broader economic and industrial growth.

If African countries can successfully address these three pillars – securing financing, building institutions, and managing partnerships – nuclear energy could become a cornerstone of the continent’s long-term energy and industrial strategy. It could help diversify energy portfolios, reduce reliance on fossil fuels and provide reliable electricity for growing industries. However, failure to meet these conditions would likely leave nuclear ambitions stalled, confined to policy documents, feasibility studies, and aspirational roadmaps rather than operational reactors.

Strategic partnerships that incorporate technology transfer, local workforce training and the development of domestic supply chains will be essential if nuclear energy is to contribute to broader economic and industrial growth.

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Viewpoint

FROM TRAINING TO EMBEDDED PARTNERSHIPS: PAKISTAN'S EVOLVING DEFENCE OUTREACH IN AFRICA

Pakistan's defence engagement in Africa is evolving from limited, transactional cooperation towards more embedded and institutionalised security partnerships. Traditionally centred on military training, United Nations peacekeeping, and modest defence exports, Islamabad's outreach is increasingly integrating professional military education with defence-industrial cooperation, technical support, and sustained military-to-military engagement. This shift reflects Pakistan's broader effort to expand its strategic footprint in Africa through defence diplomacy under the *Engage Africa* framework, particularly in conflict-affected and strategically significant regions. This paper argues that Pakistan is emerging as a flexible mid-tier security provider by leveraging cost-effective defence platforms, operational experience, and long-term institutional partnerships. Drawing on evidence from key African engagements, it examines how Pakistan is moving beyond episodic defence cooperation towards an ecosystem-based approach that links training, equipment, maintenance, and strategic dialogue. At the same time, the paper assesses the structural constraints that shape this outreach, including Pakistan's limited financial and industrial capacity, competition from established and emerging defence suppliers such as China, India, and Türkiye, and the political and security volatility of several African partner states.

Sneha M*

Introduction

In the recent years, Pakistan's efforts to reassert its geostrategic relevance have increasingly centred on expanding defence diplomacy. Historically focused on immediate regional security imperatives, Islamabad has gradually broadened its military outreach to diversify strategic partnerships, expand defence markets, and reinforce its role within the Global South.¹ Within

Pakistan's efforts to reassert its geostrategic relevance have increasingly centred on expanding defence diplomacy

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this strategic recalibration, Africa has emerged as a crucial theatre. The region's security challenges, characterised by persistent terrorism, insurgencies, maritime insecurity, and demand for affordable defence capabilities, have created opportunities for emerging suppliers like Pakistan alongside actors such as India, China, and Türkiye.²

This outreach was formally guided by the 'Look Africa' Policy Initiative in 2017 and the 'Engage Africa' framework in 2019, which explicitly linked military diplomacy with economic statecraft.³ Annual bilateral trade between Pakistan and Africa in 2022-23 merely stood at USD 4.4 billion, anchored by markets like Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt.⁴ Its major exports to Africa include low-margin commodities such as rice, textiles, and pharmaceuticals, while imports include tea, coal, and energy products. Against this backdrop, defense exports serve not only to generate foreign currency but also to deepen institutional security ties with African states.⁵ Despite Pakistan's chronic foreign exchange shortfalls and trade deficits⁶, Islamabad is increasingly seeking to leverage its military-industrial base as a higher-margin export engine.

The core of this defense push is the export of cost-effective military platforms. In 2021, Nigeria inducted three co-developed JF-17 Thunder fighter jets in a landmark USD 184 million contract⁷, establishing Pakistan as a viable alternative to high-cost Western or politically conditional suppliers. This was complemented by sales of MFI-17 Super Mushshak trainers across Nigeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, embedding Pakistani technical crews within African air forces.⁸ Additionally, state-owned enterprises such as Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) and Global Industrial and Defence Solutions (GIDS) actively export munitions, armored vehicles, and Shahpar-II drones for regional counterinsurgency operations.⁹ By pairing platform sales with professional military education and maintenance support, Pakistan is converting defense manufacturing into durable strategic influence across the continent.

The Evolution of Pakistan's Defence Outreach in Africa

Pakistan's military engagement in Africa has evolved through three distinct phases: multilateral peacekeeping, bilateral institutional training, and embedded defence-industrial

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cooperation. The bedrock of this engagement was established through United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) from the 1960s onward, during which Islamabad deployed over 200,000 personnel across major African conflict theatres, including Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia.¹⁰ While operating under UN mandates, these deployments established foundational goodwill, operational familiarity with African security dynamics, and critical elite military networks.

By the 2000s, this multilateral footprint transitioned toward direct bilateral cooperation. Through the Pakistan Technical Assistance Programme (PTAP), Islamabad has offered

subsidised Professional Military Education (PME) at premier academies such as the National Defence University and the Command and Staff College. Drawing in its own counterinsurgency experience, the Pakistani military provided specialised training in counter-terrorism and counter-IED tactics to African officers, cultivating an influential cadre of commanders receptive to Pakistani doctrine. Furthermore, this institutional foundation facilitated a qualitative shift post-2010, formalised under the *Look Africa* and *Engage Africa* policy initiatives. It was driven by fiscal imperatives to commercialise state-owned enterprises such as the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC), Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF), and Global Industrial & Defence Solutions (GIDS). Hence, Islamabad has moved beyond ad-hoc arms sales toward an embedded security partnership with Africa.

Pakistan's Emerging Defence Footprint in Africa

Pakistan's transition toward an embedded security provider is best understood through its tailored operational engagements across West, East, and North Africa. In West Africa, Nigeria represents the most mature operationalisation of Islamabad's defence ecosystem. Beyond the acquisition of MFI-17 Super Mushshak basic trainers, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) inducted three JF-17 Thunder Block II multirole fighters in 2021 to support counter-insurgency operations against Boko Haram.¹¹ Crucially, Nigeria is also supported by joint training, intelligence integration, and advanced surveillance systems, laying the groundwork for expanded procurement and technical cooperation.¹²

In East Africa, Islamabad's outreach leverages military capacity building and strategic maritime positioning along the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR). In Zimbabwe, Pakistan has expanded its defence cooperation through pilot training programmes centred on the Super Mushshak aircraft. To modernise its ageing training fleet, Zimbabwe procured 12 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft from PAC, strengthening its basic flight training capabilities.¹³ Meanwhile, in Somalia, Pakistan has actively supported the reconstruction of national security institutions. Following years of high-level defence dialogue and military training cooperation, Islamabad and Mogadishu formalised their security partnership by agreeing to strengthen bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation.¹⁴

In North Africa, Islamabad is expanding its footprint by engaging established regional military powers like Egypt and Libya. High-level bilateral defence meetings in Cairo established a joint Defence Cooperation Committee, focusing on counter-terrorism doctrine, urban warfare, and potential co-production partnerships between POF, Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT), and Egyptian defence enterprises.¹⁵ On 22 December 2025, Pakistan signed a \$4 billion defense deal with the Libyan National Army (LNA) to supply air, land, and naval military hardware, headlined by 16 JF-17 Thunder fighter jets and 12 Super Mushshak trainers¹⁶, scheduled for phased delivery over 2.5 years through mid-2028.¹⁷ Therefore, although these initiatives remain at a nascent stage, they still demonstrate that Pakistan's defence outreach is no longer confined to military education or equipment sales but increasingly incorporates industrial partnerships that can support longer-term strategic engagement.

Major Pakistani Defence Exports and Strategic Engagement in Africa

Country	Contract Signed Year	Equipment(s)	Estimated Value (in USD)	Status
Nigeria	2016	10 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft	\$9 million	Delivered (2017–18)
Nigeria	2018	3 JF-17 Thunder Block II fighters	\$25 million	Delivered (May 2021)
Zimbabwe	2024	12 MFI-17 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft	\$15 million	On order (delivery not confirmed)
Libya	2025	16 JF-17 Block III fighters, 12 Super Mushshak trainers, land and naval equipment	\$ 4.6 billion	Signed; phased delivery reportedly scheduled for 2026–2028
Sudan	2025	K-8 trainer aircraft, UAVs, air defence systems and other military equipment	\$1.5 billion	Suspended (As of April 2026)

Source: Compiled by author based on open-source data

Africa's defence procurement landscape has undergone a significant transformation,... arms supply networks.

importers, including Algeria and Egypt, reduced acquisitions amid budgetary pressures. Concurrently, sanctions, export controls, and geopolitical developments, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war, have disrupted Western and Russian supply chains, prompting African

The changing defence landscape has opened space for Pakistan to position themselves as alternative suppliers of combat aircraft, unmanned systems, and military training platforms.

Opportunities and Challenges

In recent years, Africa's defence procurement landscape has undergone a significant transformation, driven by fiscal constraints, evolving security requirements, and disruptions in traditional arms supply networks. African arms imports have declined since 2020 as major states to diversify their sources of military procurement. The changing defence landscape has opened space for Pakistan to position themselves as alternative suppliers of combat aircraft, unmanned systems, and military training platforms. Although United Nations arms embargoes continue to constrain defence transactions in countries such as Sudan and Libya, procurement decisions have increasingly

prioritised operational requirements, delivery timelines, and value, expanding opportunities for Pakistan's defence engagement across the continent.

Pakistan's growing appeal in the African defence market lies in its ability to combine competitively priced military platforms with integrated defence cooperation. Systems such as the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft and Super Mushshak trainer aircraft offer a lower-cost alternative to many Western platforms, while exports are typically accompanied by training, maintenance, technical assistance, and advisory support. This integrated model distinguishes Pakistan from many emerging defence exporters by combining equipment transfers with institutional capacity building and professional military education. Moreover, Pakistan's expanding defence-industrial collaboration with China has strengthened the competitiveness of its defence products through access to mature technologies, resilient production networks, and shorter delivery timelines. Therefore, these factors have enhanced Pakistan's attractiveness as a defence partner for African states seeking to modernise their armed forces while avoiding the political conditionalities often associated with Western suppliers.¹⁸

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For Pakistan, defence exports have also become an important component of its broader economic statecraft. Islamabad increasingly views defence exports as instruments for generating foreign exchange, strengthening the domestic defence-industrial base, and enhancing its strategic influence abroad. High-value defence agreements and ongoing negotiations with countries such as Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia reflect this broader objective of transforming defence manufacturing into a significant export sector. The convergence of expanding industrial capacity, sustained government support, and favourable external demand has reinforced Pakistan's strategy of employing defence exports not merely as instruments of military diplomacy but as tools of industrial development, economic resilience, and strategic influence. Africa has consequently emerged as an increasingly important destination where Pakistan seeks to consolidate long-term defence partnerships alongside its expanding political and economic engagement.

Despite the growing momentum in Pakistan's defence engagement with Africa, several structural constraints raise questions about the long-term sustainability of this strategy. The first challenge is the limited scale of Pakistan's defence-industrial base. PAC currently produces only 20–25 JF-17 Thunder aircraft annually.¹⁹ Although production capacity is expected to expand, a sharp increase in overseas demand could create delivery delays and strain maintenance and after-sales support. Pakistan also has limited experience in providing long-term lifecycle support, including upgrades, spare parts, and technical assistance. These capabilities are essential for sustaining enduring defence partnerships.²⁰

Domestic security and economic pressures further constrain Pakistan's defence diplomacy. Counterterrorism operations against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and insurgent violence in Balochistan continue to absorb military resources and policy attention, while potentially undermining Pakistan's international image. At the same time, persistent balance-of-payments crises, rising external debt²¹, and repeated reliance on IMF assistance have reduced fiscal space. These constraints limit Islamabad's ability to finance exports, provide export credit, or absorb the commercial risks associated with large defence contracts. As a result, domestic priorities may restrict Pakistan's ability to sustain long-term defence partnerships abroad.

External factors also limit Pakistan's strategic flexibility. Many of Pakistan's advanced platforms, including the JF-17 Thunder, have been co-developed with China. Exports of these platforms remain subject to Chinese technology-transfer arrangements and export approvals. Pakistan also lacks dedicated export financing mechanisms comparable to those of China or Türkiye. The reported suspension of the US\$1.5 billion Sudan defence package in 2026²², following the withdrawal of Saudi financial backing, illustrates this dependence on external financing. Similarly, proposed defence deals in politically sensitive states such as Libya remain vulnerable to international sanctions, United Nations embargoes, and shifting regional politics.

Moreover, competition presents another significant challenge in the African defence market. China accounted for more than 18 percent of African arms imports during 2020–24²³, supported by extensive defence financing, technology transfer, and industrial cooperation. Türkiye has rapidly expanded its presence through exports of armed drones, armoured vehicles, and local production partnerships. India has strengthened its defence partnerships through military training, capacity-building programmes, joint exercises, and defence-industrial cooperation. By comparison, Pakistan's defence portfolio remains concentrated in light combat aircraft, trainer aircraft, unmanned systems, and maintenance support. This niche offers opportunities in selected markets but limits Islamabad's ability to compete across the broader spectrum of African defence procurement. Its long-term success will therefore depend on expanding industrial capacity, strengthening lifecycle support, and reducing dependence on external technology and financing.

Conclusion

Pakistan's defence outreach in Africa reflects a broader shift in its foreign policy, where defence diplomacy has become an instrument of strategic influence, economic statecraft, and long-term security cooperation. The transition from military training to defence-industrial partnerships demonstrates Islamabad's effort to establish a more enduring presence on the continent. The success of this strategy, however, will depend on Pakistan's ability to sustain the momentum it has created. It must strengthen its defence-industrial capacity, expand lifecycle support for exported platforms, reduce dependence on external financing and technology partners, and remain responsive to Africa's evolving security requirements. Equally important, defence cooperation must continue to complement Pakistan's wider

political and economic engagement with the continent. Only then can Islamabad consolidate its position as a credible mid-tier security partner and translate defence diplomacy into lasting strategic influence.

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Book Review

Tom Gardner. *The Abiy Project: God, Power, and War in the New Ethiopia*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2024. pp.384

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Abyssinia Abay Mengistu*

Gardner argues that since coming to power in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has become one of the most debated political leaders in contemporary Africa. Following years of political unrest his ascent to was initially welcomed. Nonetheless, optimism gave way to growing violence, shrinking democratic space, and most importantly the war in Tigray. While many studies, he added, explain this transition by focusing on ethnic federalism, elite competition, state institutions, or Ethiopia's changing geopolitical factors, Gardner in his book promised to offer a different explanation. He argues that understanding Abiy Ahmed's political vision requires taking religion seriously, for Gardner, the influence of Pentecostal Christianity and prosperity gospel on the prime minister's understanding of leadership, national unity, and state power.

...understanding Abiy Ahmed's political vision requires taking religion seriously, for Gardner, the influence of Pentecostal Christianity and prosperity gospel on the prime minister's understanding of leadership, national unity, and state power.

Gardner places religion at the centre of his analysis of Ethiopia's recent developments. Methodologically, he used investigative journalism, extensive interviews, historical analysis, and first-hand observations collected over many years in Ethiopia. Accordingly, he argues that Abiy's religious view is shaping the broader political project that sought to replace ethnic federalism.

Abiy's religious view is shaping the broader political project that sought to replace ethnic federalism.

The book is organised into four broad sections: Revolution, Reform, Crisis, and War to trace Ethiopia's political transition from the final years of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to the outbreak of the Tigray War.

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In the *Revolution* section, Gardner looks back at the political developments that have shaped modern Ethiopia since the 1974 revolution. He discusses the Derg regime's Marxist dictatorship and argues that many of today's political challenges have their roots in this period. In particular, he explains how the Derg failed to address the political demands of regions such as Tigray and Eritrea, leaving unresolved tensions that continued to influence Ethiopian politics long after the regime collapsed. He also introduces one of the book's main themes: the role of religion in politics. He argues that Abiy Ahmed's Pentecostal faith and his embrace of prosperity theology explain both his political leadership and the vision of national renewal that he (Abiy) promotes.

The Reform section examines Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018, a period that generated both domestic and international optimism. Gardner describes how Abiy's early reforms, including the release of political prisoners, the opening of political space, and the peace agreement with Eritrea, created expectations that Ethiopia was entering a new democratic era. To explain why these reforms attracted so much attention, Gardner first reflects on the political system that Abiy inherited. Between 1991 and 2018, Ethiopia was governed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which combined ethnic federalism with a developmental state model under an increasingly authoritarian political system. Gardner argues that growing public protests, internal divisions within the ruling coalition, and widespread demands for political change eventually brought this period to an end and created the opportunity for Abiy's leadership.

Gardner identifies the dissolution of the EPRDF and the creation of the Prosperity Party as a major turning point that fundamentally changed Ethiopia's political landscape.

The third section (*Crisis*) examines how the early promise of reform gradually turned into political confrontation. Gardner identifies the dissolution of the EPRDF and the creation of the Prosperity Party as a major turning point that fundamentally changed Ethiopia's political landscape. According to Gardner, this decision deepened tensions with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), while Abiy's public admiration for historical figures such as Menelik II and Haile Selassie created additional disagreements with sections of Oromo ethno-nationalists. Gardner also discusses

the role of Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige and the rise of Amhara nationalism. Through this discussion, he shows how competing historical narratives, territorial claims, and ethnic grievances increasingly complicated Ethiopia's political transition and pushed the country towards wider conflict.

He argues that the violence resulted from the actions and decisions of several actors, including the federal government, the TPLF, and regional forces.

The final section, Part IV: *War*, focuses on the northern war, which Gardner refers to as the Tigray War. He documents the human cost of the conflict through the experiences of civilians, health workers, farmers, and others whose lives were deeply affected by the violence. Gardner also examines the involvement of external actors, particularly Eritrean forces, and shows how the conflict extended beyond a confrontation between the federal government and the TPLF.

He argues that the violence resulted from the actions and decisions of several actors, including the federal government, the TPLF, and regional forces.

One of the book's contributions is that it broadens the discussion of Ethiopian politics beyond familiar focus on ethnicity, notwithstanding the importance of ethnic federalism, historical grievances. Explanations most academic research and media reporting on Ethiopia have, Gardner instead argues, are insufficient as they are not re/considered alongside the religious ideas that shaped Abiy's political identity. In this respect, the book makes an original contribution by inserting political theology into debates on state-building and conflict in contemporary Ethiopia.

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Nevertheless, the book could have engaged more explicitly with the extent to which religion outweighs other structural forces (both stated or not). While Gardner acknowledges the importance of institutional weaknesses, competing nationalisms, economic pressures, and other structural issues, the reader is left to consider whether religion is the principal driver of political change or one factor among several. Otherwise, *The Abiy Project* is an ambitious and carefully researched study that offers a fresh perspective on one of Africa's most important political transitions. It helps readers to rethink the relationship among religion, political leadership, and state power in Ethiopia.

***The Abiy Project* is an ambitious and carefully researched study that offers a fresh perspective on one of Africa's most important political transitions.**

Call for Contributions

MP-IDSA invites articles, commentaries and book reviews for publication in *Africa Trends*, a biannual magazine on Africa. Submissions can focus on security, political and economic issues relating to African countries. Articles may focus on analysing bilateral, regional and multilateral developments of strategic significance to India's engagement with African countries.

Articles could be of approximately 2000 words. Commentaries can range between 1,000-1,500 words (excluding footnotes) and book reviews between 600-1,000 words. Guidelines for contributors may be found at: <http://www.idsa.in/africatrends>. Submissions may be emailed to the Editor at idsa.africatrends@gmail.com.

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