

Washington's Fear of Non-Existent Chinese Bases

Africom has some obvious incentives to exaggerate Chinese military ambitions in Africa.

By [Daniel Larison](#)

Global Research, August 18, 2022
[Eunomia](#) 17 August 2022

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the “Translate Website” drop down menu on the top banner of our home page (Desktop version).

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

Eric Miller [wants](#) to sound the alarm about future Chinese bases in Africa, but mostly he just recycles the same unpersuasive claims we have been hearing for months:

Chinese military basing efforts abroad have become a topic of great international interest and scrutiny. The completion of Beijing's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, revelations last year of a potential military base in the United Arab Emirates, and the announcement this spring of Chinese investment in a Cambodian military base with suspected exclusive Chinese use all support the realization that China is methodically moving forward on improving its ability to project power globally. Deciphering where Beijing plans to place its next flag is challenging because it is a dynamic equation—one that must factor in China's goals and those of a host nation, along with the willingness of those involved to deal with the invariable regional and international questions and blowback. One area of the world where this calculus appears favorable for China is Africa.

Miller is U.S. Africa Command's director of intelligence analysis, so it is a bit worrisome that there is so little analysis in this article. The entire piece comes across as a longer version of the [threat inflation](#) we saw in [news reporting](#) about a possible Chinese base in Equatorial Guinea that does not exist and may never be built. Nine months later, there have been no moves towards establishing a base, and neither government has given any indication that there ever will be. Even if Equatorial Guinea agreed to a Chinese base on its territory, that would bring the number of Chinese overseas bases in the world all the way up to two. The U.S. has [29 bases and outposts](#) just in Africa.

Pointing to a naval base in Cambodia as evidence for Chinese ambitions in Africa is hard to take seriously. It is not even certain that China will be granted exclusive use of any part of the facility at Ream. The U.S. has been [overreacting](#) to the possibility of a Chinese presence in Cambodia, but at least there is something real to overreact to. In Equatorial Guinea, there

doesn't appear to be anything to the rumors of a future base. It is questionable whether the Chinese government has much interest in establishing a military presence on Africa's Atlantic coast to begin with. That hasn't stopped the head of Africom from [asserting](#) in March that China is "actively seeking" a base and zeroing in on Equatorial Guinea as the "likeliest" candidate for a host country.

The main problem for Miller's argument is that there is very little evidence that the Chinese government is even trying to establish any additional bases in Africa, and there is even less evidence that they are having success in doing so. Miller addresses this problem by waving away the lack of evidence and appealing to an unproven assumption about Chinese ambitions:

The lack of visible, publicly available evidence of Chinese basing progress in Africa has fueled skepticism, with some commentators suggesting that concern about such basing efforts is overblown. This is understandable, but it overlooks the secretive nature and substantial timelines associated with these diplomatic and military negotiations. One just has to look closely enough and understand that China has a patient, long-term approach to achieving its global military ambitions.

Concerns about these basing efforts are indeed [overblown](#), as Cobus van Staden explained in an article earlier this year. He commented on the reporting about a possible base in Equatorial Guinea, saying that "the current flurry of rumors seems to reveal more about Washington's priorities than Beijing's." He added that "worries among U.S. officials about a Chinese naval presence on Africa's Atlantic coast seem to be based more on speculation than superior intelligence about Beijing's intentions." That seems right to me, and I would add that this speculation starts from the assumption that China has "global military ambitions" that would require them to acquire bases in the Atlantic and then moves to conclude that this must be what they are doing to realize the ambitions that Washington assumes them to have.

Africom has some obvious incentives to exaggerate Chinese military ambitions in Africa, since every U.S. command is hoping to make itself relevant to "great power competition" or "strategic competition." Van Staden argued that the head of Africom is doing exactly this: "Townsend, as head of U.S. Africa Command, may be less focused on any real threat of Chinese expansion than on getting emotional buy-in from policymakers on Capitol Hill, who will be deciding his command's future budgets." The head of Centcom, Gen. Kurilla, did the same thing earlier this year when he [boasted](#) that "[t]his region [i.e., the Middle East] is at the center of America's strategic competition with Russia and China" despite the fact that the Middle East is mostly a sideshow when it comes to competing for influence with those states. The public worrying about Chinese military installations in Africa seems to be mostly an attempt to bid for more attention from Washington and to get more resources to "counter" the imagined Chinese presence.

According to a [report](#) in the South China Morning Post earlier this year, this fixation on Chinese bases in Africa is largely an American one:

However, senior research fellow Zhou Yuyuan, with the Centre for West Asian and African Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, said that from his communications with some officials "it seems China has no new plans to build a military base".

Zhou said that, while the topic was a hot discussion in the US, there was little talk in China on the issue, and there appeared to be no interest in establishing another military base.

“America’s concern on this, in my opinion, is mainly driven by its domestic considerations, or by demand from different stakeholders,” he said.

In order for analysis to inform policymaking constructively, it cannot start off assuming that another state must be doing something unseen because that is what is required to pursue its unproven “ambitions.” To determine what another government is likely to do in the future, analysis has to begin with an accurate assessment of what it has done and what it is currently doing, and it must also understand that government’s view of its own interests. What we have here in Miller’s article does neither of these things. This article ascribes grand ambitions to the Chinese government because that fits the enemy image many people in Washington have of them, and then it works backwards from that to fill in the gaps when there is no evidence that supports the exaggerated assessment of the other state’s goals.

As van Staden said in his article, “Reports about Chinese plans for another African base have been both alarmist and vague.” They remain just as alarmist and vague in Miller’s argument, and they should be viewed with considerable skepticism.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above or below. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

Featured image by max.ku via shutterstock

The original source of this article is [Eunomia](#)

Copyright © [Daniel Larison](#), [Eunomia](#), 2022

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Daniel Larison](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca

