A study on the construction of overseas security protection mechanisms: a case study of Africa

Yeming Xia[1]*, Hongjian Xu[1], Junqi Pan[1], Zhantuo Wang[1], Chenyu Bai[1]

[1]International School, Zhejiang Police College, Hangzhou, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 1187344026@qq.com

Abstract. This paper delves into the theoretical foundations of overseas security protection, with a particular focus on China's overseas security needs in Africa. By analyzing the international political environment, overseas security dynamics, and the challenges faced in safeguarding China's interests abroad, it proposes a path for building an overseas security protection mechanism in Africa. The aim is to enhance China's capacity to protect its global interests. These discussions provide a theoretical basis for understanding overseas security protection and offer critical references for improving China's approach to public safety governance abroad.

Keywords: overseas security protection, private security companies, Africa

1. Introduction

1.1. Current security landscape in Africa

As a vital extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Africa has become a key strategic partner in China's international cooperation. With the deepening implementation of the initiative, the number of Chinese enterprises and citizens in Africa has increased significantly, leading to a rapid accumulation of Chinese overseas interests on the continent. By 2018, more than 10,000 Chinese enterprises had invested in Africa, with private enterprises accounting for as much as 90% [1]. These businesses have made significant contributions to African economic development and represent a major achievement in China-Africa cooperation. As cooperation deepens and Chinese enterprises accelerate their "going global" efforts, the demand for security among Chinese firms and citizens in Africa has risen sharply. Traditional methods of security protection have become inadequate in addressing these evolving needs. Conventional security models can no longer meet the growing demand for the protection of China's overseas interests in Africa. Consequently, the privatization trend in China's overseas security efforts has become increasingly prominent. Private security services are emerging as an effective means to safeguard the interests of Chinese companies and citizens abroad [2].

Since the turn of the 21st century, the landscape of privatized security in Africa has undergone significant changes. These changes are evident not only in the context of military conflicts but have also penetrated into the daily lives of African communities. The private security sector in Africa has expanded rapidly, becoming a critical force in maintaining social order. Local African private security industries have also witnessed robust development, particularly in post-conflict countries, where Private Security Companies (PSCs) have emerged in large numbers. Although precise statistics on the number of PSCs and personnel across African nations remain elusive, the private security industry has undeniably flourished on the continent. South Africa has the largest and most developed private security industry in Africa. According to statistics, the number of registered private security personnel in South Africa reached as high as 1.868 million in 2017. Besides South Africa, countries like Kenya, Uganda, Liberia, Senegal, and Sierra Leone have also shown strong growth in their private security sectors. In 2015, Kenya had between 2,000 and 4,000 operational private security companies employing around 300,000 security personnel. Uganda had 151 registered private security companies by 2017. In 2012, Liberia had 87 PSCs, with some companies employing over 7,000 personnel [3].

1.2. Changes in the private security industry

The international community has sought to strike a balance between state authority and private military companies through a model of "shared governance," ensuring the exercise of national sovereignty while leveraging the specialized capabilities of private security firms. Self-regulation within the industry has become a key mechanism for private security companies to standardize their operations and legitimize their presence. Today, the industry is gradually transitioning toward self-regulatory frameworks supported by a range of self-imposed measures. This transformation stems from a growing consensus among state governments, security companies, and the public regarding the necessity of establishing legal frameworks to govern the behavior of private military and security companies. Meanwhile, the boundaries between military and police functions are becoming increasingly blurred. To fill the resulting gap, the private sector has stepped in with security services, thereby reinforcing the transnational connections of the market [4]. An increasing number of non-state actors—including corporations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and individuals—are seeking to secure themselves through private means, presenting new development opportunities for the private security industry.

In recent years, the international regulation of private security services has gained momentum, largely due to the efforts of the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Swiss government, and several countries that are major providers or consumers of overseas security services. This process has resulted in the publication of key documents such as the Montreux Document, the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers, and the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, which have provided a strong foundation for industry regulation. Institutionally, the United Nations has established a dedicated working group to address the issue of mercenaries, regularly submitting reports on global trends in mercenaries and private military and security companies to the UN Human Rights Council and the General Assembly. Additionally, in Geneva, Switzerland, the Montreux Document Forum Secretariat and the International Code of Conduct Association (ICoCA) have been established. These two institutions play active roles in fostering intergovernmental dialogue on international security issues and in promoting multi-stakeholder participation in the regulation of private security services at the global level.

2. Analysis of China's current overseas security needs in Africa

2.1. Security needs of Chinese enterprises in Africa

At present, China's overseas interests are rapidly expanding, with the number and scale of Chinese enterprises and personnel abroad continuing to grow. Against the backdrop of profound global changes unseen in a century, intensified Sino-U.S. strategic competition, and the ongoing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's external security environment has become increasingly complex and severe. This challenging environment poses a multitude of risks and threats to the safety of Chinese enterprises and personnel overseas. As China has risen to become the world's second-largest economy and achieved sustained domestic prosperity, its enterprises and assets are also encountering growing potential risks in the tide of globalization. Africa, as a major destination for Chinese investment and development, holds both vast opportunities and considerable risks. In the process of cooperating with African countries, Chinese enterprises must gain a thorough understanding of local conditions and be well-prepared to handle various security threats, particularly those related to terrorism and anti-government armed groups [5]. In recent years, political instability in many African nations has intensified. Countries such as Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have experienced coups, while Niger saw a failed coup attempt. The political landscapes of Sudan, Tunisia, and Chad also remain unstable. In such environments, regime changes, ethnic and religious conflicts occur frequently, often making Chinese enterprises abroad the target of attacks or scapegoats. These incidents lead to project suspensions, contract fulfillment difficulties, and even direct threats to the safety and lives of employees. Moreover, many Chinese-funded project sites are located in remote and sparsely populated areas, where the awareness of and capacity for security prevention tend to be relatively weak. As a result, they are more vulnerable to criminal attacks. The instability in West Africa, in particular, has seriously undermined the security of Chinese enterprises and has also deteriorated the overall business and investment climate across Africa. Notably, since 2021, countries such as Angola, Zambia, Namibia, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have witnessed multiple armed robbery incidents targeting Chinese enterprises and Chinese-owned stores, some resulting in casualties [6]. These events once again highlight the grave security challenges facing Chinese businesses in Africa. Therefore, how to effectively ensure the safety of Chinese enterprises operating on the continent remains a critical issue urgently in need of resolution.

2.2. Security needs of Chinese citizens in Africa

China's overseas interests are not limited to capital flows or the trade of goods and energy in the Middle East and North Africa. More precisely, they center on the safety and well-being of Chinese citizens living and working abroad. Safeguarding the lives of Chinese citizens in foreign regions is a fundamental responsibility of the Chinese government. Although the number of overseas Chinese in Africa is relatively lower compared to other regions, the recent surge in Chinese-funded enterprises, infrastructure projects, and labor deployment has significantly increased the presence of Chinese nationals on the continent. According to incomplete statistics, over 2 million Chinese citizens traveled to Africa in 2015. There were more than 4,200 Chinese enterprises operating in Africa, employing over 450,000 laborers. African countries attract large numbers of Chinese expatriate workers every

year, and China's economic and labor influence in North Africa continues to grow [7]. Ensuring the safety of these Chinese citizens is not only a governmental obligation but also a key component of protecting national interests and overseas investments. China's investments and economic cooperation in Africa contribute to local economic development while offering new opportunities and resources to Chinese companies. However, it is equally essential to pay close attention to the safety and rights of Chinese workers employed across the continent. One of the most serious security risks Chinese citizens face in Africa is the frequent occurrence of kidnapping and hostage-taking incidents. In recent years, such events have emerged as one of the most severe and common security threats. By analyzing the patterns and trends of these incidents, a more comprehensive understanding of their seriousness can be achieved, which in turn supports the development of more targeted and effective security protection strategies.

3. China's overseas security protection mechanisms in Africa

3.1. Government mechanisms for protecting Chinese enterprises and citizens abroad

With the continuous enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength, the Chinese government has been steadily reinforcing the construction of overseas consular institutions and citizen protection systems, propelling the consular protection regime into a stage of systematic improvement. At the international law level, China actively participates in the formulation of global rules and has signed multilateral treaties (such as the United Nations Charter and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations), while also building a domestic legal system centered on the Regulations on Consular Protection and Assistance. Together, these efforts have shaped a dual-track governance framework integrating "international law and domestic law." This institutional evolution has directly catalyzed the large-scale development of the private security industry. According to data from the Ministry of Public Security, by the end of 2017, there were 5,237 registered security companies in China, employing more than 3.1 million personnel—an increase of 178% compared to 2010. In terms of consular service resource allocation, China is characterized by a significant "few personnel, heavy responsibilities" situation: a single consular protection officer is responsible for the safety of roughly 200,000 overseas Chinese citizens, far exceeding the standards of Japan (1:10,000) and the United States (1:5,000). Although over 30 prominent private security companies have emerged—such as Dewei International, Huaxin Zhong'an, and Frontier Services Group—there remain structural challenges in service capacity. Chinese private security companies derive less than 7% of their business from overseas operations, with services primarily limited to basic domains such as risk assessment and security training [8]. To break through these developmental bottlenecks, the Chinese government has established an institutional support system comprising three pillars: policy guidance, standardization, and capacity building. In 2019, the Ministry of Public Security and four other departments jointly issued the Safety Training Guidelines for Overseas Employees of Enterprises (2019 Edition), instituting mandatory pre-departure training. In the same year, the China Security Association, based on the Regulations on Security Service Management and referring to the ISO 28007 international standard, released the Guidelines for Overseas Operations of Security Enterprises (Trial), which clarified the compliance management framework for overseas operations [9]. For high-risk overseas regions, China has built a full-cycle management system of "prevention–response–rescue." Utilizing platforms such as the "Chinese Consular Service Network," real-time security warnings are issued, and personalized information services are delivered via the "Overseas Security" and "China Consular Affairs" apps. Notable cases include the 2021 conflict in Sudan and the 2022 armed attacks in Cameroon, during which Chinese embassies and consulates abroad activated emergency mechanisms within 48 hours and assisted a total of 12,000 citizens in relocating to safe areas. Especially noteworthy is the voluntary overseas citizen registration system, launched in 2018, which has achieved a 65% registration rate in key countries. This system provides critical data support for emergency rescue operations.

3.2. Institutionalization of transnational partnerships for overseas security protection

The international private security industry is inherently transnational. However, regulatory approaches toward this sector vary widely across countries, and a unified international regulatory framework has yet to be established. Both domestic laws and internal industry self-regulation mechanisms remain limited in scope and effectiveness. Of particular concern, the United Nations Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries conducted in-depth research between 2013 and 2016 on national legislative frameworks concerning private security companies. The findings revealed substantial legislative gaps in many countries, including inadequate licensing, registration, and vetting procedures for personnel, as well as insufficient regulation over firearm usage and remedies for violations [10]. To fill this regulatory vacuum, the international community has confirmed the legitimacy of the private security sector through the formulation of key international norms. Documents such as the Montreux Document and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers have laid the foundation for a multilateral co-governance system. These frameworks not only reflect the policy interests of developed countries but also incorporate the ethical principles of international law and human rights, thus providing robust guarantees for the healthy and orderly development of the global private security industry.

As Chinese enterprises increasingly expand into overseas markets, the demand for overseas security services has grown accordingly. This trend reflects the rapid development of China's private security service market and underscores its critical role in safeguarding overseas economic activities. Whether in terms of completed overseas project revenues, outbound direct

investment, or the size of China's overseas security market, all indicators show steady growth. This clearly demonstrates China's increasingly active global economic presence—and the corresponding surge in demand for overseas security services.

4. Pathways for constructing China's overseas security protection mechanism

The development of China's overseas security industry dates back to 2004. Compared to developed countries such as the United States and European nations, China's industry started somewhat later. However, it has developed rapidly and achieved remarkable results. Recently, Chinese private security companies have begun to actively seek cooperation opportunities with foreign private security companies. However, they face dual pressures in both the high-end and low-end markets, with limitations in both the scope and quality of their services. Despite having employees from the People's Liberation Army and special forces, their lack of proficiency in foreign languages, cultural understanding, and operational experience further weakens their competitiveness in non-armed service sectors [11].

Currently, the weakness of overseas security forces is a significant shortcoming in China's overseas public security governance. To address these deficiencies, substantial investments of both time and money are required from the government and enterprises. On the one hand, intelligence products from mature European and American security companies can be introduced, though such products are often expensive, and their cost-effectiveness requires further consideration. On the other hand, through Chinese embassies and enterprises abroad, local intelligence networks can be actively established to provide strong support for China's overseas security companies. The specificity of the international security industry plays a significant role, becoming a key factor restricting the overseas expansion of Chinese private security companies. On the one hand, China's domestic security industry is still in its infancy, with limited numbers of security companies, small scales, and serious business homogenization. Many of the security personnel are retired military personnel who, compared to their foreign counterparts, have gaps in language skills, cultural understanding, operational experience, and professional expertise. On the other hand, the overseas market is highly competitive, with European and American countries dominating, accounting for around 70% of the market share, while many countries that have yet to be entered also impose strict restrictions on foreign security companies' market access. From the perspective of supply and demand, China's overseas private security industry still faces four major shortcomings: first, an underdeveloped intelligence system; second, a lack of security awareness; third, insufficient internationalization; and fourth, lagging technological development. To overcome these deficiencies, the following four aspects can be emphasized to strengthen the practical pathways for private security companies:

4.1. Intelligence consulting for overseas security protection

To address the deficiencies of Chinese private security companies in acquiring intelligence and building information networks abroad, improvements can be made from the national, enterprise, and employee levels. From the national level, it is recommended that the government build a more comprehensive overseas security warning and intelligence-sharing system, particularly for the timely sharing of high-risk information, such as that concerning terrorist attacks, to facilitate rapid intelligence circulation. At the enterprise level, Chinese private security companies should learn from the operational models of mature foreign security companies and develop effective solutions based on specific limitations. Simultaneously, they should work closely with third-party think tanks and research teams to enhance their ability to analyze and research overseas political, security, and military risks, enabling timely warnings, prevention, and avoidance of various security risks to minimize potential losses. Furthermore, based on existing data, a specialized and systematic intelligence information network and risk database should be gradually constructed. At the employee level, comprehensive training for overseas security personnel should be strengthened, including but not limited to intelligence collection, risk assessment, legal knowledge, and foreign language skills. Research teams in security companies should continue to provide technical guidance for overseas personnel to enhance their ability to gather firsthand information, ensuring stable operations in the overseas market.

4.2. Security early warning for overseas protection

Regarding the security of overseas protected objects and anti-terrorism and riot control issues, the core lies in systematically identifying risks, performing in-depth analysis, conducting precise evaluations, and developing effective evacuation and avoidance strategies—these processes form the foundation of risk management. Complementary to risk management is crisis management, both of which play critical roles in the overseas security field. When facing common crises, such as fires, explosions, toxic substance leaks, counter-terrorism operations, hostage rescues, and various natural disasters, crisis management theory must be strictly followed to implement corresponding measures. Chinese private security companies should actively introduce the ISO 31000 risk management standard, continually enhance risk and crisis management awareness, and control every stage of risk management through standardized processes. Companies should establish comprehensive loss and damage prevention mechanisms and emergency plans to manage security, health, environmental, and financial risks comprehensively, thus effectively avoiding potential business risks and crises.

4.3. International development of overseas security protection

For Chinese private security companies to steadily "go global" on the international stage, they must deeply engage in and actively promote the global governance process of international private security. This requires private security companies to integrate into the international system and effectively utilize international market resources while strictly adhering to internationally accepted industry standards. To achieve this, private security companies must comply with a series of key international regulations, such as the Montreux Document, the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers, and the International Convention on the Regulation, Monitoring, and Supervision of Private Military and Security Companies (Draft), ensuring their actions do not exceed the legal boundaries concerning mercenaries. Moreover, Chinese private security companies should focus on communication with local chambers of commerce, labor organizations, and social groups to better integrate into local societies and achieve true localized operations. In practice, they can learn from the successful experiences of private security companies in developed countries by acquiring overseas security companies through registration, shareholding, or mergers and acquisitions. By integrating structural systems and learning advanced technologies, Chinese private security companies can gradually shift from outsourcing projects to leading roles in the private security industry. In this process, they should focus on establishing professional service institutions in fields such as risk assessment, emergency rescue, security, intelligence warning, medical support, legal assistance, security training, and security technology, to improve international service levels [12].

4.4. Technological upgrades in overseas security protection

In today's era, the application of advanced technology is gradually becoming a key factor in the competitiveness of the security industry. The proportion of technological defense in the international security industry has been increasing annually, signaling its future role as a mainstream trend leading the development of the security industry. Global security companies are viewing the application of high-tech security measures as a major driver for business growth. For example, G4S, a top private security company, significantly increased its investment in high-tech security systems, with a notable share of its revenue coming from security technology-related services. In 2018, G4S's total revenue reached £7.289 billion, with income from security technology accounting for £2.8 billion, up 14.3%, and representing 38.4% of total revenue [13]. Alongside this, with the development of economic globalization, high-end risk consulting and medical rescue companies, such as Hazard Consulting and International SOS, have established global collaborative networks with local security companies, offering comprehensive integrated security services. To follow this development trend, Chinese private security companies should increase investment in technological defenses and collaborate with research forces from national institutions, universities, and research institutes to comprehensively apply advanced technologies such as cloud technology, mobile terminal technology, voice technology, positioning technology, and data analysis. The scientific achievements in chips, algorithms, systems, and devices should be rapidly transformed into practical applications of technological defense. This transformation process will integrate communication, video, voice, text, and command dispatch, significantly enhancing the technological content of overseas security services. Furthermore, to promote technological exchange and cooperation, the Chinese overseas security industry can regularly host industry forums and exchange meetings, providing a platform for interaction between private security companies and high-tech enterprises, thus advancing the introduction and application of mature security technologies. On this basis, through the construction of a mature information service platform, integrating communication, dispatch, GIS, emergency, OA, network alarms, and video conferencing, the modernization, integration, and intelligence of China's overseas security industry can be enhanced, thereby strengthening the overall competitiveness of Chinese private security companies in the international security industry [14].

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